

# THE STATE OF THE HEART

## Executive Director’s Report

by Jim Smith

As I write this letter, I am mindful of the tough economic time our country is experiencing. It is clear that we need to reduce our spending and live within our means (or raise taxes). As we look as a Nation to reduce our deficit by cutting some valuable programs and services to men and women, I find myself very concerned about the long-term impact on the poor of our community. As the gap between the rich and the poor widens, there is a cost to us all. There is a direct correlation between poverty and incarceration in this country. “It is a sad statistical truth that incarceration has become an experience too commonly shared among poor minority males in urban areas. As the gap between the rich and the poor broadens, the prison culture and the culture of the ghetto becomes closer together.” (“Outside In; Societal Change and its impact on Corrections,” John Klofas; 2002). As we all struggle in this difficult time, the temptation of Capitalism is to look out for ourselves and deafen our ear to the needs of others. Let us not forget that when we care for others, we strengthen ourselves and society as a whole.

The Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach is a bridge that crosses the economic gap in our community. Homeless men and women come to Jennifer House and Nielsen House with only the clothes on their back and a plastic bag filled with their personal items. They are beaten down by poverty, addiction, abuse and incarceration. The Spiritus Christi Church Community and the Community of Rochester provides abundant resources for the men and women of the Prison Outreach. They are showered with unconditional love, guidance, treatment, and health care and learn to accept and hopefully love themselves. When a resident leaves they have a van full of clothes and personal belongings to call their own as they move to their new home.

In October 2009, Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach (SCPO) was awarded The Second Chance Grant. The Second Chance Act was signed into law on April 9, 2008. This federal grant represents a shift in society's thinking about men and women coming out of incarceration and returning to the community. Rather than seeing this difficult transition as a part of the consequences of criminal actions, we are realizing that it is in society's best interest to help men and women be successful in this transition. This shift is one of the most positive changes I have witnessed in the Corrections System in the 30 years of doing this work. For many reasons it makes good sense in the interest of all. From a financial standpoint, to keep someone out of prison saves taxpayers approximately \$32,000 per year. From a community standpoint, if we can help individuals be successful and not return to criminal activity we increase community safety. In addition, the positive impact of having a family and community member make changes in their lives provides hope to the next generation and gives peers the courage to follow the positive example. As one person makes radical changes in their life, we as a society become healthier.

In 2010 with the help of the second chance grant, SCPO visited and mentored 523 incarcerated men and women in four New York State Correctional Facilities and the Monroe County Jail. Eighty-eight of these men and women were then mentored in our post-release residential programs. After one year, 78 of them or 87% had not been re-incarcerated on a new charge or violation of parole/probation. The savings of helping only 10 men and women stay out of prison are approximately \$320,000! While cutting programs like the Second Chance Grant may reduce the 2012 federal budget, it is likely to cost taxpayers millions of dollars as men and women return to incarceration due to limited access to critical resources of food, clothing, safe homes, education and training.

The Senate recently eliminated the 2012 Second Chance mentoring Program from their proposed budget. However, there is still time to restore funding for the program when the House and Senate Appropriations Committees attempt to resolve differences between the two spending bills. This funding is very important for men and women reentering the

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## SAVE THE DATE

**Annual Fundraiser Gala to Support the Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach**

**MARCH 24<sup>TH</sup> 2012**

community from incarceration and has been very valuable for the Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach. If this funding is approved, SCPO will apply once again. The link below offers a quick and easy way to contact your Congress members and ask them to Support the Second Chance Act Funding. You can also visit the Spiritus Christi website to access this link. Thank you! <http://www.capwiz.com/csgjusticectr/home/>

Jennifer House and Nielsen House remain nearly full with 18 men and women and a long waiting list of individuals hoping for a second chance in a warm loving community, a safe home, with tons of guidance, and meals that are out of this world. As I was leaving work last week the women of Jennifer House were involved with what they call "GI". The music was playing and women had a chore to make their house a home. They vacuumed, mopped, dusted, scrubbed and picked up. Down the street at Nielsen House the men were engaged in the same daily activity. Somehow there seems to be a connection between fitting in, being a part of a home, having something to contribute, working hard, rebuilding one's life, laughing, crying together, and making a house a home that can anchor a person as they find themselves and their place in the community. All of us have needed or will sometime in the future need a Second Chance, an opportunity to begin anew, start over, and rebuild. Through the generosity of the Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach and the Rochester Community, Jennifer House and Nielsen House are able to open their doors wide with a warm smile and say welcome home, today is a new day. We do not care where you have been or what you have done. You belong here, a part of this healing loving family.

