

Interview with Ron Simpson AFSC Michigan Lifer Intern

Q: Please introduce yourself.

RON SIMPSON: I'm 56, served 27 years in the Michigan Department of Corrections. During that time I was heavily involved in activism, trying to aid and assist prisoners, trying to improve the conditions of confinement in Michigan's prisons. And working with AFSC will allow me to continue that work.



Q: What motivates you to do this work?

RON: I see the need for it. Looking at corrections, they don't pay enough attention to the type of people returning to our communities. You know, me being from the Black community, which is where most prisoners in Michigan come from, our communities are heavily impacted by these returning citizens.

And I call them "returning citizens," because they end up coming back at one point or another. What happens, prisons have been in the business of warehousing people instead of trying to give them programs that help them become better citizens. So when they get out, they have very little skills, very little coping skills. And these same people become your neighbors, your church members, people dating your sisters, brothers, mothers, what have you.

So my interest in this is trying to improve our communities by addressing this end of things. You know, crime in our community is really committed by a very small percentage of people in the community. So prisoners are obviously part of that percentage, so if I can address at least some of their issues, then I can help the community.

Q: What's the biggest misperception which people on the outside have about people on the inside?

RON: The biggest misperception is – they're dehumanized. I use the term people – rather than prisoners, convicts, felons, whatever labels are applied. We should humanize them – these are people's brothers, sisters, uncles, cousins – these are family members. To demonize them as killers, thugs, people who have no redeemable qualities – this is far from the truth.

Q: I always remember going into visiting rooms in prison and they always looked like pretty normal guys – not the image created by the media.

RON: There reaches a point of diminishing returns by over-punishing people. A lot of these people are good people who made bad mistakes. Not everyone's a Charles

Manson. You've got guys in there who are really smart and could really give to society. I feel they should be given a second chance.

Q: At the end of the internship, what's your vision for the future?

RON: My vision for this project is to have at least 100 faith-based groups or organizations that have adopted prisoners to mentor, and this is a self-perpetuating process. I hope to continue this work in some form or fashion.

I was talking with Pete [Martel, fellow AFSC staff], you know he's in law school, and I was talking with him about going back to school either for an MSW or some degree along these lines.

Q: How did you get connected to AFSC?

RON: When I was inside, I was actually head of a lot of prisoner organizations. I contacted Penny Rider [former staff] of AFSC to do parole readiness workshops. I was head of the National Lifers organization inside Michigan prisons. And I used to run a lot of workshops in that area, and I found out AFSC was doing them in 1998.

So I invited Penny to come in and do seminars. So I've been involved with AFSC since the late 90s.

Q: Why are the parole readiness workshops so important?

RON: They're important because it gives the prisoners and their families insight into what they need to be doing. A lot of times, prisoners have a generalized idea that, "If I can just make it to this date, I can see the parole board and go home."

But there's a lot of preparation that goes into that. You have to have your program stuff taken care of, a prevention relapse program in place, outside support groups. This puts a sharp point on the pencil, so to speak – something for them to focus on and be ready to see the parole board.

Q: Race plays a big role in the criminal justice system. What's your view on that and how should we, as a society, address that problem?

RON: That's a profound question. That's a hard one to say. When you have half the population think there is no racism anymore, how do you get past that - those blinders? Racism is something that permeates all the fabric of our society, it's like the emperor has no clothes – no one wants to address it.

So how should we address it? Keep plugging away at these social issues. You know, social change takes a long time. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice." It's a long process. If we go back to the days of slavery – how many years did it take to end slavery? Long time.

That was a drastic human injustice. So these more subtle injustices will take as long or longer to heel.

Q: Seems like the work you're doing is part of it.

RON: Absolutely. If you can reach the younger people.... Younger people are usually open to new concepts, usually change starts there because they're not so entrenched in their ideology, or someone else's ideology.

Q: I visited a friend of mine in Iowa prisons for many years and drove family members and friends to visit their loved ones as part of our church's prison van ministry. The work which you, Natalie, Pete and the interns do is close to my heart, and I want you to know how much I appreciate and support it.

RON: We appreciate that. We need all the support we can get, because it's an uphill fight doing this work.