

PORTLAND OBSERVER

Prisoner Support Group Struggles for Family Visit Law



Linda Hunter

Photo by Richard J. Brown

by Bob Lothian

Oregon People for Prison Alternatives is gearing up for another legislative assault. The support and lobby group for prisoners and their families plans to try once again this session to get a family visit bill passed.

The legislature has turned down a family visit bill sponsored by the group for the last two sessions. During the last session, Governor Vic Atiyeh withheld his support of the bill.

"The governor hadn't read the bill, he didn't know what was in it and he probably didn't care," said OPPA spokeswoman Jackie Holmes.

Holmes, a Northeast Portland resident, said the bill's purpose is "to hold the family unit together" by guaranteeing extended family visits and other privileges. The OSSP supported an innovative 72 hour visit policy where whole families could get together in a trailer on prison grounds for 72 hours. Before the bill was tabled, the visit length had been cut to 24 hours, she said.

"I married behind the wall. It's a real strange relationship sometimes," said Holmes, whose husband has two years remaining in an Oregon institution. "I've got two teen-agers at home who still need that kind of bonding," she said about the importance of keeping the family unit together.

Oregon does not have a family visit law even though California and Washington have had such laws for years, she said. Holmes said the group will continue to lobby for more rational visitation rules, so that arbitrary treat-

ment can be avoided "from whoever on the front desk may not have had the right amount of coffee that morning."

Holmes reported that even though the black population in Oregon makes up about 6% of the total, 49% of Oregon prison inmates are black.

Yet, "I find that black women are not meeting in groups such as these... we need to be meeting," she said.

Holmes also reported that the superintendents of the four state prisons have offered to meet with the OPPA to discuss a unified proposal for a bill to present to the next legislature.

The group will hold a statewide meeting, Saturday, March 22, 1 p.m. at Jason Lee Church in Salem. Holmes can be reached at 284-6422.

Another group, Waiting Outside, which operates under the umbrella of the Society of St. Vincent dePaul, offers weekend rides to Salem for prisoners' families. Van driver Laura Leveni said the rides leave Sundays at 11 a.m. from the Justice Center, at the corner of S.W. Main and Madison Streets.

St. Vincent dePaul director of social services Linda Hunter said that in addition to the rides, Waiting Outside offers a support network for prisoners' families.

On the agenda now, she said, is an effort to stop prison guards from punishing families along with the prisoners with arbitrary rules. "What we need to do is bring these people together to lobby for some new laws," Hunter said. Waiting Outside also needs a large van or used school bus, she added. The group can be contacted at 235-7837.

Educator Says Quality Schools Are Key to School Integration

by Jerry Garner

"Once quality education becomes the priority, you'll find that parents who put their children in private parochial schools will place their kids back into the public schools." These statements were made by Laval S. Wilson, superintendent of Boston public schools. Wilson, who is a graduate of the University of Chicago and Northwestern University, is the first Black to head the Boston school system, which is the oldest in the country.

Wilson believes that integration can be achieved by focusing on quality education. "The focus should be not on trying to attract parents and students back into public schools, but on providing the best possible program for young people attending public schools," said Wilson. Wilson said once school administrators do that, "we enhance the image of the schools. It becomes well-known that the young people in the sys-

tem are achieving and are receiving the best program that money can buy."

On the topic of high school dropout (one of four high school students drops out before graduation), Wilson said schools must identify which youngsters have the potential for dropping out. He believes such students need to spend a lot more time in school than others.

"Educators may need to require students who are substantially below level to stay in school an extra few hours or even on the weekend to improve their skills," said Wilson.

Wilson also commented on the Reagan's administration proposed plan to abolish the Department of Education and merit pay for teachers. He said that to dismantle the education department would be a travesty and trying to implement a merit pay plan for teachers would be very difficult and complicated.

Black Male Joblessness, Destroying Black Families

by Jerry Garner

Lately there has been a great deal of discussions on the state of Black America. Unfortunately the majority of it has been negative. The focus of the discussions has been the social decay of many Black families and their communities. One of the main causes for this is the high rate of joblessness among Black males.

Black males are becoming increasingly useless to their spouses (both legal and common-law); children and communities. The overall unemployment rate for Blacks over the past quarter of a century has been generally more than twice that among whites. Black teenage unemployment nationwide is around fifty percent.

Joblessness has resulted in many Black males taking unemployment as a routine part of their life. They become disconnected from the dominant society, that preaches the virtue of a honest day's work, "for an honest day's pay."

This cycle of joblessness has resulted in the increase in the number of Black families headed by women. Almost half of all Black households are headed by a female. Many Black males grow

up in such families without ever seeing a traditional family of father and mother. Lacking positive role models and their exclusion from the labor market, many turn to crime as a mean of economics. Others stand on street corners, consuming alcohol or drugs. This scene can be observed in Portland and other communities across the nation.

Despite the seriousness of Black males joblessness, the federal government has done little in addressing the problem. In fact, the critics blame the increase in Black male unemployment on the domestic policies of the Reagan administration. They alledge the administration has abandoned civil-rights enforcement, affirmative action programs and reduced job training programs.

The Reagan administration has shown little concern for the plight of unemployed Black males. On the other hand, he has lobbied for an increase in funding for military and the Contras fighting in Nicaragua. The President is asking Congress for \$100 million for the Contras this year and a military budget of \$311.6 billion for the next fiscal year.



African Market held to benefit the Black Educational Center was enjoyable to all who participated in the lively event. Vendors sold food,

African art, arts & crafts, and books to name a few. The B.E.C. hopes to have other African Markets. (Photo: Richard J. Brown)



Albany Busby, 6 years and Maco Hamilton, 8 years, enjoy the Black United Front's Annual Gospel Concert at Mt. Olivet Baptist Church. The concert was held Saturday. The BUF also took the occasion to present appreciation

awards to Rev. John Jackson, Vessia Loving, Karen Powell, Richard Brown, Charlotte Lewis, Lanita Duke and Bobbi Gary. (Photo: Richard J. Brown)