

## Executive Director's Report: by Jim Smith

On July 31st, Judy Simser will be retiring from the Prison Outreach. The first question people usually ask is, "is Judy really old enough to retire?" Her youthful energy and passionate spirit make her "forever young". The second question is "what will the Prison Outreach ever do without her?" It is no secret that Judy has been the glue to hold our Nielsen House and Jennifer House together. She was the founder of Jennifer, Nielsen and Pearl Houses. She has loved and cared for each resident as if he or she were her own child. Each house is beautiful inside and out and filled with the presence of love. Nearly 1000 men and woman have been offered a warm bed, a delicious meal, and a place to belong and call home. Judy has started numerous groups in jail and recently Albion Prison, where women find a safe refuge to heal and rebuild their lives. She is known in prison as "Miss Judy" and by the staff as "Get-it done-Judy". In 15 years, Judy has accomplished a lifetime of healing and service to the men and women in prison and in our residences. She is a true witness of a heart that whispers to God "here I am, use me, mold me, I long to do your will".

Judy will be incredibly missed by all. We know that we can never replace her and will not even try. One of Judy's parting gifts to the ministry is her years of empowering leaders to carry on the mission of the Prison Outreach. She has developed an awesome team that is ready to step up and take on additional leadership roles. As one staff member put it " we can't replace Judy so we are giving her job to a dozen people". There will be more to come on the organizational changes in the future.

Please join with me in thanking Judy for her extraordinary love of the men and women of the Prison Outreach and for her generous 15 years of service. We'll celebrate Judy's service at the 7pm Spiritus Christi Mass on July 29th at Downtown United Presbyterian Church. All are welcome.

## Conviction to Aid Convicts: by Robin L. Flanigan

With a father who spent his days as a corrections officer working alongside prisoners on maintenance projects, Tom DaRin grew up with a different image of the incarcerated than what was—and is—often portrayed on television and in the media.

Now vice president for enrollment management at Nazareth College and a volunteer at the Cayuga Correctional Facility in Moravia, DaRin says he'll never forget one particular afternoon as a young college student. He had come home to get his car fixed. The garage in town was closed, so his father led him to one of the maintenance bays at the prison, left for about 10 minutes, then returned with an enormous, intimidating prisoner, whom he introduced before winking and extolling the man's mechanical skills. When the man said he needed a special part, DaRin's father jumped in his car to go buy it. He was gone for about a half hour.

"There was a long bench in the shop, so I sat at one end and the guy sat at the other," DaRin recalls. "We didn't talk. Then he got up, came over and sat next to me. He said, 'I

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have to tell you something.’ I thought, ‘Oh no.’ And he said, ‘Your father treats us like men and I just thought you ought to know that.’ Then he got back up and sat at the other end and waited.”

That moment was a turning point not only in the way he viewed his father, but in recognizing that there are multiple ways to influence a population that can, if given the opportunity, still contribute.

“My father treated the men with respect and that did make a difference,” he says. “I feel like I’m doing a continuation of his work.”

For the past three years, DaRin has been a part of the Spiritus Christi Prison Ministry at the medium-security prison, where he helps run a small peer support group that in many ways reflects the informal guidance his father provided those struggling with self esteem, anger, addiction and other issues. The ministry, which has no religious agenda, is affiliated with Spiritus Christi Church in Rochester, where DaRin is a member. He got involved after reading a note in his church bulletin about the need for a volunteer.

That note was written by **Steve LaSalle**, former Nazareth College vice president of finance. Every other Monday night, the two men and LaSalle’s wife, Jennifer, try to help the inmates accept responsibility for their crimes, articulate their feelings, learn to make better decisions, and be prepared for their eventual release. The group is voluntary and confidential.

The fact that DaRin and the LaSalles are also there voluntarily is not lost on the men. DaRin remembers this observation from one of them: “You come here because you want to come here. The state workers come because they’re paid to. So how I work with you and how I work with them is different.”

Building that trust takes time, of course, and it can be difficult to hear the graphic details of certain crimes. But with measured mediation, the men allow themselves, as DaRin puts it, to “go down deep into their souls and put in the work to make a change.”

