



Prison Abolitionists Visit CDCR -Civic Engagement Talks with the Incarcerated

By Angie D. Gordon

On January 31, 2024, representatives from *Initiate Justice* (IJ) visited California State Prison, Sacramento (CSP-Sac), B Facility. The purpose of their visit was to hold a workshop on civic engagement opportunities for the incarcerated. Nikki Gunter, the Community Resource Manager at CSP-Sac, organized the event and approximately forty people were in attendance. Gunter thanked everyone for the strong turnout and commented on how hard her office was working "to bring more information and new programming opportunities to the prison."

Formed in 2016, *Initiate Justice* is a nonprofit organization dedicated to prison abolition and enacting systemic change within the criminal legal system. Initially, *IJ* began in the state prison, in Susanville, CA, co-founded by Taina Vargas and Richie Receda. In its infancy, *IJ* produced a newsletter for incarcerated readers, intended to cut through the rumor mill and misinformation surrounding sentencing reform, giving people accurate information about new laws, and who they apply to. Since then, *IJ* has grown significantly, reaching over 45,000 incarcerated folx, successfully sponsoring important legislation, and developing an extensive network of inside organizers.

The workshop was led by two formerly incarcerated members of the IJ team, Lee Gibson (Community Advocacy Manager) and Adam Cain (Inside Program Associate). Gibson, who has been with *IJ* since March of 2020, served twenty-five years in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). Convicted as a juvenile, Gibson was sentenced to serve life without the possibility of parole; however, after the courts overturned his sentence and afforded him the ability to go before the parole board, in 2019, Gibson was granted his release.

Gibson began the workshop by emphasizing person-centered language as one of *IJ*'s core values. He noted that *IJ* rejected terms like "convict," "inmate," and "prisoner," viewing them as dehumanizing. When the audience was asked for its input on this position, Brandon Black commented that "language informs our internal dialog, and influences the way that we think about ourselves." Gibson bounced off of this point,

noting that "we don't carve people out because of their offense or their identity, and language is the first step in our commitment to that."

Working out from language, Gibson went on to discuss the concept of "intersectionality," and its place as one of *IJ*'s founding principles. Originally developed as a critical theory in the academy, intersectionality refers to a lens of analysis that focuses on how multiple identity factors (e.g. race, gender, sexuality, etc.) intersect, and often compound, to create unique and individualized experiences with oppression and social adversity. Gibson stated emphatically, "This is a foundational value for us and we're not going to budge on that!" He explained further that intersectionality informs all of *IJ*'s work, influencing how bills are drafted, what language is used, and who has input throughout the process. Gibson also described this value as an organizational ethos of sorts, a principle that carries "transformative potential" for those who genuinely adopt it. Clarifying this point to the crowd, Gibson commented, "We are invested in your maturation, but we don't support immature ideology. You're not going to be the best version of yourself when you're still holding onto harmful ways of thinking about others."

Speaking from his own experience, Cain provided a powerful observation on how intersectional thinking enabled him to forge new community bonds, rather than simply identifying its multilayered fracture points. He explained, "we all have similarities, and if you're formally incarcerated, or system impacted, it's all a part of your personal story. When you connect based on those similarities you're building community and promoting shared understanding." Cain went on to describe how our ability to empathize with others is empowered through our ability to connect over our shared experiences. His words resonated with the audience, a moment which hung in reflective silence.

Gibson then turned the discussion towards civic engagement, and how work from incarcerated folx fits into *IJ*'s mission. Various civic activities were explored, ranging from having informed conversations about laws and policies to sending letters to legislators detailing how specific bills will be of service. Gibson

stressed that "all of the bills and initiatives we put forward are driven and informed by system-impacted people. The outside can't know what's going on in here unless inside voices are heard and made part of the discussion."

