



POSITIVE JUSTICE GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Winter 2017 newsletter

Welcome to our winter newsletter. This has been slightly delayed as we were waiting for permission from the Governor of Eastwood Park prison to print the report of the meeting addressed by Alma in November. As usual we have held 3 meetings in 2017. One of these was a lunchtime forum. These were very successful in the past, but the last few have been so poorly attended that we decided to go for evening meetings for the time being.

In March, at the University of Gloucestershire in Cheltenham, we had a speaker from the Howard League for penal Reform talking about their campaign to reduce suicides in prison.

In July, at Rodborough Community Hall, we had three members of the organisation Great Expectations and a magistrate talking about how vulnerable young people can be diverted from crime. The Great Expectations speakers were all ex-offenders, two on licence from local prisons. They explained how they approached young people who had been referred to them by family, teachers or any concerned adult as being in bad company or likely to get into trouble. Then in collaboration with the police, and, if it got that far, the magistrate, showed them what their future might be, if necessary going into a prison or into a mock Court situation. They all three gave very moving accounts of how they they had got to where they were. The magistrate explained very clearly the workings of the Youth Court.

In November, we had a most successful meeting in Stroud: PJG member, and RECOOP Project Manager at HMP Eastwood Park, Alma Hageman gave an inspiring talk entitled 'Vulnerable Women in the Prison System' to an audience of well over 50.

Speaking about the mental health issues, addictions, homelessness, abuse, bereavement and self-harming, Alma praised HMP Eastwood Park for the way in which it tried to help the women within a pressured and struggling prison and Criminal Justice system. Alma shared some of the women's poems and reflections to emphasise how they felt and the direct impact of incarceration was having on their lives.

The Rubies, an over 50s Day Centre run by RECOOP at HMP Eastwood Park, had worked on collages which were displayed, along with a Quilt they had previously made which had won a platinum Koestler Award. Alma also talked about the projects she and the Rubies are involved with: a repair service for other women in the prison, their involvement in knitting clothes and toys for refugee children stranded on a Greek Island and how the peer group has become a circle of mutual help promoting positive well-being.

One of the organisers and chair of PJG of the event said:

'Many congratulations Alma on a most inspirational talk. You were wonderful. I thought you did a great job of analysing why the system is so dysfunctional and broken. The way your talk was structured was excellent. The juxtaposition of the poems used to illustrate what you were saying was very powerful and it was great to hear the women's voices threaded through your talk. They were truly the subjects of the event. It was great to finish with all the positive work that comes out of The Rubies group.'

For more on the Rubies go to <http://www.pjglos.org/news/> and scroll down to 'The Ruby Quilt'.

Our plans so far for 2018 are:

21 March Sian Flyn on sex offenders – at the Friendship Café in Gloucester.

11 June Circles of Support and Accountability - probably in Stroud.

16 October at the University in Cheltenham, Sara Lee, who would have spoken this October but for the train situation in the evenings. She won a Churchill Fellowship to study prisons in the US and Scandinavia.

We are hoping to strengthen our relations with the criminology department at the University of Gloucestershire.

On June 21 David Liddington, Justice Secretary published an open letter. You can read it at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prison-reform-open-letter-from-the-justice-secretary>

PJG committee replied, you can read that at <http://www.pjglos.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/David-Liddington-1.pdf>

We finally received a reply from Jade Govia, you can read this if you go to our website. One of the committee discovered that she is a minor civil servant, and would simply have been using a government briefing. At which point we gave up, regrettably. I did email members to see if anyone would like to reply, but no one did.

We still need new committee members. We were delighted to have two extra PJG members at our committee meeting in August. We are very grateful to Alice who has joined the committee and taken over as our treasurer in place of Adrian who wanted to retire from the job.

If anyone else, particularly if you have ideas about what we should be doing, would like to join us do come to our meeting on Monday 15th January at 7.30 at Sheila's: 4 Trinity Rd, Stroud, GL5 2HX

Chair's Report to 2017 AGM

I read this morning in the press of yet one more prison suicide, just add it to the list! Arrested with mental health problems and apparently just left, put this with the continuing increase in prison numbers, end of life units being built for terminal and old age prisoners, still the use of cuffs on hospital beds, longer sentences, it must make one wonder about the state of our society, but here at PJG we battle on!

