

TEXAS FAMILIES FOR JUSTICE RALLY

by Cathy
Marston

On November 7, I stood on the South Steps of our state capitol in the sunshine on a perfect, 70-degree day with hundreds of others who were there to rally against mass incarceration. On July 21st I had been released from the Texas Dept. of Criminal Justice after serving 9 years and 7 months. Now, I stood observing the rally...

David Collingsworth, of the Texas Prison Show in Houston, whipped up the crowd in his cowboy hat: "What do we want?" "Justice!" hollered the crowd. Justice! —An end to wrongful arrest! —Exoneration of those wrongfully arrested! —Better representation for indigent defendants, including for the battered women sitting in prisons and jails across the state who are wrongfully arrested twenty percent of the time.

And Justice manifests itself as humane conditions of confinement, as Galen Baughman, communication director for the National C.U.R.E. (Citizens United to Reform Errants), stressed in a phone call after the event.

I was immediately interviewed by a video team who ostensibly wanted to talk about the lack of air-conditioning in TDCJ. After seeing my "Free Battered Texas Women" t-shirt and hearing my spiel, they graciously began their stand-up by asking: "Why are you here today?"

Whether it's the heat; or the cold (from staff refusing to turn on the heaters); or the lack of medical care; or officers retaliating for grievance writing (one night shift starved me repeatedly as recent as the Spring 2013 for writing grievances about the lack of heaters in cold weather); or sexual or physical assault, incarceration often is NOT Justice.

A snapshot of the speakers:

Mike Jewell, Executive Director of Texas C.U.R.E. (Citizens United to Reform Errants) did 40 years, some on Death Row. He spoke on how the system affects everyone, no matter if black or white, straight, gay or lesbian.

San Antonian **Steve Huerta, Chair of the Second Chance Democrats**; chair of the local chapter of **All of Us or None of Us**; and author of *Winning Our Boys Back* breathed fire: "We together will tear down this oppressive system. We together will tear down the walls of the prisons and bring our people home!"

Pastor Yolanda James of Greater Outreach International Ministries was the wife of a prisoner for 28 years: "It was hard financially, mentally, and spiritually; but made us strong.

Delay does not mean deny! Educate and continue to fight for what's right!"

Jennifer Erschabek, Executive Director of the Texas Inmate Family Association (TIFA), urged us to let legislators know that we want arrests stopped that do not contribute to public safety.

Gabe Gonzáles, Campaign Director for the Center for Community Change in Washington, D.C., promised: "We will fight the billions of dollars trying to crush us with millions of people! Not torture, but drug treatment! Not solitary confinement, but classrooms!"

After asking for a moment of silence for those incarcerated, **former TDCJ prisoner Jorge Renaud**, now a Policy Analyst for the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, gave a moving speech where each sentence began with, "When I was in prison..." Then he exhorted us to walk into the capitol to see our state legislators: "Don't ask them," he said. "Tell them what you want."

We then filed into the capitol to speak to our legislators. Many were not in; and many doors said, "Private."

The largest groups there were **TX CURE** and **Texas Voices** — the latter a lobbying organization representing sex offenders.

I dreamed in prison, too. I dreamed that I'd speak to a session of the Legislature about wrongful arrest of battered women. I dreamed that I'd be exonerated on appeal; but the courts are refusing to produce my evidence, which we assume is gone, including: 28 photos of my injuries from my ex's beating; my ex's sworn testimony admitting to punching, shaking, and choking me; my glasses and clothes that were twisted and bloodied by my ex's beating.

I dream I will be joined here at home by women like Sherry Nance, Rhonda Glover, Tyra Whitney and Norma Acosta who killed their batterers in defense of their children or grandchildren; women like Merrie Lehning, Melody Simpson, and Twyla Henderson, who defended themselves against their batterers; women whose cases the **Texas Innocence Project** has had under review for years, such as Sarajini Levine, whose batterer killed their daughter in a fire while Sarajini was out of town (yet she is the one doing time for arson).

Each day is an opportunity to act on our dreams.

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