

tic infections. Very few states have any sort of compassionate release program for terminally-ill inmates.

A number of groups in various areas have come together to support prison AIDS activists. In Toronto, the Prisoner's AIDS/HIV Survival and Activists Network (PASAN) has created a comprehensive program for dealing with AIDS in prison and presented it to the Canadian government. This brief calls for mandatory education for all inmates and staff, condom distribution and needle exchanges, confidential testing and counseling by outside agencies, access to adequate medical care including experimental treatments and clinical drug tests, and compassionate release procedures. Beyond these specific points, however, the PASAN plan is a total strategy of the sort that the government should have initiated years ago. It should be a starting point for all prison AIDS work.

Coalitions like PASAN and ACT-UP also provide a workable model for prisoner/non-prisoner alliances to deal with other issues of mutual concern. As in any work where the goal is the empowerment of an oppressed group, guidance must come from the prisoners themselves—from our knowledge of the reality of life in America's prisons.

Building bridges between prisoners and the community is a necessary process of challenging the exclusivity of our culture, and building a new kind of community based on acceptance—where hopefully, someday, there will be no need for cages or walls.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Lin Elliot

To be Queer in prison is to be silenced. Incarcerated Lesbians, Gay men, Bisexuals, and other Queer people receive no positive support for our identities. At the very best, we are ignored; more often we are subject to abuse and violence from other inmates and to harassment and discrimination by staff. We are constantly bombarded by the compulsory heterosexuality of television, novels, religious literature, and mainstream "men's magazines" that are readily available inside, while Queer-oriented material (whether erotic zines or community newspapers) is frequently banned as "a threat to the orderly operation of the institution."

Furthermore, we are left with no outlet at all for our sexuality. Even in states such as here in Washington—where there are no laws against homosexuality—consensual sex between prisoners is against prison rules and can result in severe punishment, even loss of "good time," thereby extending a person's sentence. (Indeed, prison officials seem to draw no distinction between consensual acts and sexual assault: I have seen men receive the same punishment for making love in the privacy of their cells that other inmates received for forceful rapes.) And where straight prisoners often have access to conjugal visits, especially if they are married, Queer relationships are given no such recognition. A Lesbian or Gay couple who have been together for many years will be denied the comfort available to any straight "marriage of convenience."

Prisoners as a group are among the least considered and most powerless people in our society, a fact that has become increasingly important as the United States has embarked on an orgy of prison construction that is truly unprecedented. The "land of the free" now imprisons a larger percentage of its population than any other country in the world. And, while accurate figures on the number of incarcerated Queers are not available, my own experience, both as a prisoner

- *Challenging Discrimination.* It is no accident that the groups most responsible for the recent backlash against Queers on the outside are also very active in prison. Fundamentalist churches, groups like the Aryan Nation, the racist skinheads, and other hate groups are all willing to reach out to prisoners (and quite often to staff as well). It's ironic that the more liberal political and religious groups, which are supposedly founded on inclusive principles, seem for the most part absent from prisons. This represents a tremendous loss for progressive causes. America's prisons are a vast untapped reservoir of talent, commitment, and experience—the waste of human potential that they represent is terrifying. Certainly, in this day and age we can't afford to let ourselves be divided.

I would like to see groups and coalitions working against hate groups and neo-fascists on the streets make a positive effort to link up with progressive prisoners, to help us resist the brainwashing and recruiting that goes on in the prisons, and that often serves the administration's goal of keeping prisoners separated from each other and preventing organized resistance. Outside groups would benefit from increased knowledge of how hate groups function, and prisoners would gain support and positive connections with the community.

- *AIDS Education/Prevention.* Statistics show that prisoners with AIDS live, on average, half as long as people with AIDS (PWAs) on the streets. In New York State, AIDS is already the leading cause of death among prisoners, and estimates on the percentage of the population that might be HIV-positive are horrifying. The fact that a large proportion of prisoners are, or have been, intravenous drug users is in itself reason for serious concern.

And yet, prison administrators continue to favor a speak-no-evil/see-no-evil policy (reminiscent of the Catholic church). Since consensual sex, drug use, tattooing, etc. are universally against prison rules, administrators refuse to allow—with some rare exceptions—any open discussion of safe sex, needle exchanges, or other proven methods for controlling the spread of the virus.

In addition to this, medical care in prisons tends to be very poor, and ignorance and fear among staff often lead to HIV-positive inmates being neglected or abused. Nutrition is substandard, and close living conditions make inmates very susceptible to exposure to opportunis-

and an organizer, suggests we are represented far out of proportion to our percentage of the general population.

By far the most painful aspect of being a Queer prisoner is that we often find ourselves doubly silenced—not just by society at large, but in our own communities as well. Several years ago I was in the county jail awaiting sentencing at the time of the Seattle-area Pride March. I very much wanted to be involved and to express my solidarity with my siblings on our own special day. So I wrote a short message explaining why I couldn't attend and asking the community to remember Queer prisoners when they marched. I sent my piece to the Pride organizers, hoping that it could be used in the Pride program. Apparently not. I never received any response at all.

Soon after that, I started working, along with several dedicated friends "outside," to create The League of Lesbian and Gay Prisoners (LLGP), a network of people concerned with the special problems of incarcerated Queers. Our goal was to make it possible for prisoners to be more involved in, and contribute to, the community, and to build some bridges across the isolation that prisons inevitably create.

Needless to say, it isn't easy. The nature of "correctional" systems works against us. Despite rhetoric about the value of maintaining ties to the community, I have never encountered a prison where the rules governing mail, phone calls, and visitation didn't seem deliberately designed to complicate outside relationships to the point of extinction.

Day-to-day life in prison differs radically from the experience of friends on the street, which can create a sense of disconnection even between people who are in close contact. And incarceration creates such an imbalance of power—financially, psychologically, emotionally—that despite everyone's best intentions, it can be nearly impossible to create and sustain positive across-the-wall connections. Positive action on both sides is necessary to restore the balance.

Following a forum on prison issues that LLGP put on for Queer Nation/Seattle—the presentation was a collaboration between a prisoner, an ex-prisoner, and a non-prisoner—an activist friend gave me some advice. "What you need to do," she suggested, "is offer us some concrete example of what we can do. After all, it's not like you're asking me to recruit voters, which is something that has been done before. For most of us, building bridges between inside and out is a new idea." So, what I would like to do is to briefly sketch what I believe to be the most important areas for collaboration between prisons and the larger Lesbian and Gay community, and try to suggest why I believe this collaboration is not only possible, but urgently necessary.