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See Metro, page 9

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See Local News, page 3



The Portland Observer 44

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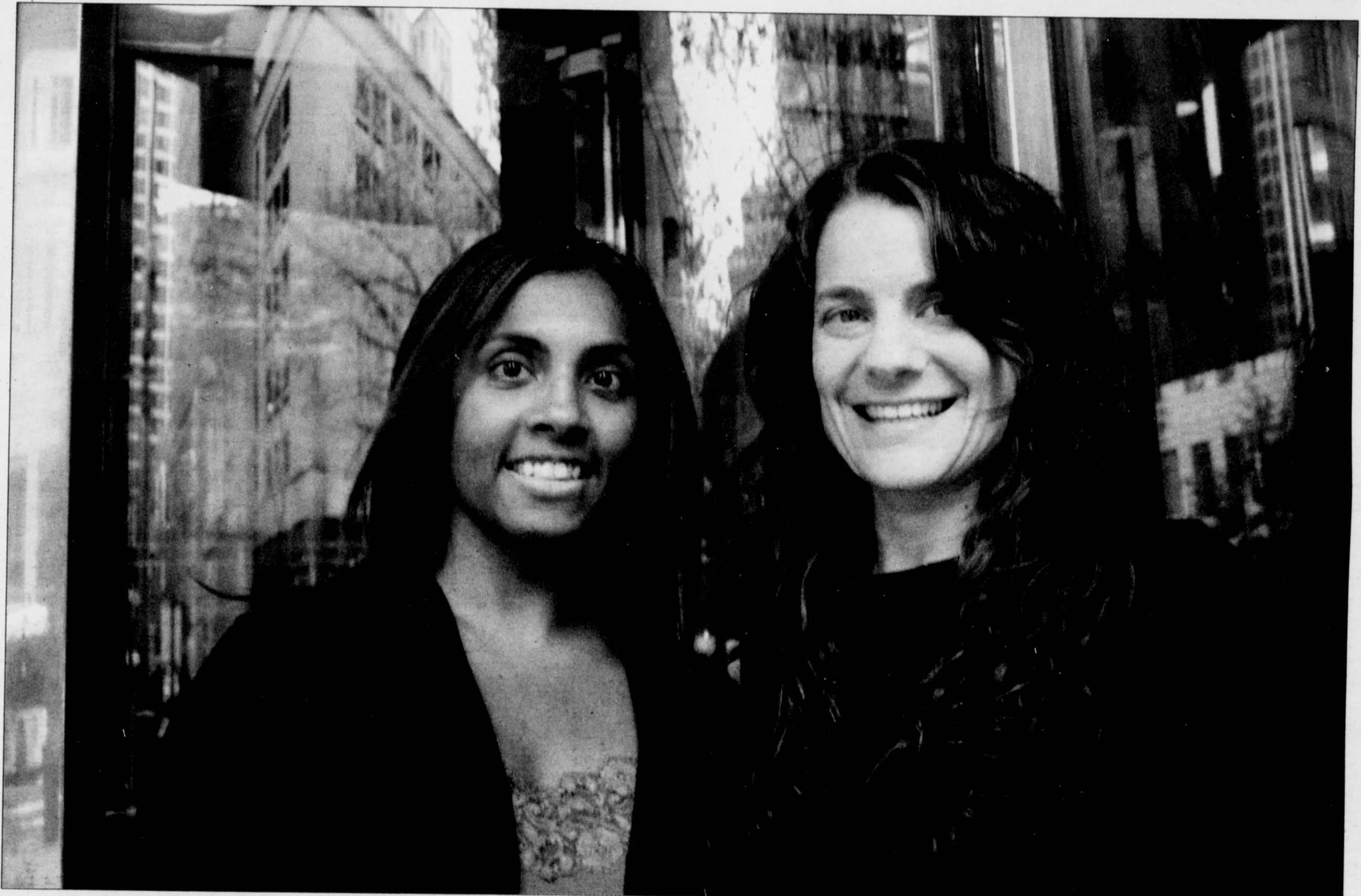


PHOTO BY DONOVAN M. SMITH/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Janis Puracal (left) and Aliza Kaplan are taking their years of criminal justice experience and putting it to work at liberating innocent prisoners. The attorneys are two of the co-founders of the Oregon Innocence Project. Oregon is the last of the 50 states to adopt a project solely focused on reversing mishandled convictions.

Fighting for the Innocent

Oregon Innocence Project a lifeline to the wrongly convicted

BY DONOVAN M. SMITH
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

As a jail cell will almost certainly shut on at least one innocent Oregonian today, workers at the Oregon Innocence Project say they are hoping to make the lockup of any inmate wrongly convicted an injustice of the past.

With one full time lawyer, and the rest of its attorneys and staff working pro bono, these dedicated experts agree that, "Ultimately we're trying to put ourselves out of business."

The Innocence Project is a national project

dedicated to helping people who have been wrongfully found guilty of a crime, and this is done largely through DNA testing. Oregon was the last state to join the movement when it launched the Oregon Innocence Project last month.

Oregon's Federal Public Defender Steve Was is giving up his position to join the group as its first legal director.

The group's simple on paper but hard in execution mission of getting innocent people out of jail begins this summer.

The Portland Observer spoke with two of

Oregon Innocence Project's co-founders, attorneys Aliza Kaplan and Janis Puracal, more about their overall mission and how they plan to tackle this justice issue moving forward.

"We know that there are innocent people in jail all over the country. We know that there are innocent people in Oregon's jails," Kaplan asserts.

As a teacher of legal analysis and writing, wrongful convictions and public interest lawyering at Lewis and Clark College; a consultant on death penalty and wrongful con-

victions cases; a representative of asylum seekers; an active member of the Oregon Justice Resource Center, amongst other accolades, it is safe to say issues around legal justice are Kaplan's forte'.

Kaplan says Oregon was overdue for their services.

Barry C. Sheck and Peter J. Neufeld launched the Innocence Project in New York in 1992. That year the number of exonerations for the organization totaled in the low spectrum of single digits. But since then, about 1,400 people in prison have been given back their freedom.

In the U.S.A., however, where less than five percent of the world's population resides, but where almost a quarter of the world's prisoners are held, odds are there many more unfairly

continued ▼ on page 4