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This week, journalist [Keri Blakinger](#) joined us on campus to share reflections from her memoir, *Corrections in Ink*.

Corrections in Ink tells the story of Keri's 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. Keri is an investigative reporter based in Texas, covering criminal justice and injustice for The Marshall Project.

The event was organized by Andrea Armstrong, Distinguished Professor of Law at Loyola who recently testified to the United States Senate on her [research](#) which revealed that the Department of Justice is failing to collect data on deaths in prisons.



Prof. Armstrong facilitated a conversation with Keri about her book, starting with a section that highlighted the creativity of people in prison to make modifications to limited resources to meet their needs. Keri's book talks about her observations of women in jail who made make-up from heating up colored pencils. Others hacked tablets to access the internet. Keri shared that she believes that this creativity stems from a lack of opportunities and a desire for purpose.

“There is so little to do that’s productive in prison and this is a way to still have an identity and value to your community.”

Keri also shared that she believes that the pandemic increased inactivity in prisons and rule breaking as people became increasingly desperate for support.

“There are people with illegal phones who have group texts across multiple units and with outside people to get help for the violence they are witnessing.”

Keri noted that one warden's solution to violence was to keep people isolated all day in their cells, essentially in solitary confinement. While this warden's tactic reduced incidents of violence in the facility, [research](#) has shown that solitary confinement can cause irreparable harm to people's brains and personalities making them more likely to commit a violent crime after release. Keri's book details her own experiences of solitary confinement and the consequences of this experience. Keri is doubtful that prisons in their current state will ever completely eliminate solitary confinement for two primary reasons. First, prisons are not held accountable for what people do after they leave prison, and secondly, there are not the resources within facilities to support people with significant trauma, mental illness, or other challenges.

“There are some people that prisons can’t deal with.”

Keri said that negative conditions in prison are compounded by a lack of training, personnel, and resources. She admitted that funding prisons or even building new facilities is an unpopular opinion, but the reality is that people are suffering.

The minimum that prisons can do is to provide, “Food that is not moldy and medical care that doesn’t kill you and that costs money.”

Prof. Armstrong pointed out that often prisons do spend money on legal expenses to fight legislation that would require them to improve conditions. She cited as an example that the Louisiana Department of Corrections recently spent over \$1 million dollars to fight a [lawsuit](#) to install air conditioning on death row, that would have cost approximately \$225,000 to provide.

Prof. Armstrong asked about abolition vs. reform, a question that I often consider as a person that provides programming inside a correctional facility. Keri offered that we should treat people better as we work towards long term goals.

“It’s not all or nothing. Sometimes you need to build a new prison...Otherwise we are preferencing our ideals over the suffering of people that are incarcerated.”

In the final section of her talk, Keri spoke about her current work to uplift the experiences of people facing execution across the country. She shared the experience of accompanying people on Death Row and the strength of their faith in the midst of extreme suffering.

Mostly, she talked about **John Henry Ramirez** who was put to death by the state of Texas yesterday. John frequently spoke and wrote about his faith and his work was often featured on the prison radio station, [The Tank](#). He fought for the right to have his [pastor lay hands](#) on him at his execution. John shared with Keri how meaningful it was to write and be heard.

“The only way to be a better person from inside a cell is to give you my words.”

Keri shared that the most devastating part of accompanying John in the weeks and months leading to his execution was watching him question his faith in God.

In prison, “faith is the thing that other people can’t take. Faith is internal. But the death penalty takes a piece of that too.”

[John Henry Ramirez](#) was killed by the state of Texas yesterday. As a people of faith, we should not condone the taking of any life. Pope Francis has frequently taught that “the death penalty is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person” and inadmissible in all cases.

JSRI has long worked to end the death penalty in Louisiana. This year, JSRI and Catholic leaders across the state will call on Governor John Bel Edwards to put a moratorium on the death penalty in Louisiana and dismantle the machinery of death at Angola.

I urge you to join us in calling for an end to state-sanctioned killing and stand united to affirm the life and dignity of every person. Please pray for John Henry Ramirez and for Keri Blakinger as she continues to walk with those on Death Row in pursuit of justice.

Keri's book, [Corrections in Ink](#) is available for purchase at Loyola's book store or online.

Best Wishes,

Dr. Annie Phoenix

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