HIGHLIGHTING 25 YEARS OF CLIENT-CENTERED ADVOCACY, EDUCATION & POLICY REFORM

2021 ANNUAL REPORT
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OUR MISSION

OJPC’s mission is to create fair, intelligent, redemptive criminal-justice systems through zealous client-centered advocacy, innovative policy reform, and cross-sector community education.

WHAT WE DO

OJPC is a nonprofit law firm with offices in Cincinnati and Columbus, Ohio. We offer a spectrum of free legal services, programs, and resources to help people navigate the complexities of our criminal legal system.

OJPC works to substantially reduce the size and racial disparity of Ohio’s prison population, as well as to protect the rights and dignity of incarcerated people. We also serve people in the community by removing criminal records-based barriers to employment, housing, education, and full community integration. In addition to offering direct, pro-bono legal services for impacted individuals, we advocate for public policy that creates safe and just communities at the state and local level. We provide education about criminal-legal issues through statewide presentations, a clinical legal program for law students, an annual internship program, community resource materials, and written legal and policy guides.
A LETTER FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:

Dear friends of OJPC,

The Ohio Justice & Policy Center has reached an important milestone: 25 years advocating for people written off by a criminal legal system that too often is cruel, inhumane, and unforgiving.

In 1997, civil rights attorney Alphonse Gerhardstein founded the Prisoner Rights Advocacy Center, OJPC’s predecessor, to fight for the humanity of people who have suffered the worst abuses Ohio’s prison system has to offer, including physical and sexual abuse, and constitutionally inadequate medical care.

We began modestly, with a fulltime executive director joined a year later by a single staff attorney. When I was hired to lead OJPC in 2002, there were two other attorneys and a paralegal. Today, however, we have a staff of nearly 20, split between our Cincinnati home office and the Columbus office we opened in 2020. And we have an army of volunteers who help us in countless ways.

In addition to our original Human Rights in Prison work, we have two other focus areas: our Second Chance Project, which represents people who face barriers to employment, housing, and other necessities because of a criminal record; and Beyond Guilt, which seeks to free over-punished people who have transformed themselves while incarcerated for serious crimes. And we do more than represent individual clients one at a time. Over the years, we have repeatedly bridged the partisan political divide to accomplish important legislative victories, some of which this report will highlight.

As we look towards our next 25 years, we must work to become more robustly funded. Although we’ve become adept at accomplishing a lot with little, continuing to operate with a poverty mentality comes at a cost. Our committed—and often over worked—staff need more than we can pay them. And while I’ve chosen since 2007 not to draw an OJPC salary to ease some of our financial strain, we can’t expect our next executive director to do so.

I’m proud of what OJPC has accomplished in its first 25 years. But to ensure we will be successful during our next 25, we need your help. Please donate what you can, and consider making, if you’re able, a planned gift through our new Legacy Society. And remember this: although we provide all of our services free of charge, our representation and advocacy still cost money—a lot of it.

Through our past and current work, I hope you we’ve earned your future support.

Sincerely,

David A. Singleton
Landing an opportunity to work along the staff at OJPC at any time, is an accomplishment. Joining this incredible team as it celebrates its 25th anniversary makes my commitment to support the organization’s mission come full circle.

My introduction to the issues that OJPC works hard to eliminate, like legal barriers stemming from criminal convictions or disparities in sentencing, came some time before OJPC ever existed. Although my legal career was developed in Texas, DC, and Maryland, I was born and raised in Over the Rhine, just blocks from the building where OJPC is located. At a young age I witnessed people arrested, charged, and sentenced because of who they were—poor and primarily people of color—and not necessarily for the acts they committed. While we didn’t call it over policing or racial profiling, the relationship between law enforcement and members of the community back then, were no different than they are today.

Coming of age in the ‘80s and ‘90s, I saw up close the devastation caused by crack cocaine all over the city of Cincinnati. By the time I was in college, it was evident that treatment for addiction took a backseat to criminalizing addiction. This insight came in handy years later when I began practicing as a public defender during the height of the opioid crisis, where again, incarceration was the response to addiction.

Whether it was my work as a member of the General Counsel’s legal team for the DC Department of Corrections, work as a public defender in Maryland and Kentucky or even working on immigration or employment matters, each position has equipped me with an ability to help identify system failures that align perfectly with OJPC’s mission to address these failures. I am delighted to work alongside the talented staff working to dismantle and reform aspects of our criminal legal system that oppress human beings. I look forward to helping shape and expand the mission OJPC for the next 25 years and beyond.

Sincerely,
LaToya Bell
The data and approximations above were compiled using the most recent 2021 reports from the Ohio Justice & Policy Center, Policy Matters Ohio, Ohioans to Stop Executions, The Sentencing Project, The Prison Policy Initiative and the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections.
OUR 2021 IN NUMBERS

109
Charges expunged for clients who survived sex trafficking

88
People helped by OJPC staff at a free Second Chance legal clinic

35
OJPC assisted 35 people with CQEs

87
OJPC Clients Assisted with Full Record Sealing

16
Memos in support of release on parole filed for institutional hearings for Beyond Guilt and Senate Bill 256 (SB 256) clients

14
OJPC Clients Helped With Outstanding Court Debt

46
OJPC Clients Assisted with Partial Record Sealing

7
Postconviction motions filed on behalf of Beyond Guilt clients

2
Lawsuits filed on behalf of Beyond Guilt clients

4
Recommended on behalf of Beyond Guilt clients

1
Clemency Petition filed on behalf of a Beyond Guilt client

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The brainchild of civil rights attorney Alphonse Gerhardstein, the Prisoner Rights Advocacy Center ("PRAC") incorporates in the State of Ohio.