Please work with us to continue to give men and women entering the community a Second Chance.

## Nielsen House Report

by Wanda Johnson

Hello all! It has been a while since we last reported, so brace yourselves, there's a lot to tell. It has been a great summer. We did many great activities with the men, from attending the Jazz Festival with some of our alumni to going to the Puerto Rican Festival with the men of the house. They had so much fun. The men all attended my Church's picnic and played kickball; what a blast to see them running around enjoying life. We got all dressed up and went to a dinner at the River's Edge party house. We were all dressed to the T. This summer has been filled with picnics at Ontario and Durand Beaches or just plain old backyard barbecues; no matter what, the men all have had a good summer.

We have had a friend of the Parish, who would rather remain anonymous, stop by at least every other week with homemade pies, cakes, and brownies; we have officially dubbed her the "sweets lady". The men work hard and play harder. We have a horseshoe pit, and I can hear the ringing from the horseshoe clanking the bar that sticks up from the ground. We have two to three alumni who come by once a week and volunteer their time by keeping the lawn beautiful or sharing their experience, strength, and hope with new residents.

Other news is that we have a cat -- not my doing. About a year ago, this cat started hanging out back with the men, I said "whatever you do, don't feed the cat." Needless-to-say, that didn't go over well; the men started feeding the cat. One day I came to work and in the refrigerator was something covered and written on tape was "Tiger's food". They had given the cat a name and made what they called "the penthouse" for him in the shed outback. Out-numbered, I surrendered and you can come by any day and see Tiger out back with "his men". One of our alums says that when he is able to move into his own apartment he wants to come back and take Tiger to a new home.

I am happy to report that Ben Reese completed the AALDP (African American Leadership Development Program) on September 24, 2011. We are committed to keeping our staff sharp, always developing to make us all God wants us to be, serving as best we can. We look forward to the next few months of fall/winter. We are thinking already about the holidays ahead and are delighted to be able to give so much to the community we serve.

# Jennifer House Report

by Dellena Harper

Fall is here and the women are anticipating a busy and eventful time of year. The ladies had a great summer that included a number of safe and sober festivities which enabled them to experience the many gifts that Jennifer House offers.

One of the women celebrated one year clean (Yeah!) and to celebrate her anniversary, the women took a trip to the Children's Museum where they enjoyed the company of their children. While at the museum the ladies played like children themselves, also enjoying the Dancing Wings Butterfly Garden. The women embraced the opportunity to bond with their children. Reuniting the women with their children is one of the many gifts Jennifer House offers.

Over the summer the women also had the chance to experience the Puerto Rican Festival where they sampled foods of the Hispanic Culture and danced to the Latina rhythms. They had a ball and we have the pictures to prove it. The theme for the festival just happened to be celebration of Latina women, so the women were able to see other strong positive women right here in the community. The women were empowered by the event. This was the perfect opportunity for the women to have fun without the use of drugs, which is another gift Jennifer House offers.

We are very blessed to have volunteers who actively and consistently support the women here at Jennifer House in many unique ways. Some volunteers have created an in house salon called "THE NEW YOU SALON" where the women can receive pedicures, manicures, new hair do's, healthy conversation and lots of love. This gift of pampering truly lifts the self-esteem and confidence of the women we serve and they definitely deserve it.

Alumnae continue to support the Jennifer House in a variety of ways as well. Some attend the State of the Heart meeting to support the current residents, while others volunteer their time taking the women to 12 step meetings, cooking for the women, and just dropping by to let them know they can stay clean and live a normal life. The alumnae continue to give the present residents the gifts of love, support and hope.

The new educational modules are going well also. The women have discussed and obtained information about a variety of topics. Some of these topics include parenting, domestic violence, STD's, breast cancer, the effects of drugs and alcohol, change and other topics the women want to learn about. This gift of education allows the women to make informed decisions and this empowers the women. A woman with knowledge is powerful and a woman who applies that knowledge is unstoppable!