To illustrate his point, Gibson told a story about how, while meeting with a California Assembly Member Isaac Bryan about an IJ-sponsored amendment to the California Constitution, he received a call from one of his inside organizers. Gibson was able to put Bryan on the phone with a person on the inside to discuss the impact of the proposed amendment. Referring to this as a "full circle moment," Gibson confessed to the crowd that "civic engagement and connecting pro-socially with my community has become a way for me to make continued amends for the harm I've done."

When the room was opened up for questions the Vanguard Incarcerated Press (VIP) was front and center, asking Gibson about IJ's stance on the equitable representation and empowerment of incarcerated folk. We framed our inquiry by referencing the way that prison politics and the aims of disingenuous self-promoters amongst the incarcerated community are prone to collide, leading to an internal pecking order where individuals and/or small groups try and control who benefits from the reach of outside organizations, and which voices are heard at the table. Being formerly incarcerated, both Cain and Gibson acknowledged this reality, in part, as a sad byproduct of how privations in prison and lost agency can distort one's moral compass, influencing them to see and treat people as nothing more than a means to an end. "We are not, nor do we try to be the gatekeepers of information," Gibson responded, "but we know that there can be points of leverage and a degree of social currency which comes with the work we do. That's why we expect a certain level of maturity from our inside organizers. We work to represent everyone, regardless of where they're at in their journey, but when our people contradict our core values and hold onto harmful ideologies, that's something we confront head-on."

The VIP followed up Gibson's response by asking him how *IJ* deals with inside organizers who stray from the organization's ethical aspirations. "We are not cops," Gibson clarified, "and we're not going to police people; rather, we are committed to having courageous conversations, and when we confront harmful thinking it's with the intention to make a place for growth and maturity to form, not as a pathway towards exclusion and removal."

Initiate Justice is an abolitionist organization, there can be no doubt about that, and their ability to come into the prison and speak directly to the

incarcerated feels like a very real shift in the carceral current. For many of us, we have watched with weary skepticism at California's newly stated commitment to remake the CDCR, the "California Way" as it has come to be known; however, whether or not this commitment will bear fruit, or spawn only sound bite platitudes and empty promises is yet to be seen. It is an encouraging sight, though, to see a heavyweight abolitionist organization step foot on prison grounds, and perhaps, something new might be occurring. People like Nikki Gunter and her dedicated staff may well represent the forefront of an important new shift in departmental culture, bringing real and meaningful opportunities to those of us eagerly looking for a new way forward. In this sense, perhaps, we might indulge in a cautious enthusiasm, waiting and watching for who else the CDCR will invite to the table, paying close attention to see how these new messages from the outside sink in, how soon care and dignity and community respect can become part of the world inside.

For those wishing to support Initiate Justice, visit InitiateJustice.org and learn how to get involved. For incarcerated individuals wanting to become inside organizers, write to: Initiate Justice, ATTN: IO, P.O. Box 15836, Los Angeles, CA 90015

*About the author: Angie D. Gordon is a journalist and scholar incarcerated at California State Prison, Sacramento. She has been published in *Critical Criminology: An International Journal* and a handful of incarcerated press publications. Angie is an executive member of the VIP's editorial board and a staunch advocate for the LGBTQI+ incarcerated community*

About the Vanguard Incarcerated Press: We are part of The People's Vanguard of Davis, a nonprofit dedicated to realizing systemic change in the criminal legal system. The VIP is a monthly publication written by and edited in collaboration with incarcerated people across the country. Our mission is to empower the voices of the incarcerated through journalism and civil debate, and enable them to shed light in some of the darkest corners of the U.S. prison system.

Outside supporters who wish to donate to our cause should visit (DavisVanguard.org), being sure to note the VIP in your gift statement. For those who wish to be placed on our digital mailing list, please send a request, via email, to JoanParkin@DavisVanguard.org. We provide free copies of the VIP to the incarcerated, anyone on the inside wishing to subscribe should write to: Davis Vanguard, ATTN: VIP, Box 4715, Davis, CA 95617