

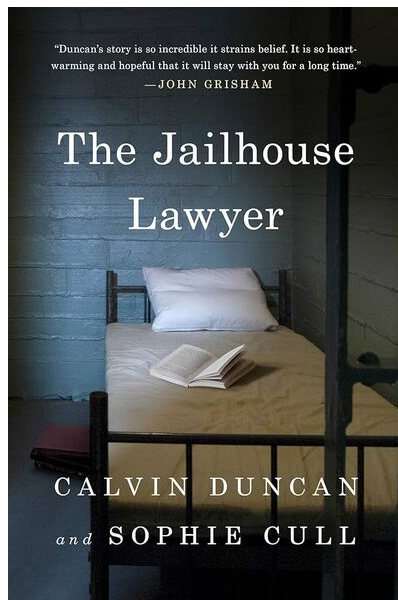
# JSRI

JESUIT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS

ESTABLISHED 2007

## The Light of Justice Program: Year in Review

The Light of Justice Program enjoyed tremendous success and engagement in 2025. In its mission to assist incarcerated people in overcoming barriers to legal review and to educate the public about the importance of access to the courts, the team's impact was felt locally, nationally, and internationally.



The publication of Calvin Duncan's spellbinding memoir, [The Jailhouse Lawyer](#), co-authored with Sophie Cull, was a crowning achievement in this very busy and productive year for our program's director.

The book explores the themes and stories that are central to the Light of Justice. In the build-up to the book's launch in July, Calvin and Sophie developed a Substack newsletter called "[Journey of a Jailhouse Lawyer](#)" which shares stories from and insights into Calvin's time as a counsel substitute while incarcerated at Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola). In a [unique arrangement](#), The Jailhouse Lawyer's publisher, Penguin Press and the Penguin

Random House Social Impact Team agreed to Calvin's proposal for a [books-to-prison](#) campaign. They published a special paperback copy of the book and distributed 3,000 copies to individuals incarcerated all over the country.

Even before *The Jailhouse Lawyer's* publication, Calvin was enjoying a banner year. Madeleine Landrieu, the Dean of Loyola University New Orleans College of Law, invited him to give the annual J. Skelly Wright lecture in March. Calvin transfixed the audience in an [interview](#) with federal magistrate Judge Janis Van Meerveld, and was given a standing ovation from the audience. **Soon after that special event, the law school announced that it would confer upon Calvin an honorary law degree and invited him to give the [commencement address](#) at the graduation ceremony in May.** His speech was an inspirational firsthand account of what it means to be an advocate and a guardian for people in need.



JSRI staff, Loyola luminaries, friends, and family celebrate with Calvin. From left to right: Annie Phoenix, Ayana Carter, Calvin Duncan, Dean Madeleine Landrieu, Marcus Kondkar, Bidish Sama, Sophie Cull, and Patrick Govan.

Only two months after he received that remarkable honor, Calvin's book was published. In July, the Light of Justice worked with Baldwin & Co. books to help coordinate the first public event to celebrate the publication of *The Jailhouse Lawyer*. Inside a packed auditorium at Dillard University, Calvin and his co-author Sophie shared the stage with moderator Sister Helen Prejean, the legendary nun and author of *Dead Man Walking*, in an [electric gathering](#) of nearly 500 people from all walks of life and from all over the state. **Formerly incarcerated friends, correctional officers and administrators, community members, prosecutors and defense lawyers, colleagues, supporters, and people eager to learn about our criminal justice system came together to hear Calvin share for the first time some of the most intimate details of his work as a counsel substitute and his personal struggle for freedom.**



Photos from the book launch event at Dillard University,

**The book launch was just the beginning of a remarkable wave of public engagement with Calvin and his work to promote access to the courts. Terry Gross, the host of**

NPR's *Fresh Air* program, [interviewed Calvin](#) about his life. So [did Scott Simon](#), the host of NPR's *Weekend Edition*. **Not only did Calvin's story and book receive widespread national attention—they also struck a chord here at home in New Orleans.** *The Lens* did a beautiful [profile of Calvin](#) and he was on the front page of *The Times-Picayune/New Orleans Advocate*.

