



By
Phillip
Smith

EMANCIPATE

Poetic Justice

On September 10, 2021, equal justice advocacy group Emancipate NC hosted its second annual virtual art show, entitled “Poetic Justice.” The art show featured the literary and poetic works of four Nash residents: Timothy Johnson, Dadi McNair, Larry Legget-EL, and Phillip Smith, as well as other incarcerated people and free citizens from across the state. “Poetic Justice,” a fundraiser, connects incarcerated individuals with a growing community of sympathetic advocates desiring to hear amplified voices of the downtrodden. Although “Poetic Justice” aims to alter the way society views so-called “criminals,” Emancipate NC aspires to do much more by dismantling structural racism and ending mass incarceration through progressive legislation that appeals to the collective heart of North Carolinians.

Emancipate NC transitioned from what was once the “Carolina Justice Policy Center” in 2019 after Dawn Blagrove, a one-time attorney for North Carolina Prisoner’s Legal Service (NCPLS), became Executive Director. Emancipate NC was born during a tumultuous time of inequality, when mass incarceration, racial injustice, and police brutality squeezed together beneath the same umbrella of criminal justice reform. Previously, these issues were viewed separately because varying factors dictate their causality. However, some recent incidents group them together and show how they lead to injustice collectively, like during an incident of police brutality where an innocent black person is racially profiled by police and murdered although unarmed. To address systemic racism, Blagrove assembled a unique team of advocates to compel change, one issue at a time. This new team includes Blagrove’s colleague from NCPLS, civil attorney Elizabeth Simpson, now Assistant Director of Emancipate NC.

Elizabeth Simpson graduated from Yale Law School in 2009. She joined Emancipate NC during its infancy, long before Blagrove could afford to pay her a full-time salary. Working pro bono presented no problem for Simpson who feels passionately about changing the system while fighting beside people she loves. Battling for the oppressed was nothing new for Simpson. As a civil attorney for NCPLS, she filed lawsuits addressing “solitary confinement, use of force, parole procedures, religious access, and many other issues” involving prisoners’ rights. She read “thousands of letters” from the incarcerated and felt aggrieved because

“little could be done to assist them based on existing law.” Working with Emancipate NC enables Simpson to fight on the front lines of criminal justice reform, but also to compel policy change aside from litigation, because as an attorney, she understands that the criminal legal system cannot be transformed through the courts. Simpson believes that the public needs “to be moved to take action” and to “demand transformative change in the streets and from their elected officials.” For Simpson, earning a salary came secondary to changing the way North Carolina treats its incarcerated citizens.

In addition to prison reform, Simpson echoes arguments of other advocacy groups about the problem of racial disparity in the criminal justice system. Personally, Simpson feels that what society calls “crime” sprouts from roots burrowing far deeper than the surface incidents reported on the nightly news, including a direct link to chattel slavery. Simpson realizes solving these “problems would require investing in human beings” to make sure their fundamental needs are met. Fundamental needs include “safe housing, healthy food, supportive family and peer relationships, healthcare and mental healthcare, meaningful educational and work opportunities, and a source of higher meaning in one’s life.” Simpson identifies society’s refusal to invest in all people equally as a catalyst for oppression, finding, “instead, we...try to punish and control behavior, rather than looking at the root causes.” Her argument makes sense, because if problems of systemic inequality were destroyed at the root, results like violence in oppressed communities may never grow into fruition. If Simpson could fix one problem with the criminal justice system, she would “take incarceration off the table.” Such a radical suggestion has been proposed by many advocacy groups. Despite staunch opposition, punishing crime without prisons may benefit communities. Simpson argues that it would “require our society to think about alternative ways to address harm.” By examining Simpson’s reasoning, incarceration should not be the first option when addressing crime, and the public should explore more humane avenues. Simpson admits, “at the wrong time or in the wrong place, any human being could do something harmful to another person and end up in prison, if they were caught and got the wrong lawyer or the wrong judge.” This logic gives the public a good reason to re-shape the criminal justice system because it could



happen to anybody, despite factual findings showing how "our [criminal justice] system disproportionately arrests and incarcerates people based on race and economic status, which makes outcomes so very unfair, currently." Whether one takes Simpson's words as opinion or fact, they originate from years of experience as a criminal justice attorney who has walked "in the bowels" of prisons across the state, and her words explain why she chose to work for Emancipate NC.

