

A JAILHOUSE LAWYER’S FIGHT FOR JUSTICE

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Incarcerated citizens face insurmountable odds. They suffer forced separation from their families. They are sent to prison for decades behind bars, most times without remorse or forgiveness, and they must endure the insanities of their environment such as the untreated mental health crises some of their fellow incarcerated citizens experience on a daily basis.

In addition, they must accept the inhuman treatment imposed upon them by prison guards. The “planted” drugs, the false conduct reports, and the physical abuse alongside their cover-ups are all a part of the prison experience for incarcerated citizens locked up in American prisons.

Many people in society believe incarcerated citizens deserve to suffer and often turn a blind eye to their misfortunes when they cry out for help. They accuse incarcerated citizens of exaggerating their claims or they shun them for whining about “small things” regardless of how egregious the abuse they endure. Too often ignored by those who could help make a difference, incarcerated citizens languish behind bars unseen, unheard, and unappreciated.

Even the actually innocent suffer from this neglect. Mountains of rigid laws deny them access to the courts even if they have evidence of their innocence. They spend decades in prison just like the guilty, pleading for a new trial or a sympathetic ear only to be told that their claims are untrue or that they may be experiencing punishment for crimes they got away with. Tragic stories of police corruption of vindictive witnesses are ignored as fairy tales or half-truths. For the actually innocent, their only option is to suffer in silence or plead to deaf ears.

For the average incarcerated citizen, hopelessness is a common mindset. “I don’t care” and “It is what it is” are popular idioms from the voices of the defeated. Their banishment from society has only convinced them that their circumstances was their fate all along. Convinced they cannot win, the average incarcerated citizen wanders through prison living up to the expectations of their biggest critics and adversaries. And as time passes by, these captured souls live trapped behind bars doing nothing more than yearning for freedom.

But there is a distinguished class of incarcerated citizens living behind bars who see these conditions as a challenge. Yearning for their freedom is only the beginning of their fight. They experience their adversity as a way to sharpen their character. For them, hopelessness is a derogatory word. Murdered by the State

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through the infliction of a social death, they are resurrected by the presence of injustice. These brothers and sisters are known as Jailhouse Lawyers.

In prison, a Jailhouse Lawyers' goal is certain: **to defeat inhumane laws and conditions through the power of the pen.** They are practitioners of the law by circumstance, but the only bar they must pass is their own prison cells as they march like warriors to the law library in search of justice.

On their way to the law library, the Jailhouse Lawyer is known by the way they exercise their right to bear arms. With their ink pens clutched in their hands or lodged behind their ears and their minds filled with unlimited ammunition, they trek to law libraries across the country to battle and destroy unjust decisions committed by legislatures and judges.

Some of them are sharpshooters. They have done these before time and time again. They know what laws they need to show and what facts they need to stuff within every shot. When they lift their ink pens into the air, prison officials cringe with fear at the show of courage. These Jailhouse Lawyers serve as champions of the oppressed behind bars and as surefire enemies of injustice.

The righteous ones among them are fearless in the face of adversity. When correctional officers search their cells out of retaliation, they challenge their authority. When correctional officers strip them naked to attack their manhood, they challenge that officer's sexual morality. And when the correctional officer frames them with false crimes or rule violations, they walk that officer into the courtroom and sue them for defamation among other things. A Jailhouse Lawyer sees their adversities as a way to sharpen their craft.

Despite the attacks made on Jailhouse Lawyers, they never quit. With their guns of ink, they fire back at every unjust move. Shoots to their reputation are seen as expected counterstrategies of war. They know the defenders of injustice will never relinquish their power without a fight. Nevertheless, they stay prepared to fight, to die, and to win no matter what. And they know no bounds except the boundaries of justice.

How do I know this? Because I am a Jailhouse Lawyer. For the past sixteen years I have studied the law and I have armed myself with caches of ink to battle those who see injustice as a weapon to be wielded against the poor and disenfranchised. I have filed lawsuits, appeals, and other motions for myself and others to help fight any injustice that may arise. I am of those who fight to extract and to protect the scarce resources of rights entitled to all incarcerated citizens.

My fight has not been easy. I have been met with resistance on many occasions. Prison administrations have sought to discourage me through many countertactics. They have searched my cell, taken my property, and written false conduct reports along the way. They have also used solitary confinement and institutional transfers as a way to disrupt and discourage my initiatives. But I refuse to quit. To do so would admit defeat to a system that ruins lives for economic gains with no regard for their humanity.

As Abu-Jamal perfectly wrote, **“those who are most apt to use pen and paper—rather than, say, a ‘lock in a sock’—to address and resolve grievances,**

are the most targeted of all prison populations.”¹ Jailhouse Lawyers must deal with the tactics prison administrations throw at them if they desire to achieve their goals. Without our courage millions of prisoners would remain constant victims of injustice without a solution. There would be no record of their victimization. The Jailhouse Lawyer is the gatekeeper of justice behind prison fences.

As Jailhouse Lawyers we must not stop our assault on the corruption systemically suffered behind bars. The cure for any sickness always comes from within the disease itself. With our ink pens in hand, we must conquer injustice by all means. We must triumph over systemic injustice. Our redemption is inside our fight.

¹ Mumia Abu-Jamal, *JAILHOUSE LAWYERS: PRISONERS DEFENDING PRISONERS V. THE USA* 48 (2009).