



# TURNING POINT

The Newsletter of Missouri CURE  
Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants

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**From the Board**

**by Hedy Harden**

## Taking Back the Streets

**N**elson Hopkins Sr. grew up in the streets of Kansas City. He hung out in an area the Kansas City Star calls the “Murder Factory” (zip code 64130) — because of frequent homicides and the many former residents who ended up in prison.

Hopkins was one of those statistics. He spent 15 years in prison for robbery, most of it in Missouri. Released in 2007, Hopkins is back and determined to make a difference in his community. In particular, he hopes to get ex-offenders who contributed to the destruction of their neighborhoods to come back and help reverse the damage.

I interviewed Hopkins, a former Marine, on May 16 while he was in St. Louis to visit relatives and meet with clients.

Back in the late ‘90s while at Crossroads Correctional Center, Hopkins and a few other prisoners developed a detailed proposal known as HELP (Hard Extended Labor Program) that would give all prisoners a chance for parole. In line with the state’s new emphasis on restorative justice, the HELP proposal was designed to increase offender accountability to the community, guard against recidivism, and prepare the offender for productive citizenship.

“The plan provided incentive and restitution,” Hopkins recalled. “We would run a training program, like a boot camp, to determine who was serious about making a change. Once they got through the boot camp, then they would work for so many thousands of hours in prison industry and assign part of their earnings to victims compensation, maybe half to the victim of their

crime and half to the overall crime victims fund.” Those who completed the program successfully would get a reduction in their sentences.

The HELP Committee was sending copies of the proposal to state officials and others. Three state reps and two judges had responded enthusiastically, but they needed to win over more legislators.

In Autumn ‘99 we published Hopkins’ proposal in Turning Point, urging readers to write legislators in support. I asked Hopkins how far they’d been able to take that proposal.

“We actually filed a lawsuit against Governor Carnahan. It said that, as Chief Executive of the state, his primary responsibility and primary duty was to public safety. This meant rehabilitating prisoners so that they don’t come back into society with the same mind-set and commit



**Hopkins**

more crimes.

“Of course they denied (the lawsuit),” Hopkins added.

**B**ut he didn’t stop there. While in prison, Hopkins took a paralegal correspondence course in order to prepare other prisoners for their parole hearings.

Hopkins conducted his own study, talking to men who’d met with their Institutional Parole Officers (IPO). The board was looking at body language and voice tone to detect signs of true remorse. Hopkins studied psychology books to get more information. He learned to recognize the signs as well.

Hopkins insisted that the men tell the truth. Most of the clients who remained with him got paroled.

**Spring 2010**

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Word of these successes got around, and other prisoners began following Hopkins around on the yard as if he were a prophet.

Since his own release in 2007, his mission has been two-fold. On the one hand, he started Operation Promise Land. He began by going door-to-door, talking to people in the neighborhood.

“We are a citizen togetherness program,” Hopkins said. “We are here to help people — those who are incarcerated as well as people who are regular citizens of the commu-

*See Hopkins—page 2*



## Crossroads Prisoners Donate a Grand to Urban Rangers

Crossroads prisoners concerned with restorative justice have donated \$1,000.00 to an inner-city organization called the Urban Ranger Corps (URC) of KCMO. Making a Difference Restorative Justice Organization (MAD-RJO) presented the “Big check” to Rev. John Wandless at its February meeting.

URC, now in its 6th year, hires at-risk males 14-18 for summer jobs at minimum wage and trains them to reclaim their neighborhoods in the notorious 64130 zip code.

Under adult supervision, the teens learn skills, discipline, teamwork and the pride of accomplishment while improving their community and making it safer. The uniformed Rangers paint, weatherize, pick up trash, cut grass, landscape, and in general beautify the area,

all at little or no cost to the low-income residents. The Rangers have remodeled and rehabbed an entire block of model homes, including a former drug house. Four of the houses are being sold.

During the rest of the year, Rangers

2005 and has donated his own wealth, a million dollars, to fund the Rangers.

Jon Marc Taylor is president of MAD-RJO, which “believes the smartest and best way to fight crime is to prevent it from occurring in the first place, and



Urban Ranger Corps of Kansas City MO

that the Urban Ranger program represents the best hope many youth have to keep from ending up dead or in prison. Some in MAD-RJO come from that very neighborhood and believe that, had the URC been around when they were coming up, they might not be where they are now.”

receive tutoring and life skills mentoring.

