GLOBAL FREEDOM

Lives and Lessons From Incarceration Nations Network's Formerly Incarcerated Leaders From Around the World

Incarceration Nations Network

Collection Editor
BAZ DREISINGER

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With an Introduction by Baz Dreisinger

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Abstract

Presented in their own words, the narratives and wisdom of 34 formerly incarcerated alumni of Incarceration Nations Network's Global Freedom Fellowship program—hailing from 22 countries—reveal how much genius and human potential is being discarded in prison systems around the world. Their inspiring and sometimes devastating life stories and visions for justice globally provide a blueprint for safer, more inclusive societies and a warning signal about who suffers when we lack these. From Africa to the United States, from Latin America to the Caribbean, these voices are a window into the worldwide crisis that is mass incarceration and the ways in which those with lived experience of justice systems worldwide are paving the way toward solutions to this crisis—locally and globally.

Key words

Global mass incarceration; lived experience leadership; prison reform; transnational solidarity; restorative justice; narrative change; community healing

Content warning

This book contains first-person accounts of incarceration and justice systems around the world. Some chapters include descriptions of trauma, torture, solitary confinement, and the death penalty. These narratives are shared to inform and inspire, but may be distressing for some readers. Reader discretion is advised.

Book beginning learning objectives

- Understand global mass incarceration as a transnational system.
- Understand the importance of lived experience leadership in the justice reform and justice reimagining work, globally.
- Understand the importance of education and restorative practices to incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people.

Book ending recommended assignments

- Write a reflective essay on how the stories in the book challenged the reader's previous understandings of the book's topic.
- Compare how two countries in the book deal with justice and prisons.
- Organize a group discussion to collectively think about the challenges, limitations, and perspectives of incarceration

and transnational justice work based on the personal stories in the book and other external sources.

- Using the Fellows' perspectives, map out potential solutions to the crisis of mass incarceration, locally and globally.
- Draw up a map of "what worked" when it came to the Fellows' road from prison to leadership.

Acknowledgments

INN is first and foremost a transnational collective, which means the ultimate "thank you" goes to our global justice family: all of our partner organizations, our many allies and especially our Global Freedom Fellowship alumni—who honor us by trusting us with their stories, their wisdom, and their work.

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Thank you to David Dorson, the pen name of our editor, a Canadian who has been incarcerated but also has extensive writing and publishing experience. His award-winning column about his experience in the criminal justice system and prisons in Canada can be found (free of charge) in the online publication Law360 Canada by searching under his pen name. His hours of work on the manuscript reflect a profound commitment to lived-experience leadership and global justice that makes this world a better place.

Foreword

I think it would be accurate to say that I have travelled a journey with prisons and prisoners, and that there have been four movements to that journey. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, my life partner Kerry and I served in detainee support structures during the final phase of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. That work took us into police stations, courtrooms, and prisons. When Kerry herself was detained by the security police, I experienced the work from a very different perspective.

During the second half of the 1990s, I served in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the search for documentary and other evidence taking the team I was part of into government offices, police stations, intelligence structures, and prisons.

And then I worked for South Africa's longest-serving former political prisoner, Nelson Mandela. That exposed me—and continues to expose me as I pursue a long association with the Nelson Mandela Foundation—to the life journeys and life narratives of numerous former long-term political prisoners. The work also took me to a number of active and former prisons—Robben Island, Pollsmoor, Pretoria Central, the Old Fort, the Women's Gaol at Constitution Hill, Drakenstein (formerly Victor Verster), and "Sun City" in Soweto.

The fourth movement in my journey is a continuing one, brought to me from the moment I met Baz Dreisinger. Since

then, I've been privileged to spend time with every cohort of Incarceration Nations Network (INN) Global Freedom Fellowship program. They've taught me a lot. They've provoked me into reading books like Jackie Wang's *Carceral Capitalism*. They've contributed to my finally understanding that the prison system in South Africa is part of a global mass incarceration apparatus.

