

On the outside

Prisoners' family members share their perspectives on incarceration

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Family members of the United States' 2.3 million inmates often undergo economic hardship and feelings of loss and frustration as they grapple with the incarceration of a loved one.

At 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 18, at First Unitarian Church in downtown Portland, 10 of them will share their personal stories in a free public performance.

"When a family member is incarcerated, it's quite an emotional, stressful and complex experience for the family," said performance organizer Carol Imani, a writing instructor at Portland Community College's Southeast campus. Imani has taught writing workshops in adult and juvenile prisons as a volunteer. She also knows firsthand the complexities of having a loved one behind bars. She said the effect incarceration has on prisoners' families is often misunderstood, and it's a story that needs to be told.

There are 2.7 million people younger than 18 with an incarcerated parent in the United States, and two-thirds of those parents are serving time for nonviolent offenses, according to a report by The Pew Charitable Trusts released in 2010, the most recent year that data were compiled. And family income over the years a father is serving time is 22 percent less than before he is locked up, according to the report.

After winning a \$3,600 grant from the Regional Arts and Cultural Council in January, Imani recruited a group of Portland-area residents to share their stories about interacting with the American prison system from the outside. She will pay each of them a \$100 stipend once she accesses the funding, she said. Over the course of six workshops, she led the group in constructing monologues they will read during the performance later this month, titled "With You on the Journey."

Chris Karczmar, an acting coach who's performed locally at Portland Center Stage, was hired to direct the staged reading.

Imani said a "very powerful" monologue delivered by the mother of a mentally ill inmate will explore the intersection of the justice system and mental illness.

"There are woefully inadequate services for the mentally ill," Imani said. "They just don't get the help they need, and they wind up committing crimes and finding themselves in prison and in jail."

The event also addresses other topics, including the "joys and difficulties of prison visits" and "the challenges of interactions with legal and prison personnel."

Sandi Meyer will share her story of working at Folsom State Prison and later marrying an inmate – only for him to be

With You on the Journey

What: Prisoners' family members share their stories

When: 2 to 4 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 18

Where: First Unitarian Church, 1034 SW 13th Ave., Portland (enter through breezeway on SW 12th Avenue)

Cost: Free

murdered before his sentence was complete. Her monologue also will explore the circumstances surrounding his death.

Imani aims to go beyond simply telling a series of stories.

"We're talking about what we've learned, and about what is wrong with the criminal justice system," she said.

One of the project participants, Adrienne Wilson, died unexpectedly on Aug. 7. She had been working on a monologue about her experiences visiting a family member serving a long prison sentence. She will be commemorated at the event.

Retired Judge Neal Lemery will share two monologues, one

from his perspective as someone who's "sat in every chair in the courtroom," and one that recounts an experience he had visiting his foster son in prison.

Lemery's judicial career was spent in Oregon's northern coastal cities, where he watched offenders sent to prison for mandatory minimum sentences he thought were sometimes unjust.

In Oregon, felony sentencing is determined by the location on a grid where the crime's seriousness ranking and defendant's criminal history classification intersect.

"You don't get to be a judge. You become an accountant," he said.

"It's crazy, and I really hate Measure 11 because it doesn't care about your criminal history. It doesn't care about anything else. It says if you commit this crime, this is how many months you go to prison. You can't

factor in what their childhood was like, what their ability to change is like, their community support, family support – you can't consider any of that."

As of Aug. 1, there were 6,319 inmates serving Measure 11 sentences in the state, according to a tally by Oregon Department of Corrections. Oregon's total prison population that same day was 14,701 – about five times what it was in 1980, according to prison population tracking by Prison Policy Initiative.

Oregon voters approved Measure 11 in 1994. It established mandatory minimums for several, primarily violent, crimes.