Affectionately known as Father John, Wandless is a former businessman who amassed a million dollars. Formerly pastor of St. Louis parish in Kansas City’s urban core, he founded the Rangers in

Father John accepted the prisoners’ donation with gratitude and amazement at the amount they were able to raise. This was the single largest donation by a prisoner service organization at CRCC since it opened in 1997. ❖

### Hopkins—from page 1

nity in high crime areas – to learn what are the advantages and privileges of citizenship and advise them of their rights.

“A lot of people don’t know what their rights really are or how to exercise them. And then they get themselves in trouble; they get mad.

So we teach them how to exercise their rights the correct way, what they mean. People who don’t know their rights are like second or third class citizens.

“Like the right to bear arms. People don’t know what that right means or how to exercise it. That’s

why a lot of people pick up a gun illegally and do something wrong. We’re knocking on doors and letting people know we’re here. We’re cutting grass, picking up trash, and raising money for a scholarship fund.”

On the other hand, Hopkins has started Pardon and Parole Negotiation Services LLC, continuing his practice of



preparing Missouri and Kansas prisoners for their parole hearings. He charges clients for consultation, and the enterprise, in its third year of operation, is showing steady growth.

Hopkins works from a storefront in Kansas City with a small staff of family members and some temporary help from the Full Employment Council.

“My business is in its infancy,” said Hopkins. “They say it takes 5 years to make it or break it in business. Mine’s been going for 2½ years, so I’m half-way to that 5-year mark.”

Asked if he had any relationship with the Urban Ranger Corps, Hopkins said, “I’m providing instruction to the Rangers. Starting Tuesday (May 18), I’ll be acting as their drill instructor.”

Hopkins’ own son, Nelson Hopkins Jr., was an infant a few days old when his father went to prison. A loving and caring father, Hopkins wrote hundreds of letters to his son while in prison and was a role model after his release.

Hopkins’ beloved son was murdered on those same streets of Kansas City last December. The 17-year-old was walking

home from a bus stop with his college application in his pocket.

In an interview with The Pitch newspaper shortly afterwards, Hopkins said, “I can’t explain how hard it is to fight back tears right now. My soul is just destroyed. It’s going to take the strength of God to keep this business going, but something is telling me I have to.”

Hopkins and his wife Ella have a daughter now 14 months old and another daughter due in a month or two.

Now he talks to high school and college classes. One of the things he talks about is responsible reporting citizenship as opposed to snitching.

His plan for getting prisoners from high crime areas to come back and help repair those communities is reminiscent of HELP. Hopkins wants to offer an avenue for offenders to provide redress to the community.

“I believe it’s necessary, in order to actually bring crime down,” Hopkins told me. “If you give offenders – those who understand what they’ve done and want to make a difference – a real chance, by saying, hey, I can let you out a little early, and they come out and go straight to their families and their communities

## Rally for Justice in KCMO

On May 8, Mothers of Incarcerated Sons & Daughters (MISD) sponsored a March and Rally for Justice in downtown Kansas City MO. MISD, in its second year of operation, held the event to "raise awareness, actions for change and address divides between families and systems for equal justice." Missouri CURE Chair Michelle Dodson spoke at the rally. The following is taken from her speech.

Many of our loved ones are sent to prison, but only a few have death sentences. Yet because of poor medical care many prisoners with term sentences are dying in prison or becoming permanently disabled.

Prisoners are thrown together in a close environment where disease runs rampant, and society doesn't seem to care. But when prisoners return to society, as most do, these diseases are spread throughout the general population.

The U.S. houses a fourth of the world's prison population. Many thousands of U.S. prisoners have medical and/or mental health problems. Sick and disabled people have a human right to decent medical care regardless of where they reside.

My husband, Damon Johnson, is a prisoner who suffers from glaucoma. Surgery to help slow the loss of vision from glaucoma is routine in the outside world. But because of the lack of follow-up care after his surgery, Damon has lost all vision in his right eye.

If a person in the free world ends up blind because of medical incompetence, the result is usually a high-dollar lawsuit and often a big pay-off. Prisoners have no such recourse.

Damon is scheduled to have the same needed surgery done on his left eye, but we, his family, live in fear that he will lose what little sight he has left because of the lack of prison medical care.