Reading INN's *Global Freedom* has been profoundly moving. The faces of those I'd met through the fellowship came alive again in a myriad inspiring stories of resilience, of picking oneself up, of not giving up. These are the stories of exceptional leaders who know the power of solidarity. And the book, for me, is a classic leadership development text. I will return to it again and again.

Verne Harris

Adjunct Professor: Nelson Mandela University

Executive Consultant: Nelson Mandela Foundation

Introduction
Global freedom: How a transnational movement was born by Dr. Baz Dreisinger

I know and the public know

What all school children learn

Those to whom evil is done

Do evil in return

Xavier Capes, incarcerated in South Africa

Hi Baz,

You're going to Barbados? I can't imagine what that would be like.

I wonder if Barbadians have prisons. I wonder if they throw their citizens away in prison forever too.

Arthur, formerly incarcerated in the United States

I published *Incarceration Nations: A Journey to Justice in Prisons Around the World* a decade ago, and then a journey became a movement.

It was not my game plan. Like most writers, my vision of success was singular: a book that people read. Instead, *Incarceration Nations* birthed Incarceration Nations Network, or INN: a global network of prison reformers and justice re-imaginers, with 136 partner organizations in more than four dozen countries. Our transnational work cuts across walls and silos, guided by two North Stars: a world without borders and a world without prisons.

How did this—how did INN—happen? In motion, of course: *movement* in the literal sense. After the book was published in 2016, my journey to justice continued. I returned to almost all of the countries I'd written about, because how could I not? To be a parachute scholar, swooping in and out for "fieldwork," is anathema to me. I am a doer, and an impatient one at that: How could there *not* be a Prison-to-College Pipeline in South Africa? Or Jamaica, or Brazil? How could we not better advocate for women in prison in Thailand alongside the Thailand Institute of Justice, or for restorative justice that looks like the program I saw in Bogota, Colombia? I kept going; I stayed moving.

I connected the global dots. I landed in Chile on a Global Fulbright Fellowship and laid eyes on La Penitenciaria, a carbon copy of Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania and thus the perfect embodiment of the cut-and-paste system of justice I bemoaned in *Incarceration Nations*: prison as a method of justice, as the exclusive response to crime, was an institution invented in the United States some 200 years ago and then, via colonialism and

globalization, foisted on the world. During my book tour, I repeatedly cited the perfect synecdoche for this cut-and-paste absurdity: a judge in Ghana wearing a formal gown and old British white wig—in a sweltering courtroom, worlds away from England.

I crossed more and more borders and went to prison after prison, bearing witness to the suffering of overrepresented groups in global justice systems. A prison in Marseille, France, packed with thousands of people of African descent (and barely a program or any opportunities for them to avail themselves of). Prisons in the Western Cape of South Africa that act almost as a rite of passage for the region's so-called colored community, funneled directly from a past molded by apartheid and before that, slavery. The South Sudanese communities in Melbourne's youth justice system, overincarcerated at numbers my brain still cannot even process.

I encountered more and more of the bizarre that is part and parcel of this nonsensical thing we invented and named "prison." In a high-security facility in Milan called Opera, heaps of wooden boats that once carried migrants to Italy's shores were being recycled by incarcerated workers into, of all things, violins. I met the hulking director of a prison in Slovakia whose experience for the job was his past life as a professional handball player. I sailed to Gorgona, the northernmost island in the Tuscan Archipelago: a prison that's also a vineyard. Or is it a vineyard that's also a prison? I pondered this during my sojourn to the breathtaking island, its verdant vineyards tumbling into an impossibly blue sea, barbed wire glistening in the Tuscan sunlight.

The bizarre, though, fast morphed into infuriating. I grew tired. Existentially exhausted. Not just by the horror and antiquated

anti-logic that is global mass incarceration but by the well-meaning yet painfully misguided efforts to address it. Tired of the little pet projects in prisons that are more about making the people who run them feel good about their do-good than they are about radical structural change or providing real opportunities for incarcerated people; tired of programs that only serve those inside and then forget about them when they're released; tired of the ones who were happy to perform their little piece of charity and then pat themselves on the back—because the reality is that if you're not uncomfortable, sitting in the contradictions of justice work, you're not really doing it, and if you're not doing this work to put yourself out of business, you're not really doing it, either.