While taking the criminal justice system to task for disparities in punishment, Simpson also urges incarcerated people to take responsibility for their own personal rehabilitation by advising them to "change for the better" and find "something meaningful to focus on, whether it is a religious calling, meditation, writing, photography, art, family, advocacy, service, or something else." Perhaps Simpson realizes one fact about the criminal justice system that many trapped in it do not: to change the system, we must first change ourselves.

Cierra Cobb never imagined she would work for an equal justice advocacy group like Emancipate NC. Cobb became a prison advocate after reconnecting with her incarcerated first love, now her husband. He explained how he had been wrongfully convicted when they first began communicating through letters and phone calls. Once Cierra read his motion of discovery, she became convinced of disproportionate sentencing in his case and wanted to change how the criminal justice system works to ensure no one is wrongfully convicted again. She contacted Emancipate NC seeking some form of assistance for her husband and found a job.

Cobb aspires to change the criminal justice system by helping push legislation leading to the end of mass incarceration. What began as a mission to free her husband metamorphosed into a lifelong journey to help all incarcerated people. She works with individuals approaching trial in the court system, currently incarcerated people, and people who have been newly freed, like Ronnie Long who was released in early 2021 after serving most of his life behind bars for a crime he did not commit. Cobb has found great personal reward in helping people and promises to continue her work after winning her husband's exoneration.

Currently, Cobb prioritizes advocating to forward criminal sentencing legislation like NC House Bill 697, which, if passed, will open a gateway to release for people serving life without parole. She also works as an advocate for family members of incarcerated people, focusing on helping children stay connected with their parents. Working to lower the financial strain of incarceration is also one of

Cobb's goals. As the wife of an incarcerated individual, she knows first-hand how expensive prison can be. Exorbitant fees for phone calls, texting on a tablet, canteen, quarterly food packages, and now mail, makes prisons an extremely expensive place to live. Sadly, the high cost of incarceration is passed on to families, because prisoners cannot afford to pay fees to connect with loved ones. Change to the system will not come easily, but Cobb knows it is possible. She remarks, "In this current moment, society has a better understanding of the criminal justice system and realizes it has done more to harm society than it has good." Cobb's boss, Elizabeth Simpson, echoes the same by finding, "Opening our collective hearts to see that families and communities have been ruptured by the impact of incarceration would mean that our society was capable of deep empathy and compassion and nuanced thinking about culpability, harm, and growth." The incarcerated community can only hope society someday recognizes how incarcerated individuals and their families are harmed by systemic inequality as Cierra Cobb and Elizabeth Simpson do.

By advocating for incarcerated individuals, Emancipate NC gives hope to the hopeless. Showcases like "Poetic Justice" work to amplify voices of the incarcerated, but society also needs to hear the voices of their free peers, who not only identify problems with the way people are treated in the criminal justice system, but fight to change them. Emancipate NC does more than just prison advocacy. Most notably, Emancipate NC worked "to challenge voter suppression" in North Carolina by forwarding accurate information about the voting process and by holding supportive events at polling stations. By helping people understand their rights when voting, Emancipate NC ensures public representation by fair lawmakers who posit a vested interest in passing fair legislation. Without sympathetic lawmakers, Emancipate NC cannot compel the transformative change it desires, illuminating Emancipate NC's mission and strategy: dismantling systemic inequality through legislation and policy change for the people, and by the people. *TNN*

Anyone can write to Emancipate NC, but Elizabeth Simpson wanted everyone to know that they do not have enough staff at present to answer all letters or inquiries; however, *TNN* will provide their address:

Emancipate NC
P O Box 309
Durham, NC 27702