The Missouri DOC and its medical provider, Correctional Medical Services (CMS), have provided no assistance to offender Damon Johnson to help him learn to live without sight. They are not teaching him how to read without sight. They are not teaching him how to walk without sight. They are not teaching him a damn thing on how to deal with blindness.

Damon went to prison at age 17, a sighted person. Now, 18 years later, he repeatedly gets denied parole.

Damon has done everything possible to make positive changes. He has completed every program possible to him. He has a good institutional record and no victim opposition. This is an American citizen at risk of becoming completely blind and expected to negotiate his way within the system.

When his world turns black, Damon will not be able to do the routine things that most of us take for granted. He will no longer be able to watch his children grow into adults nor see his grandchildren in years to come.

Damon was not sentenced to have his vision taken away. That is a bonus from the state of Missouri. People across the country have been released from prison incapacitated due to poor medical care — with devastating effects on them and their families.

Sure, medical care is expensive. I will be the first to admit that I don't pay enough taxes to support even one healthy prisoner. It takes a huge chunk of all of our taxes to pay the estimated \$25,000 a year to keep each individual locked away. Over-incarceration is a bottomless money pit, and we all pay the cost. Keeping a prisoner behind bars costs more per year than many of us earn. Medical/mental health care are added expenses that are part of the package.

Longer prison terms have cost us taxpayers dearly because of health issues related to aging offenders.

While I cannot afford to pay for a prison stay, I can afford another plate at my table and a bed in my home for my loved one. Each released inmate takes a huge burden off of the state, so consideration should be given to making this

happen.

There is a need for prisons in this society, but we have a massive system that is out of control. The time has come for change.

Good sense in sentencing is one place to start. Sentencing decisions should consider the human factor, taking into account situations that cannot be foreseen. Rather than sending a prisoner home to die after decades of medical neglect, maybe we could send some of them home a little sooner in order to save their lives — and save taxpayers money.

I apologize to the people of Missouri for adding to your financial burden. You don't want to pay my husband's medical bills, and you should no longer have to.

Like many other Missouri prisoners, Damon has met his minimum mandatory prison time and is eligible for parole. Yet the parole board continues to turn him down, perhaps simply because they can. This kind of power controls how much money comes out of your pocket.

I can't force them to let him out, but I can and will demand adequate medical care for him and all prisoners.

The moral to this story is: Don't lock up thousands of people who cannot be cared for in a responsible way.

It is long past time for a change. Let's start today and work together to make change a reality. You can help by contacting your elected officials and letting them know your views on these issues. ❖

❖



***No one is free  
when others are  
oppressed.***

## Parenting from Prison

Ten years ago in the Potosi Correctional Center (PCC) visiting room, my husband Dennis and I were discussing how restrictive the visiting policies were for children. Back then, the visiting room had no playing cards, no games, and nothing for children and families to do but sit at a table or walk to the vending machine.

“We ought to start a 4-H club in here,” Dennis suggested.

At the time, I worked as a youth assistant for 4-H in the Washington

County Extension Office. The more we discussed a club, the clearer it became that it would be a great way to help fathers and grandfathers be better role models

and parents. At the same time we’d be teaching kids leadership skills and helping prison families bond to make them better able to deal with the pressures that accompany having a loved one in prison.

I did some research on the outside, and Dennis polled the men inside. One day while riding with my boss, Lynna Lawson, in her truck, I proposed the idea to her and she jumped at it.

“Let’s do it,” she said. “4-H is looking for ways to reach underserved audiences, and this is great.”

The idea met with some resistance from the community who saw the program as “coddling criminals.” A woman who was considered a national expert on children of incarcerated parents told me that the Department of Corrections (DOC) would never go for this, especially since I was involved. An idea generated from a prison family would be shot down unequivocally.

With Dennis on the inside, pointing out what would work and where the prison authorities would balk, Lynna and I tailored the program to prison families and fine-tuned the proposal to the DOC. They accepted it with minor adjustments

and one major exception – they would not allow sex offenders to participate in an enhanced visiting program. However, we did expand it to include fathers, step-fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers and others who serve as role models to a child.

Thanks to Lynna and Tammy Gillespie in the Extension central office, we received a CYFAR (Children, Youth and Families at Risk) grant. Within months we held our first 4-H LIFE (Living Interactive Family Education) meeting in the



PCC visiting room. Rob Wilkerson came on board to teach parenting and leadership skills to the incarcerated parents. Rob served as the liaison between the prison and the families, which was unprecedented for a Volunteer in Corrections.

