

'The biggest stain since slavery'

After five years at a maximum security prison, former prison chaplain Jeannie Alexander emerged as a prison abolitionist, working against the dehumanization of modern incarceration

BY AMANDA HAGGARD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Jeannie Alexander grew up "deeply obsessed" with God. Before she resigned as chaplain of Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in September, her obsession drove her to work with a group of some of the most marginalized members of society.

"It's this very intense, passionate, deep understanding of who we are as people that drives me to God," Alexander said. "There's a mystical encounter that happens with God when you're with other people. And once I experienced it, I realized that God is present in everyone, even — and especially in — those who have done horribly destructive things. The people I met in prison became my community; I'm grieving that loss."

After five years working for Riverbend, she decided she could no longer stay in an environment controlled by individuals and policies that she describes as being diametrically opposed to her own beliefs and goals. She's now started an

organization on the outside called the No Exceptions Prison Collective, made up of eight board members on the outside and at least an equal number of members serving time on the inside in eight different prisons within Tennessee. Jeannie talks about her experience working with inmates and her new her goal to end mass incarceration as it stands today in Tennessee.

Amanda Haggard: Tell me about the work you were doing in the prison.

Jeanne Alexander: I worked there five years — two years as a volunteer chaplain, three years as institutional chaplain. In my first two years, I was doing homeless outreach and advocacy at the same time,

and teaching as an adjunct (at a local university).

At some point I had to choose between immersing myself in homeless outreach or in the prison. By the end of 2010, it was extremely clear that it would be the prison. I went in with the realization of the destructive nature of mass incarceration, and had the definite opinion that the effects of mass incarceration do not benefit the common good. Going in I said, "If I'm going to be here, I'm going to be authentic." I never hid my politics; never hid the fact that I was a death-penalty abolitionist. I never hid the fact that I had been arrested on more than one occasion for civil disobedience. In fact, when I was hired, the warden who hired me was Roland Colson, who was an incredibly forward-thinking warden. He

understood that the No. 1 factor in reducing recidivism was education and opportunity — not just a GED, but meaningful, substantive programming. He respected my vision for a culture that the chaplain's department could help to create, and we worked together well as team.

I went in as a very unconventional chaplain, and it was a beautiful experience.

It was incredibly difficult work on a spiritual, emotional, and physical level. It is spiritually and intellectually very difficult to work in an environment every day where you are forced to bear witness to the dehumanizing effects on all parties involved.

A.H.: Was it different than you expected?

J.A.: I don't know what I expected, but it was amazing. Prison is tragic, and it's beautiful. I thought for years working with folks who are homeless that I was working with the most marginalized population in America. And don't get me wrong, they are some of the most marginalized, but I realized while working in the prison that the

