

How loud must we scream?

Dear GCN:

This is in response to the interview of Judy Greenspan, *GCN* December 1-7, 1991. First, I would like to say that as a prisoner, operating a small organization with a primary focus in litigating the rights of gay and HIV positive prisoners, I found Judy Greenspan to be an invaluable resource. The support she gave me, such as locating witnesses and participating in depositions, etc. are innumerable. The day I received her letter informing me she was leaving the ACLU, National Prison Project was a blue one indeed. The most disappointing thing was that her news came right after Mike Reigle left *GCN*. Though, feeling lost and without guidance, I could not feel bitter or resentful. They have given us so much of their time, energy and resources over the years, it is impossible not to love them, and wish them nothing but success, joy, love and peace in any endeavor they may pursue during their life.

In her interview, Judy touched on some very good points, that I would like to elaborate on from a prisoner's perspective.

The prisoner rights movement of the '60s was successful because the people were more united. Everybody was fighting for desegregation and humane conditions for prisoners. The majority of the prison cases protecting prisoner rights arose during that era. However, in the present day, people are more self-centered. Many laws have changed giving some minorities (gay, black, women, latino) the opportunity to gain a better education and jobs. Many have disregarded the struggle that made it possible for them to be where

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they are today. It is not necessarily their fault nobody is somebody in America without money and power otherwise you're still nobody the American way. Though the AIDS crisis and other issues have rejuvenated the prisoner rights movement, those who oppose us built a solid foundation of adverse legal precedents during the slack period.

So, today the issues involving prisoners are many. There are, as Judy pointed out, AIDS education and prevention, medical treatment, compassionate releases, overcrowding and rehabilitation programs. The prison system is literally bulging at the seams. Where prisoners were once being rehabilitated, they are now being warehoused. The federal government has made a business out of incarcerated inmates. Federal Prison Industries (UNICOR) gross over a billion dollars a year at the cost of inmates who slave in factories for slave wages. Because prisoners with AIDS receive inadequate medical treatment, segregation and suffer enormous harassment and discrimination at the hands of both fellow inmates and prison officials, their prison sentences are death sentences. The lack of AIDS education in the prison system, where there are a lot of myths and rumors about infection and transmission easily escalates into violence, and if a prisoner is gay or a known AIDS carrier they become the target. Furthermore, gay prisoners are constantly under sexual pressure, being physically abused and forced to live at the whim of other inmates. Pointedly, gay inmates are accepted only as a sex object to be used by other inmates, and are rejected in all other aspects of prison life.

With all these problems, despite the valiant persons they are, no Judy Greenspan, Mike Reigle or Rebecca Lavine could succeed in battling all these improprieties. Others have got to help, but they just won't. Why they won't, I don't know. Not to single out any organization, but just as an example of the manner gay and lesbian organizations treat prisoners, I am going to recall an incident. But before I do, let me say that I consider my organization well founded. I have a couple of national organizations willing to attest to the authenticity of my work. I say this because a lot of people are under the misconception organizations are not willing to become involved in prisoner advocacy because of the insincerity of prisoners. However, this is not the case, they are simply not interested.

For example, in an attempt to gain some litigation assistance I contacted the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund who informed me that they do not do any prison work. Ironically, they referred me to Judy ACLU National Prison Project, and Mike *Gay Community News*. In a subsequent conversation I explained this to Judy and she seemed genuinely upset that other organizations will not become actively involved in assisting prisoners. It was really a moment that displayed the lack of support. But as I said then, and I'll say now, it has always been that way. It is not uncommon for organizations to overlook pleas from prisoners for support.

I guess standing on a hill just wasn't loud enough. How high must we climb? How loud must we scream? How many prisoners must die, before this community realizes prisoners need their help?

Judy and Mike, thank you for being there—I love you. And Rebecca, welcome to the struggle.

Yours in justice
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