

## ACTION UPDATE

NOVEMBER 2021

**I**N 1984, TOM CAHILL was asked by a reporter about his plans to fight prisoner rape. JDI was just getting off the ground, and Tom was running it by himself out of the beat up camper he lived in. But Tom believed that when more people learned about JDI's work — courageous people with an unshakeable commitment to human rights — the organization would grow. "My fantasy," he told the reporter, "is to obtain office space to work against injustice in the prison system."



It would have been easy to dismiss Tom as an idealist. After all, sexual abuse in detention was a human rights crisis that no one wanted to talk about, let alone work to

end. But Tom's prediction came true. The movement began attracting human rights champions — among them John Kaneb. One of JDI's earliest supporters, John was a driving force behind many of our landmark victories to ensure the safety and dignity of people behind bars.

Tom and John both passed away recently, and we are deeply saddened by the loss of these two remarkable people. During the past year — my first as JDI's Executive Director — they were both incredibly generous in sharing their wisdom, support, and encouragement. In these pages, you'll read more about the legacies of Tom and John, and about JDI's groundbreaking programs that are helping to fulfill their vision of a world free of prisoner rape.

*Linda McFarlane*

Linda McFarlane  
Executive Director

## Protect Prison Mail!

*Prisons and jails are blocking people's mail.  
With your support, we're fighting back.*

**M**ARTIN LEYVA won't ever forget the letters that his mother sent him in prison. Her perfume lingered on the paper, flooding him with warm memories of home. Johanna Mills felt so attached to letters from her mother that she stuffed them in her pillow — a practice familiar to many people who have served time. Troy Isaac pasted letters he received on the wall of his cell, so that he'd never feel alone.

Mail is a staple of prison life — a meaningful, and inexpensive, way to stay connected with loved ones and remain hopeful amid the stress and chaos of incarceration. Letter-writing is also tied to better outcomes for people when they leave prison. When Martin, Johanna, and Troy got out, their transition was made easier because of the support from the family, friends, and advocates with whom they kept in touch during their incarceration.

But prison mail is under attack. Detention facilities nationwide are denying people their mail. With your help, JDI is fighting back. More than two thousand people joined us in demanding Attorney General Merrick Garland end the federal Bureau of Prisons' use of a service called MailGuard. Under MailGuard, letters from loved ones are not given to the people they are meant for. Instead, correspondence is scanned and then either delivered as a crude print out or uploaded to a prison kiosk or personal tablet provided by Smart Communications — the company that runs, and profits from, MailGuard.

Mail-scanning programs are especially devastating to people with disabilities. "I had to rely on trusted people to read my mail to me, in a private setting," said Charles Singletary, a formerly incarcerated person with a visual impairment. "How will that work if I'm using a kiosk with a long line of people waiting behind me? It's chaotic

*See Protect Prison Mail! continued on page 2*



*When he was locked up, Martin Leyva stayed connected to his family through the mail. "I watched my daughter grow up in pictures that I got in the mail and then put on my locker," he said. But many prisons are now denying people their letters, photos, and cards. Photo: Christine Vaughan/CSUSM*

## “I Feel Like I’m Not In Prison”

*JDI’s Art Workshops in a Men’s Prison Give People a Way to Open Up — and Heal.*

**P**RISONS ARE NOISY, crowded, and often violent — hardly an environment that is conducive to healing from trauma. But at the California Rehabilitation Center (CRC), JDI is providing people in custody with a break from the turmoil around them, and an opportunity to reflect on and process difficult feelings.

For two hours each week, JDI holds art workshops at CRC, aimed at helping participants cope with the effects of trauma. The program, called Rooted in Resilience, is based on a model pioneered by A Window Between Worlds, a nonprofit arts organization and a longtime JDI partner. JDI adapted the model for prisons and has rolled it out in other detention facilities in California, as well as in New York and South Africa.

But the CRC art workshop program is unlike the others run by JDI in one key respect — it’s the first one we have held in a men’s prison. “I feel like I’m not in prison for two hours, and I can let my guard down,” said Michael,\* one of the people participating in the CRC workshops. At the weekly sessions, Michael and the other artists use materials such as watercolors, oil pastels, charcoal, and colored pencils to explore different themes.

During the first workshop, called “A Perfect Window of Time,” the participants depicted a place or a moment when they felt loved, protected, and at peace; for many, their happiest times were spent with loved ones. Another workshop focused on helping participants recognize, and cope with, powerful emotions, like anger.

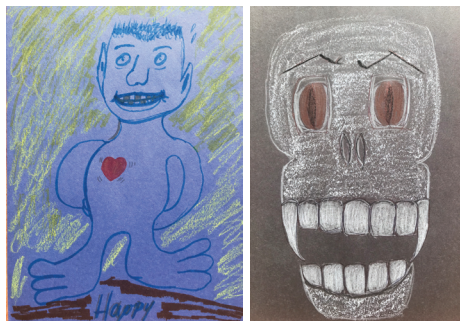
“There’s this perception that men in prison are all hardened criminals who are completely shut off from their emotions,” said Edward Cervantes, a JDI Senior Program Officer and one of the program facilitators. “But that’s not true. The problem is that they aren’t given an opportunity to share in a way that feels safe. Through art, we are seeing men open

up about difficult issues and feelings that they used to bury deep inside.”