These gifts are the ingredients to a successful woman and a number of successful women have experienced Jennifer House. Without the support of the volunteers, the people who give donations, the alumnae, and the small Christian Communities from Spiritus Christi, we would not be able to offer these gifts. These gifts uplift the women and provide them with the tools and skills they need to make healthy choices and enhance the quality of their lives and the lives of their children.

We want to say a special, heartfelt thank you to the youth at the Vacation Bible School who donated many needed hygiene products that were greatly appreciated. They also made bags of sweets with decorated pens and a sign that says welcome home. We use those gifts as part of a welcoming packet for the new women who arrived at Jennifer House. Little ideas like that mean so much and they are the things that make a "house a home". Thank you so much.



Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach will participate in ROC the Day, a 24-hour opportunity for community members to contribute online to local not-for-profit organizations. We invite you to support the ministry through this campaign on December 8th. Visit [ROCtheday.org](http://ROCtheday.org) for more details. An 8% service fee will be deducted from your donation.

## Gratitude for Grants

Jennifer House is grateful to the **First Unitarian Church** for providing a grant to assist women who are sanctioned from the Department of Human Services (DHS). When a woman becomes sanctioned (for noncompliance with a requirement such as providing certain documentation, keeping appointments or completing a program), she temporarily is cut off from receiving services from DHS, which means they will not pay for her to stay ANYWHERE. The grant from the First Unitarian Church Grants Fund allowed us to help a woman who faithfully attended the Jennifer House groups while in the Monroe County Correctional facility, but had nowhere to go upon release, due to her sanction. As a result of this one-time grant we were able to provide the young woman with a second chance at life. While residing at Jennifer House she began her journey of recovery. She excelled in her chemical dependency program and also was able to address her mental health obstacles in order to prevent future relapses. She became an active participant in her recovery process by diligently attending 12 Step meetings and actively working with a sponsor. The young lady today is stably housed, reunited with her children, and sober. Thanks to the Unitarian Church's grant, she made a successful transition back into society and has become a productive member of society.

The Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach also is grateful for other grants received this year from the following local organizations:

### **Charles S. and Millicent P. Brown Family Foundation**

These funds were critical in a difficult year of transition. The Brown Family Foundation assisted the Prison Outreach in developing a business plan, which included some critical organizational changes. These changes have been set in motion and we are already seeing some very positive progress.

### **Rochester Area Community Foundation Women's & Girls Project (Jennifer House) and**

### **Marie C. & Joseph C. Wilson Foundation (Jennifer and Nielsen Houses)**

The funds from these two grants support the Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach Family Reunification Program. The goal of this program is to improve physical, cognitive, social and emotional functioning of individuals and to ensure full participation in life. Phase I of the program focuses on immediate stabilization of the parent. Phase II addresses the issues that led to incarceration and works to reunite parent and child through visits at Jennifer and/or Nielsen Houses.

## **The Passion of Troy Davis**

by Rosanne Fabi

I have been a member of the Prison Outreach for almost twenty years and through that work I became more and more drawn to Death Penalty issues. Over the last ten years I have befriended Death Row inmates and their families in Mississippi, Georgia, and Texas and have become an active member of the Anti-Death Penalty movement. What has been the greatest spiritual lesson in my journey is that the deepest, darkest corners of human existence - such as prison and especially Death Row - are where I most clearly see the face of God. That certainly describes what I have witnessed in the life of Troy Anthony Davis.

About 10 years ago I heard his sister, Martina Correia, speak at an Anti-Death Penalty conference. I was inspired by her story about her brother and I asked her if it would be ok if I wrote to him. She gave me his address and Troy and I had been friends ever since. Little did I know at that time I was being invited by God to stand as a witness to a struggle marred by human tragedy but inspired by spiritual destiny.

Troy's story began in a Burger King parking lot in August 1989 after a pool party in the African-American neighborhood of Cloverdale in Savannah, Georgia when he was twenty years old. There was a homeless man being harassed and when he yelled for help a white off-duty police officer, Mark MacPhail, arrived on the scene and was shot dead. A manhunt ensued. The next morning a young man named Red Coles walked into the police department with one of the best attorneys in Savannah and stated that Troy Davis was the killer. With no questions asked Troy Davis was arrested and charged with capital murder. No weapon was found, there was no DNA evidence, and no forensic evidence at all connecting Troy to this crime. He was found guilty solely on the eyewitness testimony. Since that time seven of the nine eyewitnesses have recanted. Most were teenagers at the time of the incident and all cited police

intimidation and coercion as the reasons they testified against Troy. One of those seven stated he was forced to sign a statement that he was unable to read because he is illiterate. And the star witness, Red Coles, is the person nine other witnesses have come forward and stated did the crime. They either saw it, saw him with a gun that evening, or said that in the years since the incident Coles admitted to them, usually in a drunken stupor, that he was responsible.