Lemery said it's especially frustrating to see youth offenders serving Measure 11 sentences when, within the correctional system, they've completed years of therapy, graduated from high school and developed

See OUTSIDE, page 5

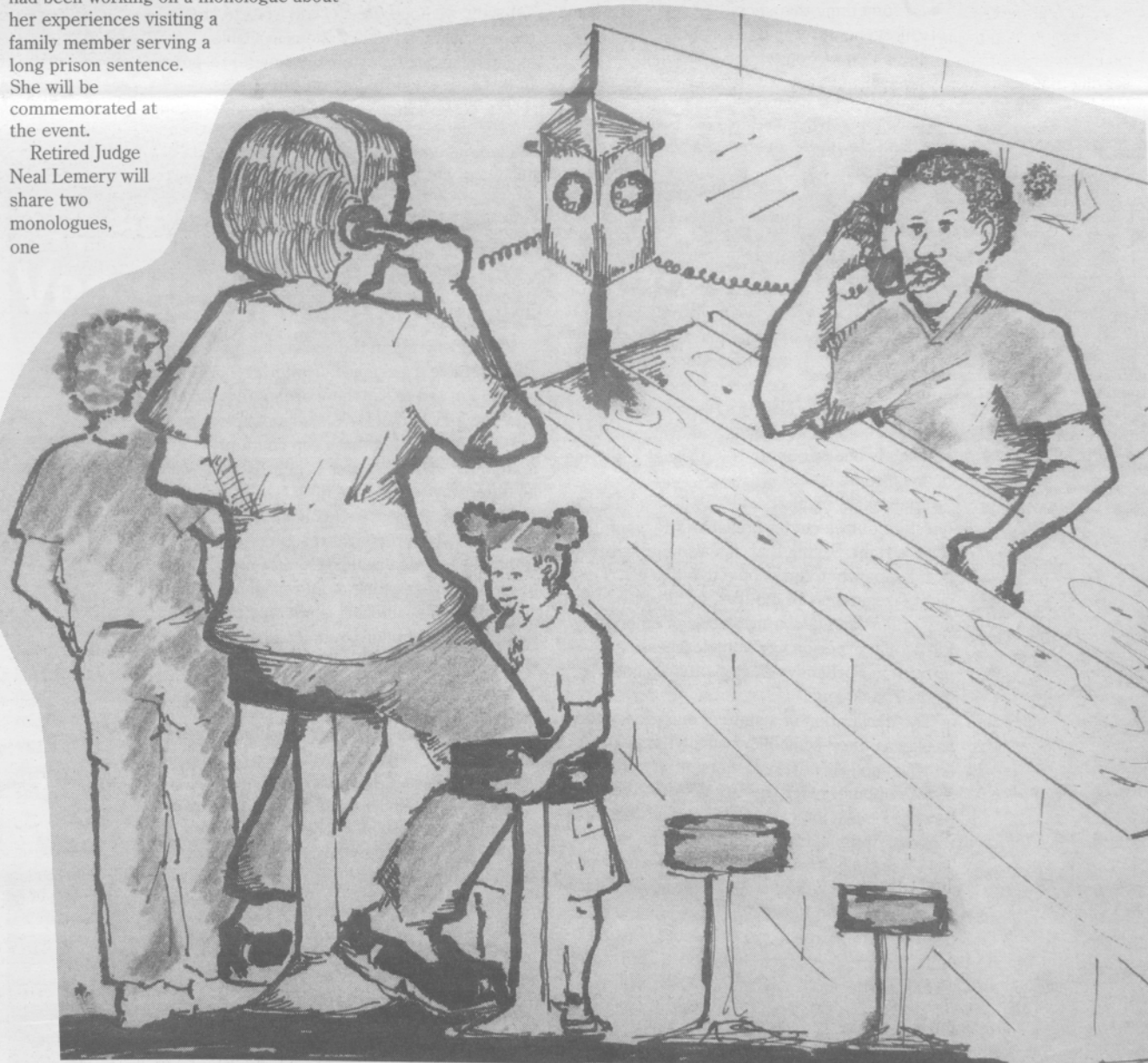


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