“They don’t see us as do-gooders coming in and treating them as lab animals,” says LaSalle, who helped recruit both DaRin and Nazareth College President **Daan Braveman** to the ministry’s advisory board, which meets four times a year at Nazareth. “Tom can ask the very pointed questions because he doesn’t have a threatening manner about him.”

Dismayed at the lack of formal educational opportunities for prisoners, many of which used to come from state and federal grants before they were cut in the early 1990s, DaRin plans to start a grassroots movement to help restore tuition benefits. It pains him to see inmates watching so much television, for example, when what they are craving is mental stimulation. And that is exactly what he helps provide every two weeks.

The men in the group feel honored that DaRin and the others make the three-hour commute to be part of a two-hour session. One of them acknowledged, “I never knew people like you existed.”

“Those are the moments that make me want to get down there every time, if that’s what my presence means,” DaRin says. “We think that when we volunteer, we’re the ones doing the giving, but I’ve probably gotten more back from the men than the other way around.”

“This has made me a better husband, a better father, a better son, a better brother, a better boss. I’ve learned that we have to really listen to people and their stories, and try to be helpful— even when it seems very hard to do.”

*Robin L. Flanigan is a freelance writer in Rochester, New York. This article first appeared in the April 2010 issue of Nazareth College's Connections magazine. It is reprinted with permission of Nazareth College.*



## The Nielsen Report: by Wanda Johnson, Nielsen House Manager

Summer is fast approaching! Yeah!!! Things are abuzz at Nielsen House. This is my favorite time of the year; I love to feel the sun on my face. People and animals alike start to emerge from their winter solstice. We are ready to pull out the grill and make use of the volleyball set. The men have been waiting to challenge Ben Reese in a little one on one (he thinks he has bragging rights); we shall see. Nielsen House is in great shape, inside and out. The exterior has been steam cleaned and painted. We have a new front sidewalk and the stairs to the front entrance have been replaced. The house is just beautiful.

Two visits from Spiritus Christi parishioners added to that beauty. We had 20+ youth from Spiritus Christi help us do some spring cleaning in April. They cleaned windows, furniture, and raked the yard free the debris that had been left behind by the winter snow. The youth also presented the men with signs that had slogans to remind them they are loved, and small palm size cards that had words like hope, peace, grace, and courage on them. The idea was that if any of the men awakened and felt they lacked any of the above feelings they could pick up the card and carry it with them all day. What a great idea!! It is good for the men to see past Nielsen House and into the eyes of the ministry, to see the real hearts that send love to them when they are incarcerated or transitioning. Similarly, when one of the Small Christian Communities from Spiritus Christi prepared and shared Valentine's Day dinner with the men, they felt loved. This is what makes the "house a home". After we have these encounters between the men and the ministry, the men seem to care even more for themselves, those around them and their home here at Nielsen House. It makes it all worthwhile. To the fine youth and the Small Christian Community from Spiritus Christi, "we thank you for making us feel so loved". God Bless.

## Book Review - Picking Cotton: by Kathleen Tranelli

Picking Cotton is a story of persistence, faith and forgiveness. It also is a study of victim psychology, eyewitness testimony, and how police procedures in the 1980 are contributed to false identification of a rapist.

In 1984, a student at Elon University in North Carolina was raped in her bedroom by an intruder to her apartment. She vividly remembered the details of the crime, and committed to memory the physical features of her rapist. She identified her rapist from a police lineup with certainty, based on physical appearance and voice. The rape changed her life forever (including loss of her fiancée and various forms of anxiety), and she hated her rapist with all of her soul.

A black man named Ronald Cotton was arrested for the rape of the white Elon student, Jennifer Thompson. Based on prior skirmishes with the law, Ronald was pulled in to the lineup for Jennifer's rape, and she identified him as her rapist. Ronald insisted he was innocent, but after a trial in 1985 he was convicted and sentenced to life plus 50 years in prison for rape and breaking and entering. He served eleven years of that sentence, many of them believing that he knew who the real rapist was, until ultimately he was exonerated based on DNA evidence. Jennifer's world once again was shattered when she realized she had identified the wrong man.