***The Jailhouse Lawyer* won rave reviews for its literary merit.** It received a starred review from [Booklist](#) and a positive trade review from [Kirkus](#). The *New York Post* listed it as a “buzz book” in early July. That month it debuted as a best-seller on the USA Today list of the **top 150 books at #56**. Excerpts of the book were published online by [Lithub](#) and [The Lens](#).

Locally, Calvin spoke at the East Baton Rouge Parish library in July, Octavia Books in August, the Innocence Project New Orleans gala and Melba's on North Robertson in September. In November, he spoke with the Whitney Plantation's Book Club and did a book talk at Conundrum Books in St. Francisville. He also addressed several classes at Loyola and Dillard Universities.

Calvin hit the road to share his story all across the country. **He traveled to Berkeley, Portland, New York City, Madison, Milwaukee, and Fayetteville, addressing law schools, universities, a professional association of lawyers, and members of the public at large.** And, though he couldn't travel to each place that invited him, he Zoomed in to speak to audiences in St. Louis, Utah, and Los Angeles.

Calvin's journey got even more interesting late in the year. Shortly after his book was published, **Calvin [decided to run](#) for Clerk of Criminal District Court in New Orleans.** While he stepped away from JSRI and the Light of Justice Program during his campaign, his campaign's core messages still resonated deeply with our work. The ups and downs of the campaign deserve their own deep-dive, but suffice to say that Calvin continued to inspire the public with his positive energy and his emphasis on accountability, transparency, and hope. After making it to a run-off in November against the unsuspecting incumbent clerk, **[Calvin won](#) a tremendous and resounding victory.**

**The remarkable full-circle journey of a wrongfully convicted man coming back to run the office that was partially responsible for the length of his incarceration captured the public's imagination.** Calvin's story was featured in national and international media: the *New York Times* [covered](#) it [twice](#); NPR [picked](#) it up; and so did the [Associated Press](#). News of his electoral victory brought MSNow anchor Stephanie Ruhle [close to tears](#). He appeared in interviews with CNN's [Jake Tapper](#), and with [Al Sharpton](#) on MSNow. And the [BBC interviewed Calvin](#) at length in December, airing his story to a large international audience.

We welcomed Calvin back to JSRI after the election. The Light of Justice Program is now preparing for his eventual departure, as he will take office as the next Clerk of Criminal District Court in Orleans Parish in May 2026.

**Staff members Patrick Govan and Bidish Sarma have worked to keep The Light of Justice Program running and to support incarcerated people's ability to access the courts so Calvin could focus on his book and campaign.**

Over the course of 2025, the Light of Justice staff made presentations to UC Berkeley School of Law, UCLA Law School, the Death Penalty Information Center, and several classes at Loyola New Orleans, including Professor Marcus Kondkar's "Louisiana Incarcerated" course, JSRI Director Annie Phoenix's J-term course on "Ending Mass Incarceration", Professor Drew Chastain's philosophy course on "Making Moral Decisions," and Professor Brian Barnes's law school class on "Advanced Legal Research."

**The team also wrote several articles.** In December, *JESUITS* magazine [published](#) an article by Bidish titled "Hope rekindled: Redressing mass incarceration in Louisiana." The piece summarizes the work of the Civil Rights Division at the Orleans Parish District Attorney's office and features Patrick's remarkable journey to freedom and his position at JSRI.

In September, *Inquest* [published a special book review Bidish provided](#) of *The Jailhouse Lawyer*. The Light of Justice team also succeeded in obtaining offers of publication from two law journals. In August, the Akron Law Review accepted Bidish's proposal for its 2026 annual symposium. Akron will publish an essay in April that Bidish is writing about the legal concept of finality, and the ways in which the work of the Civil Rights Division calls into question the concept's assumptions. In April, the American Criminal Law Review also accepted for publication an article Bidish wrote with co-author Sophie Cull about the second look movement. The article, which will be published in the Spring of 2026, will explore the trend of punitive sentencing and the emerging movement to revisit unfair and harsh sentences around the country.

