

# JustSouth Monthly

JSRI Perspectives on FAITH DOING JUSTICE

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## A Determined Woman Shares Her Story: SAHI Webinar Sheds Light on Mass Incarceration

By Sue Weishar, Ph.D.

On November 16th the [LUCAP](#) organization Students Against Hyper-Incarceration (SAHI) held a Zoom conversation with Rhonda Oliver, Executive Director of Women Determined, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping women transition from prison to the free world. Ms. Oliver founded Women Determined after serving almost 14 years in the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women for the theft of goods valued at less than \$200. During the hour-long event Ms. Oliver provided viewers with compelling insights into the ways Louisiana's criminal justice system is stacked against poor and marginalized defendants.



Rhonda Oliver performing in Women Determined's play Released to Nowhere.

Sabah Bashi, SAHI's Project Leader, moderated the event. Ms. Oliver began by explaining to viewers how the Jefferson Parish DA's office used Louisiana's "habitual offender" law against her to obtain a 20-year sentence for a crime with a maximum sentence of two years. Sabah then asked Ms. Oliver to discuss the repercussions of her sentence. Oliver exclaimed, "There were so many!" First and foremost Rhonda Oliver was separated from her nine year-old daughter who was forced to live from home to home "with no stability" while her mother was incarcerated. Oliver lost all her possessions, including her car. The bills she had, including a student loan, continued to pile up. Upon release, with her parents deceased and her siblings impoverished and themselves in unstable living situations, Oliver had no choice but to live in a homeless shelter.\*

When Sabah asked Ms. Oliver when she realized that the criminal justice system was against her, she responded, "Immediately! I was a poor, black female. My only way out was to study the law" and then to represent herself in her appeals. Combing through her case and the cases of other women with whom she was incarcerated, Oliver soon realized that they were "caught up in a system that would do anything to obtain a conviction" and that defendants often ended up with sentences to "fit" what prosecutors felt they deserved.

Ms. Oliver's conclusions resonate strongly with the research of a leading scholar on mass incarceration, Fordham University law professor John Pfaff. Professor Pfaff argues in his important book, [Locked In](#), that a major cause of mass incarceration in the U.S. is a profound shift in prosecutor behavior since the mid-1990's, when D.A.'s began bringing more serious charges with longer sentences against arrestees, despite a dramatic drop in crime.

Ms. Oliver became so proficient in filing appeals on behalf of herself and other incarcerated women that she earned the nickname "Johnnie Cochran." Finally, after 14 years a federal district court judge vacated her sentence. Suddenly, Rhonda Oliver was free.

At a university committed to building a more just world, in a state that leads the world in rate of incarceration of its residents, it is good news that Loyola students have come together as SAHI to focus on the scandal of hyper-incarceration. Contact Sabah Bashi at [sabashi@my.loyno.edu](mailto:sabashi@my.loyno.edu) to see how you can become involved in SAHI's work. Learn how you can support the work of Women Determined at [www.womendetermined.org](http://www.womendetermined.org).

To gain a better understanding of mass incarceration through the experiences of an adolescent, a must-read is Loyola Associate Professor Christian Bolden's compelling autoethnography, [Out of the Red: My Life in Gangs, Prison, and Redemption](#). In this Advent season of light and hope, Dr. Bolden's powerful and courageous book provides critical insights into youth gang and prison life and the social forces that pushed him there, as well as how the loving support of family and mentors helped lead him to healing and redemption.

\* Rhonda Oliver wrote a play about her experience of homelessness after prison, "Released to Nowhere," which was performed with other members of Women Determined at Loyola during the Spring 2019 semester. The play was sponsored by JSRI, Loyola's Honors Program, Women's Resource Center, Loyola University Community Action Program (LUCAP), and Department of Criminology and Justice.

Monthly articles reflect the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of Loyola University New Orleans.

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#### JSRI Future Activities

##### January 2021

The winter *JustSouth Quarterly*  
will be released.

JSRI staff and associates—  
working from home—will  
continue monitoring local, state,  
and federal administrative,  
legislative, and judicial actions  
regarding our priority issues and  
the impact of Covid-19;  
participating in advocacy  
communications with authorities;  
recommending resources on our  
website and by social media;  
research and writing for our  
publications; and activating our  
advocacy network.

#### JSRI Recent Activities

##### November 19

As a guest speaker on a  
webinar hosted by Students  
Against Hyper-Incarceration  
(SAHI), Dr. Sue Weishar  
provided information on the laws  
and policies that have  
contributed to mass  
incarceration in the U.S.

##### November 20

JSRI staff met via zoom.

##### November 21

Dr. Dennis Kalob was  
interviewed on WWL-TV about  
JSRI's recently released  
signature report, the [JustSouth  
Index 2019](#).

##### December 2

Dr. Weishar was the guest  
faculty facilitator for the final  
Freshman Honors Colloquium  
meeting of the year where she  
led Zoom discussion on the  
history of U.S. immigration  
policies and the challenge  
facing undocumented  
immigrants today.

##### December 7

Dr. Kalob was quoted in a Public  
News Service story that aired on  
nearly 50 radio stations across  
the United States and was also  
covered by several print and  
online media outlets. The topic  
was the COVID-19 crisis and its  
economic impacts on individuals  
and families.

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