I could no longer stomach the prison tours, which inevitably begin with trespassing on trauma and end with a branded gift from the authorities: the notebook, the pen, the painting from the "model inmate"—like the one given to me in Bangu Prison outside of Rio de Janeiro, where some 26,000 people live; it's a meticulous drawing of Nelson Mandela with words penciled beneath him in Portuguese: "just as happiness is not eternal, sadness is not forever."

And I grew sick and tired of the "pretty prisons" I'd seen everywhere from the Dominican Republic to France: the "model" wing or facility that looks totally unlike the rest of the system but actually exists to prop up that system, because the powers that be can always point to it and say, "look, we have this one!" In a newly built prison in Bratislava—where there are heated floors but no warmth of life whatsoever—I seethed at the very concept of a "model" prison, because prisons exist in the context of larger

ecosystems of justice, care, and health, which means that there are no model prisons, there are only model *systems*, guided by common sense: allow people to meet their needs. Give them opportunities. Give them community and a sense of inclusion. Give them, simply yet profoundly, *love*.

INN was thus born from years of accrued fatigue and frustration, doused with optimism. From early on, I knew that the organization had to be grounded in the transnational collective, and that even as it would make knowledge-sharing about prisons and safety a two-way street, it would work to leverage the privileges and resources of the Global North to benefit the Global South—because, after all, the Global North is largely responsible for the worldwide prison crisis, then and now; the United States alone doled out at least USD 5.2 billion of international criminal justice assistance funding between 2013 and 2022, much of it going toward building carceral states (i.e., arming police forces and erecting prisons). Given that we helped make the mess, how could we not be working to clean it up; how, morally speaking, could US funding of justice work end at the border?

We launched in late 2019 as a global network that supports, instigates, and popularizes innovative prison reform and justice-reimagining efforts around the world. I use both "reform" and "reimagining" very deliberately, because we are focused on systems change and we are abolitionist, but given that the only way to be a pure abolitionist is to stand on the sidelines—and who can bear to do that when lives are on the line?—we also support the sometimes incremental reform efforts of our global partners. Our unofficial motto is "correcting and connecting"; the "correcting" part refers not to correcting people—as I often say, we

"rehabilitate" furniture, not humans—but correcting the inequitable societal systems that shape them. Our ethos is spelled out on the home page of our website: "INN is a partner-led organization that is: globally minded but locally grounded, attuned to problems but driven by solutions, focused on systemic change even as we work to clean up the mess of mass incarceration in the here and now. We are committed to transnational solidarity, intersectionality, working toward a world without prisons and ensuring that those directly impacted by the justice system lead the way to its radical reimagining."

Over years of building with our partner organizations, I honed in on the two areas of focus that have become INN's pillars (i.e., in addition to our ongoing mandate of being amplifiers of and collaborators in the manifold work of our global partners). The first is culture and narrative change: reaching across silos to get the broader public to understand that prisons, the war on drugs, the war on crime—these do not make us safer. Because the reality is that policymakers worldwide often know very well what the data says: prisons are criminogenic, meaning they produce more crime than they treat or prevent. But from one corner of the globe to another, nothing is more marketable to the public—especially during election season—than tough-on-crime. To that effect, we labor to reach the voting community with a different set of messaging, to induce that trickle-up effect: politicians become obliged to give the people what they want, which is smart on crime. At INN, we have an award-winning docuseries (*Incarceration Nations: A Global Docuseries*) and an art installation (The Writing on the Wall, with renowned visual artist Hank Willis Thomas) that we've screened/staged around the world; our

creative, fun—yes, *fun* is vital to the work and turning people onto it!—events cut across demographics to reach the broader public with a more thoughtful narrative about safety and justice than the diet of punitivity peddled by the bulk of politicians and media outlets.