Calvin and Bidish, along with collaborators Everett Offray and Kelly Orians, applied for a grant from the [Participatory Law Fund](#) at the Temple University Beasley School of Law. In July, they were awarded it. In the Spring of 2026, **they will submit an article about jailhouse lawyering in Louisiana, its legitimacy as a form of grassroots legal education, and how the pedagogical approach of jailhouse lawyers can help inform clinical legal education.**

**As part of JSRI's *Just South Monthly* series on Hurricane Katrina at 20, Bidish [wrote](#) "The Living Memory of a Criminal Justice System's Collapse."** The companion *JustSouth* podcast episode to this piece [was aired](#) in July. On the 20th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Bidish interviewed Judge Calvin Johnson at a commemorative event at Loyola's Chapel of St. Ignatius. They discussed the unique challenges the hurricane brought to the Orleans criminal justice system. It was the first time in many years Judge Johnson has spoken about his experiences during Katrina.

In the early part of 2025, the Light of Justice Program worked with three Loyola Law student volunteers to gather information about how incarcerated individuals handle litigating their cases after their criminal convictions are affirmed on direct appeal. That research project continued into the spring, when a group of four undergraduate students from the University of Ottawa came to volunteer almost full-time for three weeks in late May and early June.



*Students from the University of Ottawa volunteered with JSRI. From left to right: Bidish Sama, Cynthia Belegris, Alisha Khan, Calvin Duncan, Emma-Christelle Thibault, Jasmine Cordea, and Patrick Govan.*

Throughout the year, Pat, Calvin, and Bidish participated in the broader work of JSRI. **Pat in particular played a key role in supporting the work of JSRI Twomey Scholar Ronnie Moore and his civil rights trips to Donaldsonville.** They also contributed to JSRI's Ignatian Teach-ins on mass incarceration. In April, the Light of Justice crew joined others in JSRI and a few dozen law students from Loyola to visit Angola. **As part of the trip, Calvin and Pat shared with students some of their own experiences of incarceration at Angola.**

In addition to the tremendous recognition Calvin received this year, **Pat was specially honored by the Louisiana Parole Project, which selected him to be one of five individuals in its inaugural Impacted Leaders Initiative.** This initiative is a twelve-month paid fellowship program that empowers participants to utilize their experiences to change systems, communities, and lives. In December, **Bidish and his former supervisor at the DA's office, Emily Maw, were honored by the Louisiana Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers with the 2025 Chief Justice Pascal F. Calogero Jr., Lifetime Achievement Award.** This award is given to recognize public servants whose leadership has strengthened fairness, access to counsel, and the rights of the accused in Louisiana's criminal justice system. Bidish and Emily accepted the award on behalf of the Civil Rights Division.

**In 2026, the Light of Justice team looks forward to several exciting opportunities.** With financial support from Ascendium, JSRI will identify and explore opportunities to offer legal education inside Louisiana's prisons.

**As part of this project, JSRI will work with formerly incarcerated individuals who are interested in working in the legal field, to understand their needs during and after their incarceration. Along with former counsel substitute Everett 'Buff' Offray, Bidish will be teaching a law course inside Angola.** This course is a reboot of a class that

Calvin helped start inside the prison many years ago, and that Buff continued leading until his release from prison in 2021. The year will bring some big transitions, including Calvin's move to the Clerk's office and Bidish's move to Loyola Law, where he will be launching a clinic in which students will represent incarcerated people on their appeals. Both Calvin and Bidish look forward to supporting the Light of Justice program and its mission.

If you are interested in supporting the Light of Justice Program, you can [donate online here](#) or reach out to Executive Director Annie Phoenix at [alphoeni@loyno.edu](mailto:alphoeni@loyno.edu).



*Patrick Govan, Bidish Sarma, and Calvin Duncan working with Loyola Law School students.*

This email was sent to . To ensure that you continue receiving our emails, please add us to your address book or safe list.

[manage](#) your preferences

To unsubscribe from all Loyola e-newsletters please click [here](#)

Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.

powered by [emma](#)

[Subscribe](#) to our email list.