



Executive Director's Remarks from WPA's 2008 Benefit Dinner

*Excerpted from a Speech Given by Georgia Lerner
June 4, 2008, New York City*

Good evening, friends, colleagues, and patrons of the Women's Prison Association. I am Georgia Lerner, and I am honored to stand before you and introduce myself as the Executive Director of WPA. I appreciate that each of you chose to be here tonight; your presence is an affirmation of our mission: helping women with criminal justice involvement realize new opportunities to build stable lives in the community. I must believe that you are here because you agree that women should not be forever limited and defined by the crimes they committed—none of us would choose to be described based on our worst days. So, thank you for being here.

As most of you know, earlier this year, WPA's Executive Director of nearly two decades, Ann Jacobs, retired. Ann was a mentor to me in so many ways. She helped me find new ways of understanding and looking at criminal justice issues, she introduced me to City and State officials, and she encouraged me when I saw opportunities to improve and expand on the work we were already doing.

By far, though, my most intense learning occurred when Ann and I discussed real-life situations when crimes had affected us or those close to us. When I was the victim, would I sing the same tune, heralding the merits of rehabilitation with accountability, over punishment and revenge? The discourse that Ann and I shared about these personal events served as the foundation for our statements about responses to crime.

WPA believes that jails and prisons are expensive and that they are not particularly effective either at reducing crime or increasing neighborhood stability.

WPA believes that people who are already disenfranchised from community life and institutions cannot be effectively educated about accepted social norms, models of employment, family and faith when we send them to prisons, hundreds of miles away, where the community within bears no resemblance to the communities in which we expect them to be citizens when they get out.

WPA believes that we cannot afford to dismiss from our consideration the thousands of men and women whom we warehouse in prisons every year. If we send them away because we are afraid of them and because we believe that their absence improves public safety, then we should focus more on what we do with them while they are gone. Most will eventually be coming home.

If we really want to reduce crime—not just while people are locked up, but after they come home too—we need to foster personal accountability by making it safe and tolerable for individuals to acknowledge the impact of their deeds and do whatever is possible to promote repair and healing. Until we acknowledge and do what we can to fix that which we have broken, we are not fully free to grow and progress.

What does help a woman take responsibility for her life and free her to progress? Well, what does it take to get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice.

Institutions where the routine is rigid and individual judgment is not allowed are not the best stages for rehearsing the role of a person who is living in a community that does not operate on a rigid schedule and requires constant decision-making. It is obvious to me that preparation for a law-abiding life should be taught as a laboratory, in the classroom of real-life, in the community where a woman will make her home.

That is why, at WPA, we have promoted the use of non-incarcerative responses to crime for more than 160 years.

There's more to making it work, though, than merely being "not-prison." We rely on our staff of brilliant and committed individuals who, on a daily basis, create spaces at WPA where staff and clients feel safe and feel understood. They create spaces where women can take the risk of looking at themselves in new ways, can think about the things about which they are not proud, and can come to accept that what has come before has contributed to making them the people they are today, and that new experiences are the key to creating a new life.

Our staff create spaces where women can take the risk of trying something new—whether it's using a Metrocard, calling a doctor to change an appointment, asking an employer for time off, smiling back at the receptionist who greets them, or describing their own positive attributes. These may sound like small things—but if you have been locked up for several years, only ever riding in a squad car or Department of Correctional Services bus, then it can be terrifying and overwhelming to manage even the basic aspects of a regular day. We've all been in unfamiliar territory, where we feel alone because we don't know the lay of the land.

When women return to the community after being incarcerated, they return to a community that is somehow different. Some of the differences are concrete changes, like the fact that you cannot use a subway token if you want to and that you have to dial an area code to call your neighbor in Brooklyn. Some of the differences arise from a woman's internal experience of change in her relationships to people and community. Before she was arrested, she may have felt invisible, or may have been in charge of her family and household, or she may have lived all of her adult life in the streets, feeding an addiction.

Many women have described feeling like they had a big sign on their forehead that said "Just Released from Prison." And, while the sign was not there for others to see, the feeling of standing out in a negative way was very real. Our staff understands, and takes the time to educate women about what to expect. We know that it's not sufficient to tell a woman to take the subway to Parole. We have peers who may accompany her as she buys a Metrocard, who will show her how to use it and how to read the machine to see how much money is left, who will tell her what subway stops precede hers, and which landmarks to use to find her way. We do whatever we can to reduce the number of surprises and arm her with knowing what to expect at each turn.

As we move forward, building on the foundation of what Ann Jacobs created, I am committed to safeguarding the values of WPA. I am committed to walking the walk that we urge for our clients. I believe that the community of WPA must be an expression of our belief that all human beings have the capacity to grow and change.

Thank you very much.