Rooted in Resilience is JDI’s first on-site workshop program since the start of the pandemic. While our staff were able to pivot to virtual sessions in some prisons, there’s no substitute for in-person interaction. Everyone is masked, and our staff undergo rapid testing before entering.

“We’re sensitive to how people in detention facilities experienced the worst of the pandemic,” said Edward. “Covid inflicted a severe toll on a group of people who already were grappling with so much loss and pain. A big part of what we’re doing now is giving folks a way to release some of that pain. And it’s working.”

*\*Michael’s name has been changed to protect his privacy*



*The drawings above are from a CRC workshop called “Monster Feelings,” which helps participants identify and explore emotions that they might have a hard time expressing. Participants each depicted, and named, a “monster” feeling, including (clockwise from bottom right) an “angry monster,” a “happy monster,” and a “content monster.”*

## Protect Prison Mail

*continued from page 1*

and dangerous.” Charles spoke out against programs like MailGuard at a virtual event that JDI co-hosted with the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN). JDI and NDRN also penned a letter to the Biden Administration — which was signed by more than forty civil rights organizations — calling for an end to MailGuard in federal prisons.

Charles is one of many formerly and currently incarcerated people who are playing a leading role in the effort to oppose mail restrictions. People with direct experience with MailGuard, like Jacqueline, have been sending their own letters to the Attorney General calling for the program to be terminated. Jacqueline is incarcerated in Pennsylvania, which switched from traditional mail delivery to MailGuard in 2018. For her and so many others, the emotional lift of a letter comes not just from a loved one’s words, but from the letters themselves — from, as Jacqueline explained, “running my fingers across the page and feeling the indentations of their writing.”

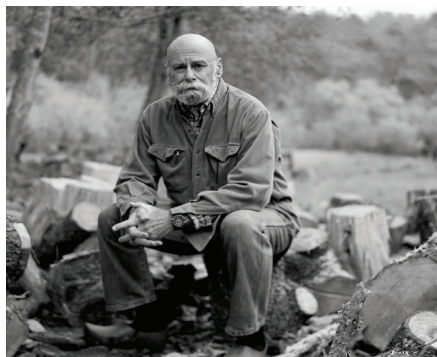
Pennsylvania paid Smart Communications \$15 million for MailGuard. As JDI Executive Director Linda McFarlane made clear in a *Philadelphia Inquirer* op-ed published in September, the program has been an expensive disaster. Citing the harms caused by MailGuard to incarcerated people and their families, and its negligible impact on drug use in the state’s prisons — the putative reason for the program — the op-ed called on the state to stop scanning letters and to return to physical mail immediately.

JDI’s campaign to protect prison mail is about more than one private company’s awful program. We continue to hear from incarcerated survivors who tell us about privately run mail services that deprive them of the chance to hold the personal letters and cards from loved ones that help them get through each day. That’s why we’re going to keep bringing the fight to Smart Communications and other companies that block mail — and to the corrections agencies that hire them.



# Honoring Tom Cahill and John Kaneb

## *JDI Mourns the Loss of Two Heroes in the Fight to End Prisoner Rape*



**Tom Cahill (1937-2021), outside his home in Northern California in 2007**

In 1982, when Tom Cahill first became involved with JDI — known then as People Organized to Stop the Rape of Imprisoned Persons — the organization had no budget, no staff, and no office, and its founder had moved on.

But Tom, a longtime activist and survivor of a gang rape in a Texas jail in 1968, was undeterred. He ran JDI from the old camper van

he lived in and then, in later years, in a barn with no indoor plumbing, sending out press statements and research briefs to anyone he thought might listen. In 1986, he joined forces with Stephen “Donny” Donaldson, a gay rights activist and prisoner rape survivor. Under their shared leadership, the organization’s influence grew. When JDI secured the passage of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) of 2003 — the first federal civil law to address this crisis — it represented the culmination of years of advocacy by the organization that Tom had helped build from the ground up.

“It is impossible to overstate the important role Tom Cahill played in bringing prisoner rape into the national consciousness,” said Linda McFarlane, JDI’s Executive Director. “His tireless advocacy and courage inspired countless people to join the fight to stop this crisis — among them elected officials, human rights activists, and an untold number of fellow survivors, who saw their own story reflected in Tom’s. He was a leader and mentor to everyone at JDI, and a dear friend.”

Tom stepped down as Board President in 2006. On his retirement, Senator Ted Kennedy, one of PREA’s sponsors, was among those who celebrated Tom. “All of us in Congress are grateful for your role in helping to pass the PREA,” Kennedy wrote to Tom in a letter. “The nation owes you a huge debt of gratitude for this impressive reform.”