A vital part of this more thoughtful narrative, of course, centers people with lived experience of prisons worldwide, who should not only not be stigmatized, but embraced as leaders in our transnational effort to build safe, equitable communities. This is INN's second pillar of work, represented in the book you are holding: development of and support for lived experience leadership globally. Why? Because, as US justice leader Glenn Martin famously put it, "those closest to the problem are closest to the solution, but furthest from the money and resources."

In the United States, we started the shift from a movement led by people like me, who have not been incarcerated, to a lived experience-led effort more than a decade ago. But the rest of the world is far behind. So I created the Global Freedom Fellowship (GFF) to start building this community up, worldwide. Annually, up to 17 formerly incarcerated leaders from around the world spend 2 weeks with us in South Africa—a place where, as Nelson Mandela famously put it, "you go to prison first and then you become president"—in order to connect, build, learn, be inspired, heal, and feel joy. Those last two are especially important. No one can do the hard work of prison reform and reimagining without healing from trauma: the compounded trauma of before prison, during prison, and after prison. And no one can do it without a community, without consistent love and support. So we designed the Fellowship experience to be saturated in

these things, an opportunity to learn about each other's work and plot collaborations, yes, but more than that a relentless celebration of—to cite the title of the GFF anthem, composed by two members of the Fellowship's founding cohort, Evie Ponder (United States) and Rodrigo Sabiah (Brazil), during their time in South Africa—"Love & Freedom."

For 3 years of the Fellowship, it was magnificent to watch the potent, instant bond that cemented together members of our cohorts. It never failed: that immediate sense that this is a family, and this is love. Fellows who had trouble saying "I love you" to their wives or partners found the phrase rolling off their tongue during their time in South Africa. Even more incredible was the fact that this feeling did not wane over time; years later, our three GFF WhatsApp chat groups still ping away as Fellows share news, spread love, celebrate victories, and commiserate losses. With more than four dozen Fellows in almost 30 countries, INN has built an army of lived experience leaders across the globe who are connected to each other, have identified their area of intervention in the crisis that is global mass incarceration, and are supported by our global justice family to keep making change in their home countries and transnationally.

For US Fellows, this means extending their commitment to justice work across borders in ways they may not have previously considered. This is embodied in the work of Jarrell Daniels '23 (United States), whose Brooklyn-based gang intervention program, Project Restore, is currently being replicated in Melbourne, Australia, via Global Freedom Consulting; or of Jhody Polk '24 (United States) whose legal empowerment efforts have extended beyond US borders in collaboration with Fellows like Awande

Mshotana '23 (South Africa), Morris Kaberia '23 (Kenya), and Canaan Nkamuhabwa '24 (Uganda). For many Fellows outside the United States, it means receiving nourishment from a community that doesn't exist in their home countries, where there is no solid ecosystem of prison reform work and no collective of people with lived experience of justice systems; it means leveraging that global community to build a similar one and expand the work—much in the way that Nicholas Khan '24 (Trinidad & Tobago) did, working closely with me upon his return from South Africa to launch multiple programs, including a Prison-to-College Pipeline initiative and an arts workshop in youth facilities.

That is what it means to build people, not prisons: investing deeply in one leader and then watching as the ripple effect of this investment impacts families, communities, countries, and eventually the world.

It's critical to step back and recognize a potent incubator of the lived-experience leaders I've been speaking of: in-prison university programs, which have been central to both my and INN's work from the beginning. Education Not Incarceration, we say, both because education can essentially replace prison in ways that would make us all safer and more equitable, and because we know that if people had access to quality education in their communities—which they did not have on account of the social and racial inequality making such a thing accessible only to certain segments of society, globally speaking—they likely would not have ended up in prisons in the first place.

But let me rewind. Fifteen years ago, I founded the Prison-to-College Pipeline program at John Jay College of Criminal Justice,

where I have been a professor since 2003. The program offers in-person university education to people in prison and also guarantees them a place in university upon release; the concept of it—a reversal of the infamous US school-to-prison pipeline, which funnels poor black and brown people into the criminal legal system and exists in myriad iterations globally—is to give students in prison the best of both worlds: the opportunity to study while inside, but also to benefit from all of the powerful things that come from university on the outside, which is much more than a degree: a community, vital networking opportunities, campus resources, and more.