We had our ups and downs with attendance when men were transferred or went to the hole, and there were a few times when Institutional Activities Coordinator Rick Secoy was the only thing keeping the prison from ending the program. But 4-H LIFE not only survived — it has thrived. The program has spread to other prisons and has won several national awards.

In early May, 4-H LIFE was a featured workshop at the annual CYFAR conference in San Francisco. We had the opportunity to show people what traditional visiting is like (I played the mean correctional officer) compared to the enhanced visiting program in 4-H LIFE.

My son, Regi BarrHarris, a founding member of the club, performed two of his original songs. Regi had never expressed an interest in music until one of our 4-H meetings in which Dennis and two other inmates played guitars and a keyboard and helped the children play them.

Extension is now turning 4-H LIFE into a volunteer run program to expand it

by Paula Skillicorn

further. If your loved one is in a prison that does not have 4-H LIFE, get involved by contacting the 4-H office in that county and offer to help get it started. It might take a lot of work, but your family will benefit. ❖

### *Hopkins—from page 2*

— and they can go to people in the community and actually be heard in a way that nobody else can be.

“Just like when I came home to my friends and my family, I was able to be heard, because they knew who I was. I could go out and talk to these guys who, when I went to prison, were 5, 6 and 7 years old, and all they heard was what I used to do in the streets, and they were singing my song, and when I got out, they said they finally met the guy they’ve been singing about. Now that I’m out, they’ll listen to me. And I tell them, ‘Hey man, that ain’t the way to do it – I got a better way now. Let’s try this way.’ I talk, and they listen, because I have the same passion and the same spirit.

Hopkins plans to work with the Kansas City Reentry Coalition as a service provider.

“I want to create jobs for prisoners. My goal is to create an employment network and I would hire only ex-cons to come out to the neighborhoods and really clean them up.

“Then we will place them in different jobs throughout the city. Of course, we wouldn’t have someone with a robbery conviction working in a bank, or a sex offender working near a day-care center.

“These guys who have been there have more credibility with the people in the community than city officials.”

You can reach Hopkins at [Pardon & Parole Negotiation Services, LLC](mailto:ppnservices@gmail.com), P.O. Box 270166, KCMO 64127; phone 816-217-2033; or E-mail him at [ppnservices@gmail.com](mailto:ppnservices@gmail.com).

## Families Prepare Lawsuit

by Paula Skillicorn

Ask death row inmates what bothers them the most about their sentence, and many will tell you that it is what capital punishment does to their families.

"Death Row" families are harmed in unique ways starting with the point at which the state decides your loved one is not only so "bad" that he or she has to be put in prison, but so disgusting and worthless that they are not fit to live.

The emotional, physical, and psychological harm these families experience goes far beyond the harm caused to other prison families. We not only deal with the same frustrations with prison rules, practices and policies, but we are treated by the state as though we, too, should be put to death.

And in the end, if the state gets its way, it does kill us as well. Some of us die from the stress; others die in spirit.

For the past year, some of us have been working on a civil rights suit tied to the death penalty. This suit in no way belittles the pain other prison families feel when their loved one is sentenced to spend years in a cage, nor does it disparage the pain of the initial victims.

We families of the condemned are

not only ignored by society and the system, but the Missouri Supreme Court ruled last year that we don't even deserve the right to see the execution protocol to ensure that it will prevent botched executions or torture. This ruling followed the admission of a dyslexic doctor that on previous executions, he cut in half the drug that is supposed to keep the inmate asleep so he does not experience the terror of being totally paralyzed or the excruciating pain associated with the drug that kills the heart.



No one can imagine what we families experience unless he or she has gone through this. It is a grief like no other. And it is totally unnecessary. Society is not one iota safer for killing Dennis.

The families who put together this lawsuit have used up their savings despite greatly reduced lawyer fees. We are ready to file but for the hiring of two experts.

A nonprofit organization, PSVR, has been started to raise money for the two

experts. Recently, we held a presentation in a St. Louis church in an effort to raise funds. We are seeking additional venues.

None of this money will go to any of the death row families. It will be used to get this lawsuit filed.

We know the economy has made it tough for us all. However, if you, your church or organization would consider donating, we can give you more information than I can fit here.

The current cases dealing with lethal injection were not intended to end the death

penalty; they will only force the state to use a different protocol if the cases are won.