We again had a programme of three good meetings and we are lucky that the reputation of PJG can attract such quality and well informed speakers.

We continue to campaign as in our aims and objective and would welcome ideas, suggestions for topics and meetings, also feedback good or bad would be appreciated to enable us to grow stronger and have a louder voice.

The Stroud area is still our stronghold but we endeavour to visit other parts of the shire, so again suggestions, ideas are most welcome.

It is still a battle to change ideas and attitudes: we fight a demonising media, negative press coverage, and a justice department that appears to focus on votes and self interest. It is most heart warming that there are groups and organisations like ours and those today who care and will give up their time to talk to us and hopefully begin to change ideas and attitudes.

I would like to thank on behalf of those in and out of the system all those who work tirelessly on their behalf, it must at times appear to be a worthless and thankless task. There is a special, heartfelt thank you to all the prison visitors and especially the prison chaplains who bring a ray of light and sanity to those behind the doors.

They may not think so, but their presence and the fact that they give their time is truly a miracle in a sad, lonely place.

Thank you from us all, past, present and future.

Martyn Shepherd

Prison Education Trust (PET)

I answered an appeal for the prisoners Education Trust some time ago and now they send me an update of their activities in prisons. They have supported 3,040 prisoners this year through distance learning of all kinds and they have good contact with prison governors and prison staff. I think that they might send someone to talk to us at one of our open meetings in the future. One prisoner commented: 'Prison changed your life temporarily, education changed your life permanently'

Sheila Winter.

Other prisoners said:

'I am so grateful for the financial support which has been provided to me by the PET. I have seen the difference education has made in some offenders' lives. I wish to improve my own similarly.'

'The PET have enabled me to use a negative period of my life and turn it into a springboard, which I hope will enable me to get a quality job role on my release. I lost my job when I came to prison, but, by undertaking this course it's give me such a positive outlook on my future that I no longer worry about employment on my release, whereas it was my main worry when I arrived here.'

This is an excellent suggestion for a meeting. We have not had a meeting on education yet.

Koestler Exhibition of Prisoners' Art

Each year the Koestler Trust organises an exhibition of prisoners' art. To read about the 2017 show go to <https://www.koestlertrust.org.uk/exhibitions/>

PJG in the Media

Stroud News and Journal 19 November 2017 (on line)

Stroud MP's column: David Drew on prisons

THEY say, to paraphrase, that you can tell the strength of a country's democracy by how it treats its prisoners.

That's why I have always had some doubts about the US, because it is quite prepared to let many rot on death row for decades.

One of the roles of an MP is to visit prisons, and sometimes to meet constituents there. It's a responsibility that I've always taken seriously.

I recently, for example, went to Eastwood Park, the women's prison which though just outside of the Stroud Constituency has had a long relationship with this part of the world, some of the staff coming from here, and prisoners being resettled into our area.

My reason for the visit was to check up on a particular case that has been taken up by a constituent, but also to get a feel for how the prison estate has suffered under austerity. One aspect that I found out about was that the Mother and Baby Unit, which I saw open nearly twenty years ago, has been left unrepaired and therefore unusable for the last year as a result of a flood.

This has meant that any young mother with child, or expectant, from the whole of the South West and South Wales could not be situated anywhere in the region.

I immediately took this issue up via a Parliamentary Question and have been assured that action is now imminent, albeit trying to rectify what is a totally unsatisfactory situation.

I used to make my visits with someone who was chair of the Prison Visitors at Gloucester Prison. Sadly Tony is no longer with us – he was a marvellous man giving years of his life to the rights of prisoners to help oversee the gaol and to do what he could to progress issues such as resettlement, so important if people are not to face the revolving doors of coming straight back to incarceration.

That's why probation is so important, and I've struck up another relationship with someone who is working as a volunteer for the resettlement service in the community.

Sadly what John has discovered is that the current situation is near crisis, but I'll say more about that in a later column.

