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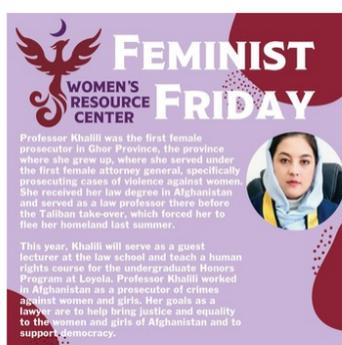


### Upcoming Events

#### Human Rights and Women's Rights in Afghanistan

October 28th, 12:30-1:30pm  
Loyola University New Orleans, Marquette Hall 315

The featured speaker is Professor Negina Khalili who was the first female prosecutor in Ghor Province, where she served under the first female attorney general, prosecuting cases of violence against women. Professor Khalili received her law degree in Afghanistan and served as a law professor there before the Taliban take-over, which forced her to flee her homeland last summer.



#### St. Charles Center for Faith In Action Heart of Reconciliation Conference

November 17th-20th  
7100 St. Charles Avenue New Orleans, LA 70115

This powerful gathering will bring together community members, those touched by the criminal legal system, trauma-informed experts, spiritual leaders, and change agents to deepen the understanding of the power of reconciliation, identify tools for reconciliation, and build action plans to heal. [Register here.](#)



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## The Work of the New Orleans DA's Civil Rights Division:

### Giving Second Chances to Reformed Men and Women Makes Us a Better Community

By Bidish Sarma, J.D.

As a lawyer working in the Orleans Parish District Attorney's Civil Rights Division, I have the unique opportunity to revisit old cases with extreme sentences and advocate on the State's behalf for reduced sentences where those outcomes are appropriate. New Orleans is the mass incarceration capital of the planet, and our decades-long attachment to [locking people up](#) for the rest of their lives means that there is no shortage of work. One of the biggest lessons I have learned about second-look work is that focusing on the narrow question of whether someone may commit another crime can cause us to miss the bigger point: formerly incarcerated people make life-changing contributions to society.

[Research](#) suggests that America can reduce its inflated prison population without any meaningful risk to public safety by releasing individuals who have already served lengthy sentences. In my role, I see evidence of this truth every week when I walk over to the Criminal District Courthouse at Tulane and Broad. There I see [Everett Offray](#), who goes by Buff. He works for the Orleans Public Defender as a Resentencing Client Advocate, helping individuals who are being released from prison during their transition back to the community. Ten months ago, Buff was serving a life-without-parole sentence for a murder he committed when he was 18 years old. In 1994, Buff shot and killed another young man, Timothy Lacey. Profoundly changed during his more than 27-year period of incarceration, Buff was a jailhouse lawyer, helping other incarcerated men who could not afford legal representation navigate complicated proceedings. When I learned that the victim's father, Mr. Bill Lacey, wanted an opportunity to sit down with Buff, and that Buff wished to express his remorse, Buff's lawyer, Kelly Orians and I coordinated an in-person dialogue that the District Attorney facilitated. It is impossible to describe the beauty of the reconciliation I witnessed. [Mr. Lacey forgave Buff](#) for the crime, and Buff pledged he would continue to work every day to make the world a better place.



Bidish Sarma and Buff

It was not clear then that Buff would ever obtain freedom; after all, he was sentenced to die in prison. However, after a thorough review of his case, Kelly and I approached the court with a proposed plea agreement. Because there was troubling evidence that Buff's lawyer had failed to provide him with constitutionally-adequate representation, rather than litigate, we proposed that he plead guilty to the offense of manslaughter and be re-sentenced. In December, the court accepted the proposal and sentenced Buff to a term of 40 years, of which the law required him to serve 20. Having already served that time, Buff was able to leave Angola immediately and wasted no time finding work with the public defender's office.

Seeing Buff at the courthouse, energetically assisting his clients and sharing his ready smile with us, always brings me back to the bigger picture. It reminds me how the Church's teachings on mercy and redemption are embodied in the lives of those who served lengthy prison sentences and are now home. (To date, the Civil Rights Division has intervened in more than two hundred cases, and more than a hundred and fifty people have left DOC custody thus far as a result of those interventions.) As he promised Mr. Lacey, Buff is bettering our world. And there are hundreds of incarcerated people like him, waiting for a second chance to do the same.

**Through a special grant administered by the Jesuit Social Research Institute, Bidish Sarma works as an Assistant District Attorney in the Orleans Parish District Attorney's Civil Rights Division. His work has focused largely on cases in which people received life and long sentences.**

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