Our lawsuit has greater potential, but until it is filed, I don't want to publish the details indiscriminately. For more information, please contact me at [paula@thefamilyinformationcenter.com](mailto:paula@thefamilyinformationcenter.com).

I hope CURE supporters will help us as well. Thank you in advance for any help you can give us.

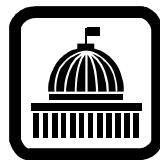
To donate, contact PSVR at 6203 Washington, St. Louis MO 63130, phone 314-322-5159. The E-mail address is [psvr@earthlink.net](mailto:psvr@earthlink.net). ❖

## Death Penalty Legislative Update by Jeff Stack

## Reggie Case Update

The 2010 legislative session, dominated by budget shortfalls and political posturing for the fall elections, had small victories for Missourians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (MADP).

Democratic senators successfully thwarted a regressive effort to narrow the Missouri Supreme Court's proportionality review of death-penalty cases. Senators Jolie Justus (KC) and Joan Bray, Rita Days and Joe Keaveny (St. Louis) were prepared to filibuster two House omnibus bills in the final days of the session. Republican lawmakers wanted to add a provision limiting the review of capital convictions to other death penalty cases only. The Court's majority earlier this year had ruled it appropriate to review murder convictions in which sentences other than death were imposed to help insure greater fairness. Faced with the



prospect of a filibuster, GOP leaders declined to bring the legislation up for floor debate. Lobbyists with the ACLU, Missouri Catholic Conference, the Missouri Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers and MADP provided support for the resisting lawmakers.

Despite a third of all Representatives from both parties co-sponsoring House Bill 1683 calling for an execution moratorium and death-penalty study, House

Speaker Ron Richards declined to even assign HB 1683 to a committee. A similar moratorium/study measure, Senate Bill 930, and SB 591 to repeal the death penalty were both assigned to a committee but never given public hearings.

About 130 people attended the inspiring *Moratorium Now!* rally and lobby day in March. We thank the many individuals across the state who took actions over the past several months. ❖

New evidence has surfaced in the case of Reginald Clemmons, sentenced to death for the drowning deaths of 2 sisters who fell from the old Chain of Rocks Bridge in 1991. Three lab reports and physical evidence including a rape kit were discovered in cold storage in the police crime lab. Rape charges, filed but later dropped, were nonetheless used by the prosecutor as an enhancement to get the death penalty.

Clemmons' case had been turned over to a Special Master, Judge Manners, for review and was scheduled for a May 10 hearing. Manners will now reset the hearing after DNA testing has been done on the rape kit.

Redditt Hudson of the ACLU, which is tracking the Clemmons case, said "It is evidence that is central to Reggie's sentencing and should have been produced these many years ago. Now, importantly, it is evidence for everyone that this was a horribly flawed process." ❖

### High Court Ruling on LWOP and Juveniles

According to a May 17 decision, states may not impose a life-without-parole (LWOP) sentence on juveniles who have not killed anyone.

Florida holds more than 70 percent of juveniles sentenced to life for non-homicides, including Terrance Graham. Graham, now 22, was convicted of armed robberies at ages 16 and 17.

Justice Anthony Kennedy said in the 5-4 majority opinion, "The state has denied him any chance to later demonstrate that he is fit to rejoin society, based

solely on a non-homicide crime that he committed while he was a child in the eyes of the law. This the Eighth Amendment does not permit."

Chief Justice Roberts agreed with the decision in Graham's case, but declined to join in the ruling for all juveniles. About 3 dozen states provide for LWOP sentences for non-homicides. Over 100 juveniles are serving LWOP for crimes less than homicide. About 2,000 others nationwide serving life for murder are not affected by this ruling. ❖

### Prison Family Website

Where can prison families go for tips, information, news and support to help them deal with the incarceration of a loved one? Check out [www.thefamilyinformationcenter.com](http://www.thefamilyinformationcenter.com).

Share your stories, issues and solutions with prison families across the country. Discover resources to help deal with the DOC or handle the issues you're

faced with every day.

There are also sections on attachment parenting, living with loss, pets, sustainable living and other issues that affect all kinds of families.

Our goal is to provide information and offer the type of accurate information, support and resources you can't get anywhere else in one site.

### Join Missouri CURE!

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***CURE is NOT a service organization. We are an all-volunteer non-profit criminal justice advocacy organization. CURE has NO legal services. We advocate for criminal justice reform, but cannot take on individual cases.***

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***United We Stand – United We CURE!***