Short-term we need to do much more to keep individuals out of prison.

That's why I'm a strong supporter of restorative justice so admirably led by Mary Brown in the form of Positive Justice Gloucestershire.

If you haven't heard about this group go onto its website and find out about the alternatives to prison and why this matters.

David Drew
MP for the Stroud Constituency

Stroud News and Journal 21st November 2017

Positive Justice Gloucestershire attend London book launch

TWO members of Positive Justice Gloucestershire went to London last week for the launch of new book, *Life Beyond Crime: what do those at risk of offending, prisoners, and ex-offenders need to learn?*

Some months ago the Monument Trust asked for short essays that answered the question, 'what do prisoners and ex-offenders need to learn?' They had around 50 responses from those working in the criminal justice system, professionally or in a voluntary capacity, serving prisoners and ex-offenders. Two of these came from the PJG members.

The book is full of hope, and evidence that people can change. Ways in which this can happen range from training those in prison to work in fibre optics, to working in organic horticulture.

PJG member Hilary Peters wrote of the importance of connection, particularly with an individual who accepts them unconditionally.

This gives prisoners a different view of themselves - as someone worth while. It gives them the incentive to change.

Mary Brown of Stroud wrote that 'we are all, everyone, meant to shine'. As a Quaker prison chaplain, she found the truth of the Quaker belief that we all have 'that of God' within us.

Also at the launch was Yorkshire based artist and good friend of PJG, Norman Anderson. Norman has spoken at PJG meetings, particularly about his art, which he discovered in prison. In the book he wrote of how at the age of 48, embarking on a 18 year prison sentence for drug importation, after 40 years of drug addiction and crime, he received a letter from his eldest daughter.

She wrote: 'Dear Daddy, you are our daddy so we forgive you.' This so shook him that he gave up drugs on the spot.

Initially he was very vulnerable, but through yoga, meditation and counselling, Norman discovered art and Quakerism.

He had someone who accepted him unconditionally and went on to shine. He now has a master's degree in fine arts, and is contemplating a PhD.

The book also contains poetry and artwork by those in prison.

It is an inspiring testimony to the capacity that humans have for change.

It challenges the pessimism of the media and many of those in government.

It is testimony to our common humanity.

To read our contributions go to <http://www.pjglos.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/what-do-prisoners-need-to-learn.pdf>

We were also contacted by Radio Gloucestershire (to whom we send numerous press releases – it was good to be asked for the first time) when they wanted a comment on a disturbing report into Gloucestershire's privatised probation services.

Points West contacted us on the same issue, and PJG member Karen McKeown (once a senior probation officer and inspector at HMI Probation) was all set to be interviewed, when they interviewed Martin Surl (Gloucestershire's police and crime commissioner) instead. We are in the hands of the media. One of the main reasons for starting PGJ was to refute some of what we hear and see there.

Inside Time (the prisoners' newspaper) Jan 2018 - letter from Marie Rees-Rickets in Eastwood Park:

'Super Alma

I feel I must write and give respect where it is due. Alma Hageman has given up her time to create two groups here at Eastwood Park, Rubies and Bluebells. Rubies is a group for inmates over 50 who enjoy crafts, such as knitting, crocheting, painting, drawing, making cards and jewellery. She runs this group Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and it gives the women a chance to meet and have a natter over coffee and biscuits.

Bluebells runs on a Wednesday and she is trying to get a group of women up to 40. If you need something Alma will sort it, she gives up her free time and is always happy, friendly and cheerful, and both women and staff love her attitude. I really believe she deserves recognition for all the hard work she does voluntarily and never asks for anything in return. Thank you, Alma, you are a pure superwoman.'

"This book should be compulsory reading for all of us who believe in the capacity of human beings to change if given the right opportunity."

Roger Gendall OBE, film maker and criminologist

life BEYOND CRIME

What do those at risk of
offending, prisoners and
ex-offenders need to learn?

Edited by Paul Crane

*"It is rare to read a hopeful book on prisons today. This is a
colourful and glorious festival of short individual contributions."*

Professor Nicola Pridemore