Tom remained a committed member of our Survivor Council until his death, and he stayed in close touch to share advice and cheer us on. He was deeply humble about his role in our movement, and he always emphasized the contributions of others — especially other survivors. At a 2003 Capitol Hill briefing organized by JDI to push for PREA’s passage, Tom gave a speech honoring Donny, who died in 1996. “Stephen Donaldson can’t be here to tell his story,” he told the crowd, which included survivors, activists, and political leaders. “So I will.”

We will keep Tom’s memory alive by telling his story, and by continuing the fight to end sexual abuse in detention.



**John Kaneb (1934-2021), testifying at a 2011 Capitol Hill hearing on ending sexual abuse in immigration detention**

For decades, the crisis of prisoner rape was in the shadows — ignored by the media, by donors, and by elected officials who had a responsibility to stop it. Were it not for John Kaneb, this blackout might have continued. John was one of the earliest supporters of JDI, lending credibility to a movement that was still trying to find its feet.

John first learned of JDI in 1997 and began working with us and our allies on federal legislation to address sexual abuse in detention. His political savvy — and his profound belief in every person’s absolute right to dignity — was essential to ensuring the passage of PREA. On the law’s ten-year anniversary, President George W. Bush — who signed PREA into law in 2003 — recognized John’s crucial role, stating, “Thank you for all you did to make sure our justice system is just and fair.”

John’s contributions to the movement didn’t end once PREA became law. On the contrary, he understood that PREA was only one step — that the work was not complete until the crisis of prisoner rape was over. And John was always ready to put in the work. As Vice-Chair of the National Prison Rape Elimination Commission, he helped shape the groundbreaking PREA standards.

After the Commission’s work ended, John’s commitment remained steadfast. He fought

with us for strong, meaningful PREA implementation and oversight, including by rallying his allies on Capitol Hill and helping to secure legislation aimed at strengthening PREA’s audit requirements. He was also very concerned about the suffering of incarcerated survivors and was dogged in working with us to ensure they could get the help they need.

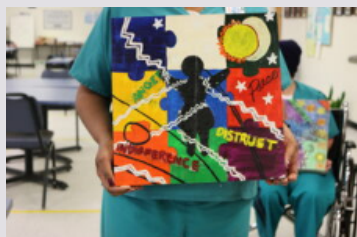
“Whenever our movement needed a true champion, John was there,” said Linda McFarlane, JDI’s Executive Director. “He was a kind and principled person who abhorred bullies and believed in the Constitution. In other words, he was exactly who you’d want in your corner. He never sought credit or recognition; he simply wanted to fix the problem — to make sure that every person in the government’s custody is safe from sexual abuse. John was a thoughtful partner, a keen strategist, and a generous supporter. It was an honor to work with him, and we will always be grateful for his compassion and partnership.”

# This is #PrisonersToo

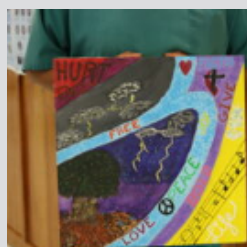
#MeToo became a global phenomenon because of social media platforms that are off limits to incarcerated people. That's why JDI started #PrisonersToo — a campaign that allows people behind bars to share their #MeToo stories without Facebook or Twitter.

We invited artist Cathy Salser to join us in working with groups of artists incarcerated in two South Carolina women's prisons to create a storytelling platform for survivors. The artists chose the image of a butterfly to represent the healing transformation that is possible when survivors break their silence. Cathy and the incarcerated artists created butterfly murals consisting of individually painted panels, each capturing one artist's experience of trauma and healing. Then the artists invited others in the prisons to contribute to the mural by adding fabric butterflies that told their own stories.

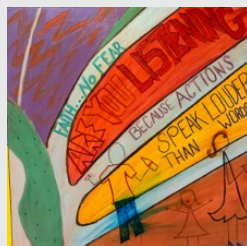
Below are some of the stories that incarcerated survivors have told. Now they need to hear from you. Please visit [justdetention.org/prisonerstoo](http://justdetention.org/prisonerstoo) to learn more about #PrisonersToo and to share your own story or message of support with survivors on the inside.



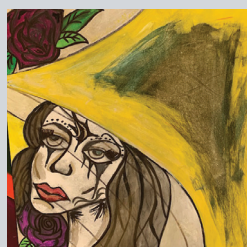
"All I knew was anger. I didn't have any other emotion. I dealt with people in anger. If they were trying to help me, I was angry. That's all I knew. With my healing, I finally felt loved and finally knew how to give love. On my panel, I was still putting myself together like a puzzle. And I was broken into pieces. But I'm healing now."  
— Tamika



"My panel has a tree growing out of that darkness and coming into light, going through a storm and coming out. I put a cross on there just because that's a part of growing back into that person that he tried to take away from me." — Carman



"What I was thinking about when I did my panel was that when I was between six and eight I was being molested, and I didn't reach out to anybody. I didn't tell anybody until I was 18 years old. But I did draw pictures." — Tammi



"I have grown a lot since her [the crying woman depicted in the panel]. I feel like that was me a long time ago. Recently I have transformed. I'm not that same person. I believe that it's not my fault anymore." — Sabrina

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