Jennifer and Ronald share the harrowing details of their tragedy in the book Picking Cotton. The book "challenges our ideas of memory and judgment while demonstrating the profound nature of human grace and the healing power of forgiveness". (From the book cover). Ronald and Jennifer both are victims of the real rapist. Ronald reveals how his faith in God and support from his family enabled him to manage his anger, maintain hope, forgive

Jennifer and the real rapist and ultimately find peace in prison as an innocent man. Jennifer reveals how in turn, Ronald's peace and forgiveness of Jennifer enabled her to overcome her heartfelt guilt for identifying the wrong man, forgive the real rapist and find peace in her life. One of her particularly striking insights is "People think that when you forgive someone, you excuse what he did. That's not what it is. It's about power and letting go."

Jennifer and Ronald have become friends, and they speak about their case at events around the country. I heard them speak in Maryland last month, and it was powerful! The case led to the establishment of an Innocence Project in North Carolina. The Winter 2010 issue of this newsletter featured an article about the Innocence Project, and locally this year, Frank Sterling was exonerated and released after 18 years in prison with help from the Innocence Project.

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Picking Cotton, by Jennifer Thompson- Cannino and Ronald Cotton with Erin Torneo, copyright 2009.

### **Alumni Corner: by Pastor Abram Cotton III**

Dear State of the Heart Reader,

Allow me a brief moment to share how the contributions of volunteers' time, commitment, and the ability to extend themselves unconditionally has been a vital and sustaining pillar of insight in my life. The Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach Program helps individuals see beyond surface mistakes, pain, and hindrances, while promoting strength and self-assurance. Their Men's Focus Group, as it is called at Cayuga Correctional Facility in Moravia, New York, presents incarcerated men an opportunity to address issues of the inner-self by first providing an attentive ear and then a genuine desire to help build stronger perspectives for future success. Focus is, after all, a prerequisite for achieving future fortitude.

I made my acquaintance with the Focus Group while confined by the New York State Department of Corrections. Yes, I was a convicted felon, identified by a number, not a name, and judged by who I was supposed to be, not who I was. I learned, therefore, that there are some things in life (opinions, attitudes of others) which you may never be able to change. But my question to you today is, can you change yourself and your own behavior enough to see a brighter future? If so, you are a prime candidate for future success with incredible focus!

As a striving believer in the Christian faith, I had no issues with who I was in Jesus Christ; however, having allowed myself to tap in to the depths of my core issues, I realized there were things that God adored doing for me, while there were other things God encouraged me to do for myself while utilizing the other branches on the tree of life. In my case, that's what the Focus Group was...an extension of His love aimed in my direction. I've come to understand that focus is not just the ability to see clearly, but also, it is the ability to see further than what is in front of you.

I was released in January of 2008, after fourteen years of incarceration, and have since been called to the ministry as a licensed and ordained Assistant Pastor at Christian Love Bible Church of Rochester, NY. In addition, I have an amazing wife, a great job, and many other blessings that time does not permit me to express at this moment. I believe these blessings were always in my destiny according to God's will for my life; but, how many of us know that it is superfluous to attain those blessings while lacking the life skills to keep them? That's where the Prison Outreach Focus Group was instrumental in helping me to turn obscurity into positive objectivity.

In conclusion, with God’s grace and a wonderful support network such as the Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach, my vision has become crystal clear. And, I not only want to experience the greater things in my path, I want you to realize your full potential as well.

God Bless!  
Pastor Abram Cotton III

### Fundraising Update:

Thank you to all for helping to make the month of March a successful fundraising month for the Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach. Through the collection, dinner, raffle and auction we raised approximately \$24,000! What a generous and awesome community. Thank you! We had a great time at our country jamboree as 200 guests dressed in cowboy/girl hats, boots and danced up a storm under the instruction of Randy the Cowboy. A special thanks to committee members Todd Schrimmer, Dan Krist, Mike Clark, Anne Beers, Steve LaSalle, Sharon Castronova and Paula Kosiorek. Thank you members of the youth group, who joyfully assisted the servers, sold raffle tickets and welcomed the guests. A special thanks to DJ Chuck Argento for once again donating his incredible music.

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