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Rights Amendment. She palled around with Bruce Springsteen to raise money for an organization that favors abolishing the death penalty. She frequently speaks and writes about her experience as a crime survivor.

Bird's two-year advocacy fellowship from the Open Society Institute will fund her project to establish groups of crime survivors in Washington and Nevada. These groups will be affiliated with a program of the Portland-based Western Prison Project and will be the basis of a regional network.

"My vision for the groups is that they will mostly focus on advocacy toward policy changes that improve the system's response to survivor and community needs," says Bird.

Open Society Institute program officer Kate Black told *Just Out*: "As a crime survivor, Arwen lends a powerful voice of dissent to 'tough on crime' policies that, contrary to popular belief, do not represent the views of all crime victims. OSI is proud to support Arwen and her work to advocate for a more humane and effective system of justice."

Bird will use the model of SAFES for her work in Nevada and Washington. The crime survivors groups will focus on restitution reform, improving crime victims' compensa-



Kathleen Pequeño got involved in criminal justice reform after her brother was murdered in 1985

tion, sentencing reform and advocacy for better government spending.

While much of Bird's work has been directed at improving circumstances for crime survivors, the criminal justice reform movement tackles a wide spectrum of issues. From prisoners' rights to stopping the expansion of prisons, justice reform advocates work on many fronts.

As Brigette Sarabi says, "This is a big movement, and there's room for all perspectives."

Sarabi, 44, is the founder and executive director of the Western Prison Project. An out

lesbian, she won a Gloria Award from the Ms. Foundation earlier this year for her leadership.

The project has helped prevent additional harsh mandatory sentencing legislation and educated more than 15,000 ex-felons about their voting rights across seven Western states. Focusing on prisoners, former prisoners and their families, the organization works to make prisons more humane and raises awareness about the overreliance on prisons in the United States.

Not surprisingly, Bird calls Sarabi a mentor.

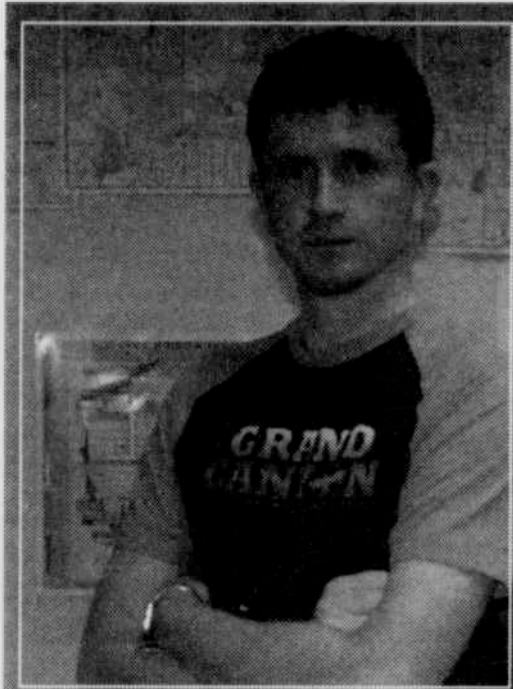
"I was able to see very early in getting to know Brigette that she had many wonderful skills and gifts," she says. "She is able to organize diverse groups of people to come together around a common goal."

Though Sarabi is the survivor of a violent assault, it was having a family member in jail that led to her vocation. Her daughter spent more than three years in jail for robbery, and it was then that Sarabi learned that the criminal justice system was failing to help perpetrators of crimes, their families or their victims.

Bird does not think it is a coincidence that queer women like Sarabi have been her peers and role models.

"I haven't necessarily sought that out," says Bird, "but it seems to be the reality of who is drawn to this work, who stays involved for the long haul and who sees criminal justice reform in the broader context of social justice and human rights."

Kathleen Pequeño, membership director at the Western Prison Project, says queers are well represented in the movement because they understand the connection between the criminalization of homosexuality and other forms of injustice.



"I decided I didn't want to be a lifer" —David Dean

Pequeño, who is a lesbian, says her political views were shaped by her brother's murder in 1985. She sees parallels between society's response to crime and to queers: "We don't know how to deal with it."

David Dean, 36, also works at the project and is queer. His involvement in criminal justice reform comes from the inside. He spent nearly two years in prison for committing fraud and identity theft in order to fund his drug habit.

"I saw a lot of people who were in prison for the third or fourth time," says Dean. "I decided I didn't want to be a lifer."

Dean got clean and sober while in jail. He kept a low profile and worked in the prison library. At the suggestion of a friend, he contacted Sarabi when he got out to see about getting a

job with the project. Now he helps register other ex-felons to vote and educates them about their voting rights.

### Why they do what they do

Queer Western Prison Project board member Scot Nakagawa says he is sometimes asked, "Given all the misery in the world, why would you want to help people who inflict crime?"

Nakagawa, who worked for several years for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, says the reason he is devoted to his field of work is because "when you look at who is in prison, you realize prisons are a way for society to manage the poor."

Bird adds: "If prisons and a punishment-oriented response to violence work so well, why isn't the prison system shrinking instead of the tremendous growth that it's had in the past decade? I know that we can do better."

According to the Prison Index, a joint venture of the Western Prison Project and the Prison Policy Initiative, incarceration grew rapidly in the 1990s, with almost 2 million adults in prison or jail by 2000. During that same decade, crime rates were falling; for instance, murder rates dropped from 9 per 100,000 people in 1994 to 5.5 in 2000.

However, public perception was that crime was on the rise. In 2000, almost half of all U.S. citizens thought crime was increasing. Why? About 82 percent of the public say they base their opinions about crime on what they hear on the news. And in the last half of the 1990s, Americans shelled out an extra \$50 billion to spend on criminal justice.

Oregon added more prisoners to its system in 2002 than any other state in the region. According to the Western Prison Project, the boom in incarceration is directly because of the passage of Ballot Measure 11, Oregon's "one-strike" mandatory sentencing law, in 43 percent of cases.

Nakagawa takes the stance that "crime is not a social problem or an issue of evil individuals." He notes that almost everyone in society has been affected by crime and that we all have a vested interest in helping offenders re-enter society successfully.

"One in 37 people has been in prison or in jail," says Nakagawa. "Almost everyone comes back to society. How we treat them will affect how they treat us."



Scot Nakagawa says he is sometimes asked, "Given all the misery in the world, why would you want to help people who inflict crime?"

Bird concurs. She says she is trying to create a world in which "people are able to be themselves and live to their full potential...because of the inherent safety, adequate resources for everyone and recognition of the contribution that each person has to make."

All you need is one look in Bird's bright, compassionate eyes to know that her conviction is hard-won and deeply felt. Being a crime survivor, she says, has given her the power to touch hearts.

Her goal in using that power is at once simple and daunting: "I am fundamentally driven," she says, "by the desire to prevent what happened to me from happening to someone else." ■

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