The program is still thriving, and in a decade of building it I came prepared for many things: the challenges of navigating two of the biggest bureaucracies in New York (City University of New York [CUNY) and the Department of Corrections), and the emotional highs and lows of working with the most brilliant, passionate students I had ever met—brilliant students who were also grappling with inordinate amounts of trauma and crises that struck on a daily basis. But here is what I was not prepared for: Being yelled at—a lot.

Each day when I arrived in prison for class, inevitably at least one student rushed toward me.

> Baz, where's my transcript?
> Where's that book I asked for?
> Why am I not registered for this class?
> Why haven't I gotten my exam back yet?

This was initially a lot to take in, especially because anyone who has run a program behind bars anywhere in the world knows that

the bureaucracy of this work is deafening, and countless things are not under our control and thus get delayed and impeded—much to our dismay and frustration. But I fast became accustomed to being bawled at by my beloved students, learning to never take it personally.

Fast forward to 2 years ago. I am in Madrid, Spain, headed to a prison where university students are studying via UNED (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia), a massive distance learning institution that's now our partner in the Global Freedom Scholars Network: INN's network of justice-involved university students in 17 countries. I enter their classroom alongside their professor and it comes at us *en español*, in full force:

> Where's my transcript?
> Why can't I access this video?
> Look how this website doesn't work!
> Why can't we have more hours per week in the computer lab?

Fast forward, again, to last year. In preparation for the Mandela Day launch of the Global Freedom Scholars Network in Nigeria, I was rereading the complete prison letters of Nelson Mandela. And I came across this, addressed to the registrar at the University of London, and dozens more like it:

> I should be pleased if you would kindly credit me with having passed Jurisprudence and Legal Theory, and allow me to write the remaining three subjects for Part II of the LL.B course on two separate occasions, i.e., I should like to write Public International Law in June 1970, and the remaining two subjects in June 1971.

> As a prisoner who is doing hard labour, I am experiencing considerable difficulty in preparing to write four subjects in one examination, and any concession you might make in this regard will give me a fair chance of showing competent knowledge in each subject I offer.
> I might add that one of my main problems has been to obtain the latest editions of the recommended textbooks, and to consult the reference works, as well as the journals that would enable me to keep abreast of the development of the law in each subject. The total cost of the study material I require for purposes of preparing for the examinations is, in my circum-stances, prohibitive. I could afford such costs only if the remaining course is phased out as indicated above.

A week later I was cc'ed on the following email from an incarcerated student in South Africa:

Dear College of Education,

Can you please assist me with a complaint about module BPT1501 (Becoming a Professional Teacher) from semester 1, 2024.

This module was a portfolio module, no exam. There were 7 compulsory assignments, and I could not complete assignments 5 and 6, due to my Unisa malfunction. I received my results for this module yesterday morning (18 July 2024) and now it shows that I have failed BPT1501 as a consequence of my Unisa malfunction for Assignments 5 and 6.

Please find attached screenshots of myUnisa malfunction when trying to open the BPT1501 assignments 5 and 6. Please see below email (of several emails) sent to the lecturers of the module. The

lecturer was on leave according to an automated response; the teaching assistant's contact details were only released after the assignment submission deadline, and although they did send me the assignment questions via email after this deadline, I then couldn't submit the assignments through myUnisa as it was already closed.

I am an incarcerated student, and it is difficult for me to get hold of the relevant parties. My studies are sponsored by an American scholarship and requires a consistent pass rate. Your urgent feedback in this matter will be highly appreciated.

Thank you for your attention.

Can you see the theme I am generating here? Students who embark on university-level education in prison must fight tooth and nail for it—and they do. They face every obstacle imaginable, yet they still earn those degrees and those credits; they still build a profound community of learners against every single odd stacked against them. And that is why these prison-university partnerships yield leaders who represent our global society's best chance at a better world. If they have managed to learn and to organize in this context, imagine what they could do in the free world and especially on a university campus—and imagine the glorious society that can result from their empowered leadership.