Before Amnesty International USA and the NAACP and other organizations were able to take Troy's story to the global level, Troy was one more almost-anonymous innocent African-American prisoner struggling on the Row to keep his head above water-incarcerated by a biased system. His family - led by Martina-never stopped trying to find help. We all see Troy as the hero/martyr that his life was but Troy was also an ordinary man who was chosen for this extraordinary journey. All of us who knew him personally are holding close the memories of his generous heart, his unabashed honesty, his unwavering faith in God, and his unforgettable laugh. But the journey Troy Davis was chosen for was so much bigger than any personal relationship he had, so much bigger than the lies and injustice that held him captive. After seeing the years he and his family struggled to be heard and then watching his case reach a worldwide audience in 2007 we would talk about what was happening. I was in awe and I would tell him, "Troy, you are a chosen one. Do you realize that? You have been chosen by God just like Moses was chosen. He picked you and your family for a holy mission. Your struggle is changing the world." Troy would get quiet and nod his head and say yes, he knew. I would ask him what that felt like and he would tell me he walks as humbly as he can with God and just follows where God leads.

Where God led Troy Anthony Davis was a most sacred journey - the journey of the Cross. And the closer his death came the more evident it became. We as Americans can only pray that the legal system set up to protect us will do the right thing but they did not do that for Troy - like Pontius Pilate they all washed their hands of the truth that was before them and let an innocent man be killed before admitting to their own sins. From Atlanta on September 19 for the clemency hearing to Jackson on September 21 at 11:08pm - there were thousands of people who were actually there but also there were also thousands who took to streets in communities all over the world, people who prayed in their houses of worship, people who fasted and held vigils in their homes. A million signatures calling for clemency were gathered by Amnesty from all over the world; public officials from the right and left called for clemency, other prisoners around the country prayed in their cells, guards right there at Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Prison prayed for Troy's life... This was the Road to Cavalry and the whole world was there.

Like Jesus being tortured by his captors, the warden who we all now know did have a personal vendetta against Troy when he revealed to NAACP National President, Ben Jealous, that he was on the Savannah police force in August 1989, did all he could to make Troy suffer as much as possible before death. The scheduled execution time was 7:00pm. We had the glimmer of hope with the reprieve. We waited in prayer for 4 hours until we heard they would not stop this murder. I don't know if it is true but people said Troy was strapped to the gurney that whole time. If he was or if he was waiting there in the room with his captors to be strapped down, the symbolism was unmistakable. The gurney is a cross and his life hung there, just like Jesus, waiting for death. And as Jesus' last words were "Forgive them Lord for they know not what they do." Troy's last words to his captors were, "May God have Mercy on you and May God bless you." Our brave Troy left this world with a prayer of forgiveness and blessing for those who ended his life.

Why did this have to happen? Because the world must awake from its apathy and realize that we must fix what is wrong: Racism is wrong, White Privilege in all of its forms is wrong, Injustice is wrong, the Death Penalty is dead wrong and it took a righteous man like Troy and a family like the Davis family to show us how wrong it is and how broken the system is. Troy once told me years ago "When you feel Love, something in you becomes alive." And because we were blessed enough to witness the powerful, fierce, unconditional love for God, Family, and Justice that Troy and his amazingly strong, spiritually rooted, brave family have not only shared with each other but with the world something in the world became alive. And this love is greater than any hate, than any lie, than anybody's revenge.

There is no mistake -Troy Davis died for our sins - the sins of our broken system. But his death will not be in vain if we keep that lesson of Love inside of us and we love God, each other, and Justice-For-All the way Troy and the Davis family taught us.

An hour after they killed Troy, my daughter posted on Facebook: "Today we mourn but tomorrow we organize. The spirit of Troy Davis is not dead."