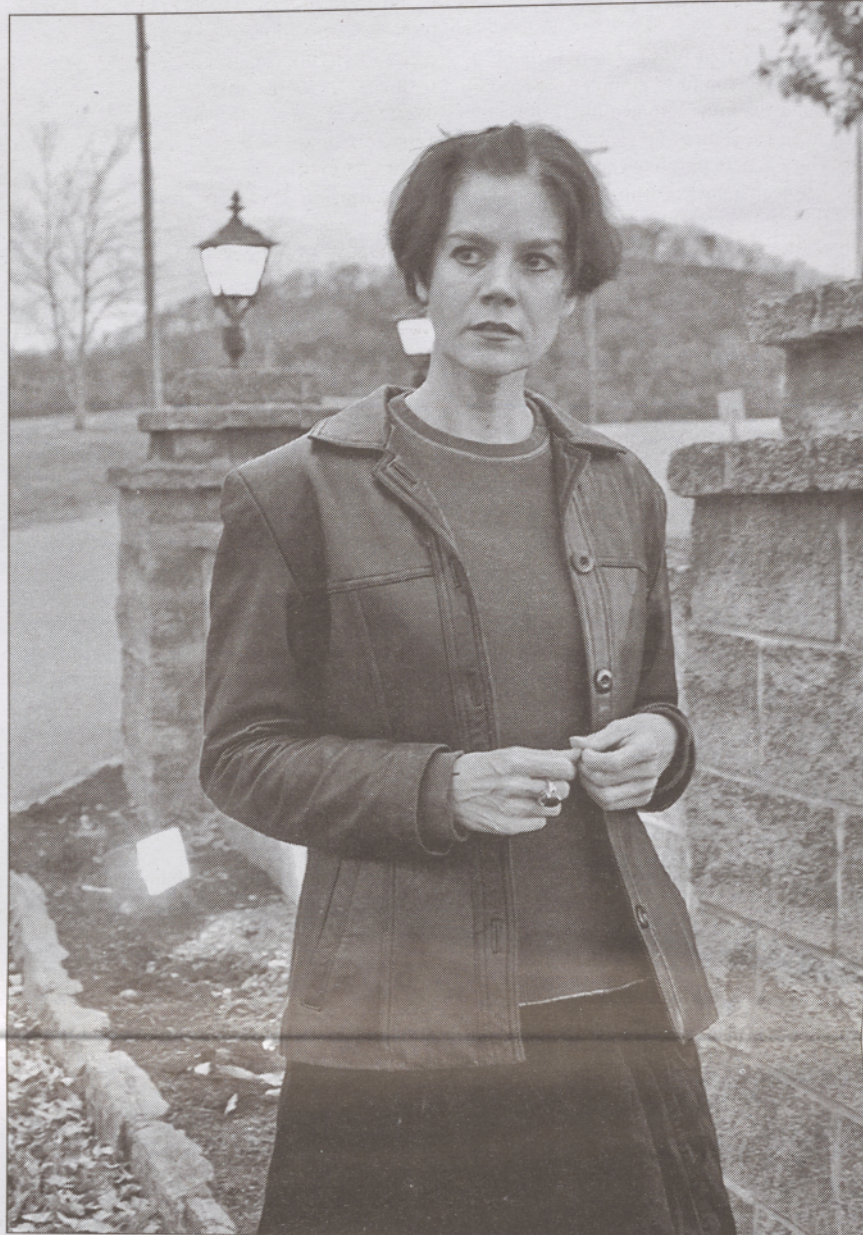


PHOTO BY LINDA BAILEY

Jeannie Alexander stands outside Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville.

cultural barriers I faced trying to humanize prisoners were even greater.

A.H.: Talk about your goals in starting the No Exceptions Prison Collective?

J.A.: There are three primary areas we want to focus on. First of all, we want to work on sentence reform: beginning with particularly 51-year life sentences and working to repeal the 85 percent "Truth in Sentencing" laws. Second is internal conditions with a particular focus on health care. Third is the parole system—which is so incredibly dysfunctional. We're looking at how to engage in substantive reform of the parole system through eliminating retrials, creating meaningful opportunities for parole and eliminating "seriousness of the offense" as a rationale for refusing parole when it is otherwise clear that an individual is likely to do well in their community and no longer presents a legitimate threat.

A.H.: How do you hope to achieve those goals as an organization?

J.A.: The way we approach all of our goals is through a combination of litigation, legislation, education, and organizing

prisoners' families. We will travel all over Tennessee to speak at any community organization, congregation, or college that wants to hear our message. Education is key.

Grassroots organizing with families of prisoners is also key. Families of prisoners so often feel helpless, disempowered, and ashamed. It's really as if they have no voice in this system for their family member being held captive, but organized they have power and a united political voice. And it's a voice that has to, and should be, heard. Without a doubt, some of the best, most principled, most courageous people I've ever met are prisoners in the state of Tennessee. I am inspired to do this work because of the prisoners I know, and by God their families should hold their heads up.

A.H.: Can you explain how you went in a death-penalty abolitionist and came out a prison abolitionist?

J.A.: I left as a prison abolitionist for many reasons. Our recidivism rate in this country is — depending on which statistics you look at — between 50 and 60 percent. In

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