But alas, this is not how the narrative typically goes. Instead, around the world, this is what usually happens to these change-making scholars: they fall into what I call the prison-to-capitalism pipeline, by which they are funneled into menial jobs that don't allow them to exercise their genius or allow us as a global

community to benefit from it. Sometimes, too, they fall through the cracks of society, perhaps back where they came from—and society remains, structurally, exactly as it was; the university remains exactly as it was. And the cycle continues.

INN launched the Global Freedom Scholars Network to finally undo that cycle. We are building a new global norm where access to university education for incarcerated people is not some radical outlier of an idea but a global norm—because everyone deserves the right to education at all levels, including those who are incarcerated. We are building a global community of emboldened, accomplished people who can organize and build solidarity in the most challenging of settings. These people will make the structural change we desperately need in order to build safe, cohesive communities in the context not only of, as we say, Education Not Incarceration, but of all the facets of society.

It should thus be no surprise that many of the Global Freedom Consultants are also part of INN's Global Freedom Scholars Network. They all represent INN's changemaking transnational army: teachers, lawyers, educators, philosophers, housing specialists, cooperative creators, government appointees. Against all odds, they have built programs like the Underground Scholars at UC Berkeley, the community libraries of Buenos Aires, and the Prison-to-College Pipeline initiatives in Trinidad and South Africa. They keep countless justice programs running, like ConTextos in El Salvador, Rubikon Centrum in the Czech Republic, and The People's Law in South Africa.

They are the ones we, in this crisis of a world, need; they are the ones we have been waiting for in order to stop the bleeding and

build a better global community—and they have been here all along, ignored and discarded. Not anymore.

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So what have I learned along the way, as we launch Global Freedom Consulting, as my journey to justice keeps on journeying? For one, lived-experience leadership is not a magic bullet; on the road to justice there are no magic bullets. That its *raison d'etre* is not DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) or tokenism. And that it's not simply about storytelling. While the sharing of personal histories may be part of the work for lived- experience leaders—it shifts the narrative by humanizing a deeply dehumanized population—that should never be the crux of it, nor should people be made to perform trauma on demand. The most impactful lived experience leaders I know aren't sharing their personal stories over and over—they are sharing their movement-building success stories, their blueprints for how to create justice in the world.

Because, ultimately, the value of a robust global community of lived experienced leaders is simple: it produces better justice work. While we should be mindful to not paint all lived experience leaders with a single brush—a person who spent 1 year in prison is not coming to the table with the same experience as someone who spent 40 years there; a person's race, class, gender and nationality similarly shape his or her knowledge sets—we can generally say that people who have lived behind the wall bring a wealth of wisdom and understanding to the table, which vastly improves how projects play out in real time. They also bring a palpable sense of urgency to the work, because

it's not an abstract thing but something deeply personal. And these ingredients—wisdom and persistent urgency—make for a vibrant, innovative, sustained global justice movement. The measure of success of INN's GFF and now its baby, Global Freedom Consulting, is thus not simply that we see an increase in the number of people with lived experience on the front lines of the movement—that's step one. The real success is that these leaders—healed healers, nurtured with love and freedom, held to a high standard in terms of work and impact—are able to enact more justice, locally and globally. We cannot lose track of what the point of lived experience leadership is: not to valorize people and create activist celebrities but to move the needle of the justice system and make us all safer and more equitable, country by country.

Coming from the US context of a well-developed scene of formerly incarcerated leaders, I also have a clear sense of the challenges such a scene faces. An infusion of financial support for this work can pit people against each other in competition for funding and ego stroking. It can lure the wrong people into the work for the wrong reasons (money, adoration) and also lure the right people into the work for the right reasons, only for them to discover that, in fact, the nonprofit sector can be one of the most toxic spaces for people coming home from prison: it's financially unstable from year to year, it's low paying across the board, it's often directly triggering to peoples' traumas.

Leaders must be able to more than meet their needs while doing the work. Yet when we talk about money and the movement, we name a persistent, profound threat. The corporatizing of justice work, its commodification, is perilous not only because