## Reflection of a Jail Chaplain

by Sister Judy Greene, SSJ\*

On Tuesday afternoons I conduct a Men's Spirituality Group at the Monroe Correctional Facility. At the beginning of a recent group I was talking about making connections when a long-time member of the group said in a stage whisper to a newer member next to him, "She's big on connection." My response, "Yes, she IS big on connection AND she's still got pretty good hearing," brought the relief of laughter to our group. I recount this because I believe that making connections and being in relationship is at the heart of my ministry as Catholic Chaplain in the Monroe County Jail System.

The position of Catholic Chaplain at the County Jails was established in 2004, and was the result of a collaborative effort among the Sisters of St. Joseph, the Diocese of Rochester, and the County of Monroe. The main goal in creating this position was to have a consistent presence in both facilities and to serve the needs of incarcerated Catholics, insuring access to sacramental and pastoral care. Financial support for this ministry comes from the Sisters of St. Joseph, the Diocese of Rochester and Monroe County.

The men and women I spend my days with are from the streets of our city and from the suburbs; they are rich and they are poor; some are well educated and many are school dropouts; some have families who love and support them and some have been abandoned by their families; some are jailed for minor offenses and some for murder; some are from our parishes and some have no church affiliation. It is a microcosm of our society.

The majority of my time is spent in one on one visits in the housing units. It is here that I listen to the stories -- stories of regret and sadness, stories of courage and forgiveness, and stories of a hunger for God. I witness daily the strength and resiliency of the human spirit and hear of the faithfulness and long-suffering of family and friends. Despite the doubts and fears, many hope in a different future and see a light at the end of the tunnel or, as one person told me, "At least now there is a tunnel."

The message I receive most consistently, both spoken and unspoken, is: "There's more to me than you see." I am aware as I write about "them" that I'm also writing about "me" and about "us." Over the years I have developed a healthy respect for the band aid approach. Aware of the overwhelming problems in the system and my inability to significantly change it, I continue to see value in the ordinary connections -- the simple but powerful message conveyed by showing up consistently, keeping a promise, and calling someone by name.

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*\*This article appeared originally in an issue of Blessings, a publication of the Sisters of St. Joseph. It is reprinted with permission. Sister Judy's ministry is a separate endeavor and not affiliated with the Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach.*

## Volunteer Vignette

by Kathleen Tranelli

I witnessed a remarkable exchange between two women at Albion Correctional Facility recently, during the Jennifer House meeting. By sharing what she had learned about herself in prison, one woman opened the eyes of another woman to a truth she had never seen, then rebuilt the other woman with encouraging words of hope and promise.

Martha\* is a 50-ish mother of four, who stabbed a man while defending her daughter in a street fight. In prison, she realized that she needs to claim a life of her own, and stop getting involved with the problems of her grown kids. Through classes at Albion, she has increased her reading and math levels by several grades and is working toward her GED and General Business certification. She has participated in many programs, including anger management, and she embraces every learning opportunity she has. She is determined to set boundaries with her children upon her release, loving them but also loving (i.e. protecting and improving) herself. "I have to let them fend for themselves", she said, acknowledging that this is contrary to a mother's natural protective instinct.

Upon hearing this story, Yolanda's face dropped, and she quietly seemed crushed. Yolanda saw her own mother in Martha. Yolanda's mother has been caring for Yolanda's children since, and before, Yolanda came to Albion.

Yolanda was struck by the reality that she had robbed her mother of the good life that she deserved and for which she had worked hard. Yolanda passionately shared her remorse with the group.

Wise Martha quickly addressed Yolanda, telling her it's not over, you can make it up, you have a chance to redeem yourself. First write to your Mom or call her, this week. Say "thank you," and acknowledge her huge sacrifice. Another woman chimed in, "Take her to dinner when you get out," and load her up with treats. Martha hit home with all of us when she said, "Nothing will mean more to your Mom than to see her child make good of herself. I promise you, the best gift a child can give a mother is to make her proud of you."

Yolanda thought for a while, then brightened and softly but strongly said, "Yeah. I can make her proud of me." I could almost feel the commitment rising up in her.

The Jennifer House meeting provided an opportunity for these two women to learn from each other, in a way that likely would not have occurred elsewhere. I felt privileged to be a part of it. As is often the case, the exchange caused me to think about my own relationships, and underscored how much we have in common, whether we are imprisoned or free. Thank you, Martha.

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*\*Names have been changed*

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