



Number 124

September 2022

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Upcoming Events

Released to Nowhere Play

The play, *Released to Nowhere*, will be held at St. Martha Catholic Church, 2555 Apollo Avenue, Harvey, this Sunday, September 25, at 4:30 PM. Written by Rhonda Oliver and performed by Ms. Oliver and other members of [Women Determined](#), the play presents a detailed account of the seemingly impossible challenges women face when released from prison. For more information click [here](#).

Corrections in Ink: A Memoir - Book Talk by Keri Blakinger

Journalist Keri Blakinger will discuss her book, *Corrections in Ink: A Memoir*, on Monday, October 3, from 6PM to 7PM at Loyola Law School, Room 405. Ms. Blakinger's memoir describes her journey from the ice rink to addiction and a prison sentence, to the newsroom—and how she emerged with a fierce determination to expose the broken system she experienced. Register for this event [here](#).

Latinx Culture, Diplomacy, and Law

In celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month, a panel discussion on *Latinx Culture, Diplomacy, and Law* will be held Wednesday, October 5, from 5:00 PM to 6:30 PM in the St. Charles Room. Contact Dr. [Pablo Zavala](#) for more information.

Teach-in on Mass Incarceration

An Ignatian Teach-in on Mass Incarceration will be held Monday evening, October 17, from 6:30 PM to 8:30 PM in the Audubon Room. At this event formerly incarcerated persons will share their life stories with participants in small listening circles. All members of the Loyola Community are invited to attend, no pre-registration required. For more information contact [Sue Weishar](#).

"What Is the Crime Wave?"

This event offers three perspectives on the recent spike in crime in New Orleans: as a statistical trend (Ben Horwitz, AH Datalytics), as a scary social phenomenon (Dr. Chuck P. Nichols, Psychology), and as a media event (Dr. Sheryl Kennedy Haydel, Director of the School of Communication and Design). Dr. Marcus M. Kondkar (Sociology) will facilitate a conversation among the speakers to understand what is really happening in our city, and how the concepts we rely on shape our responses to current events. This event will be held on October 26 at 6pm in the Audubon Room.

[Click to Join our Advocacy Network](#)

A Culture of Encounter with Life Without Parole

By Marcus Kondkar, Ph.D.

I spend a lot of time analyzing data on incarceration, sentencing patterns, and recidivism, with a focus on life without parole sentences. As a sociologist, I am trained to think about social life through a structural lens, from a distance conducive to maintaining objectivity. About a decade ago, I met Calvin Duncan, a remarkable man who served 28 and a half years on a life sentence before winning his freedom with help from the Innocence Project. Calvin spent most of that time at the Louisiana State Penitentiary –Angola—as an “inmate counsel,” and he knew all these people there serving life sentences; he grew up with them and knew their stories of transformation and growth over the years. As we talked, we realized that people don’t know about the changes that happen behind prison walls, because they have no access to incarcerated persons. One of the consequences of designing prisons to keep people in, is that they keep the rest of us out, and the people in them remain an abstraction to us. We are skeptical of transformation and rehabilitation because we never see it. So Calvin and I realized we had to find a way to get into the prison and get these stories out. We designed an ethnographic oral history project, initially for an academic audience, and after much effort, I was given access to Angola to record more than 100 life-history interviews with people sentenced to die in prison. While Louisiana is an extreme outlier in the use of life without parole sentences, the men at Angola are representative of the 55,000 Americans currently serving life without parole across this country. The men I spoke to were all convicted of murder, which in Louisiana carries a mandatory life without parole sentence. They were disproportionately Black; all were convicted when they were very young, and all had served at least twenty years in prison.



Pope Francis calls on us to create a culture of encounter with “the other” if we want to understand their experiences, particularly for folks who are marginalized to the sidelines of society. In order to make empathetic connections with the other, to be reminded of our common humanity, we must visit with them, hear their stories, and see them as whole human beings. In the absence of such encounters, we remain trapped in our own set of assumptions and prejudices, and narrow our existing world view.

During the first week of interviews at Angola I realized that I was encountering something more intimate and far-reaching than I had imagined. I was suddenly privy to extraordinary stories of transformation and struggle that the public would never ordinarily get a chance to see or hear. Right away, I was struck by the openness and emotional intensity of our conversations. Several of the men I spoke to told me that I was the first person to see their tears since they were children. There were stark reminders of how their invisibility and feelings of insignificance have been normalized. Most were confused as to why I wanted to learn about them, why anyone would be interested in them, and why what they had to say might matter to anyone. I came to learn that the men were telling me things they never shared with their loved ones, because they have learned to avoid emotionally difficult conversations to spare them worry. Something about meeting a relative stranger and being asked about their lives allowed them to share memories and talk about things they would otherwise keep hidden away.

We returned to the prison to screen the project for all the men who contributed to it, and now that the interviews are beginning to reach the outside world through [www.visitingroomproject.org](#), they’re having profound and unexpected consequences. In some cases, the interviews have served as a catalyst to reunite families after decades of estrangement. In others, they have helped victims’ family members learn more about the men responsible for their loved one’s murders, which has led to healing and forgiveness. And in almost all cases, they have simply allowed the men who shared their stories to feel like people in their lives can see them more fully.

The Visiting Room Project is an invitation to experience this culture of encounter, to sit face-to-face with people serving life without the possibility of parole, and hear their stories, in their words. As Calvin told me when we first dreamed up the project: “We just want to be seen for who we are.” Of course, this is true for all human beings, but how much more for the thousands we’ve locked away to die in our prisons, never to be seen or heard from again?

Dr. Kondkar is Chair of the Sociology Department.

In 2020, he received Loyola’s highest recognition for faculty, the Dux Academic Award.

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

Please send feedback to jsri@loyno.edu

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS

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