PRAC opens its doors with seed funding from the Open Society Institute.

PRAC sponsors CLE in Columbus, Ohio on prisoner rights. This is the organization’s first community presentation.

PRAC changes its name to Prison Reform Advocacy Center (still abbreviated “PRAC”).

PRAC launches the National Resource Center on Prisons and Communities (NRCPC) to stop prison construction across the U.S.

David Singleton becomes Executive Director of PRAC.

Partnering with NC-based Friends of Haywood County, NRCPC helps sponsor a regional forum on prisons, economic development, and sentencing reform for residents of Haywood County and surrounding counties in Western North Carolina.

Federal district court judge grants PRAC client Wayne Hoevenaar a preliminary injunction preventing prison officials from cutting his hair. Ohio prison system successfully appealed, it decided to adopt a new grooming policy allowing incarcerated people to grow long hair if necessary for them to practice sincerely held religious beliefs.

PRAC files C.U.R.E.-Ohio v. Blackwell, a class action lawsuit seeking to remedy the misinformation 22 Boards of Election were providing to people with felony records who sought to vote.

PRAC releases “The disenfranchisement of the Re-enfranchised: How Confusion Over Felon Voter Eligibility in Ohio Keeps Qualified Ex-Offender Voters from the Polls.” The study found that 22 of Ohio Boards of Election were telling people who had felony records in Ohio that they were ineligible to vote when in fact they could. Under Ohio law, people who are convicted of felonies can vote so long as they are not incarcerated on the felony conviction at the time they seek to vote.

With support from NRCPC, activists in Arizona defeat plans to build a 3200-bed private prison for women, which would have been the largest private prison for women in the United States.

PRAC files Fussell v. Wilkinson, a class action lawsuit to remedy DRC’s system of unconstitutional medical care for incarcerated people. PRAC co-counsels the case with PRAC founder Alphonse Gerhardstein.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9/10/2004</td>
<td>PRAC resolves C.U.R.E. lawsuit with defendant Boards of Election agreeing to post notices correcting the misinformation they had circulated and educate their staff about the right of people with felony records in Ohio to vote.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9/27/2004</td>
<td>PRAC files Racial Fairness Project v. Summit County Board of Elections, which sought to remedy a notice the Summit Board of Elections sent to people convicted of felony offenses that suggested that disenfranchisement was permanent. The following day, the court orders Summit County Board of Elections to notify each person, who received the notice, that they were eligible to vote so long as not incarcerated on the felony conviction.</td>
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<td>2/25/2005</td>
<td>PRAC and the ACLU of Ohio file Coston v. Petro, a class-action lawsuit alleging that Ohio law banning people convicted of sex offenses from living within 1,000 feet of schools was unconstitutional. Although this first suit challenging the constitutionality of the residence prohibition was unsuccessful, this case was the beginning of PRAC’s successful 2-year battle against the restriction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/25/2005</td>
<td>The Prison Reform Advocacy Center changes its name to the Ohio Justice and Policy Center (“OJPC”).</td>
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<tr>
<td>11/22/2005</td>
<td>Court approves settlement of Fussell class action lawsuit. Settlement results in the creation of a Medical Oversight Committee comprised of independent experts who were charged with the responsibility to oversee the reforms agreed to by DRC and plaintiff class representatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/28/2008</td>
<td>OJPC files Hamilton, et. al v. Ashland County Board of Elections on behalf of 16 young men who had reached voting age while incarcerated in a juvenile correctional facility but whose registrations were invalidated. As a result of the suit, a state court judge permits the plaintiffs to cast provisional ballots in the presidential election.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/20/2008</td>
<td>With the support of law enforcement and victim rights organizations that believe that residence restrictions are ineffective and counterproductive to protecting children from sexual abuse, OJPC wins Hyle v. Porter in the Ohio Supreme Court. The Court rules that the residence restriction for people convicted of sexual offenses cannot apply retroactively under the Ohio Constitution.</td>
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<td>9/2006</td>
<td>OJPC launches the Constitutional Litigation Clinic at NKU Chase College of Law. The Clinic allows students in their final year to litigate civil rights cases on behalf of people incarcerated in Ohio prisons.</td>
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<td>7/17/2006</td>
<td>OJPC wins a preliminary injunction in Buchanan v. Burbury requiring prison officials to provide Mr. Buchanan, a Sacred Name Sabbatarian, with kosher meals. OJPC has used Mr. Buchanan’s victory to obtain kosher meals for other Sacred Name Sabbatarians.</td>
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Continued from Page 9

**2009**

8/12/2009
In *Hamilton v. Eleby*, OJPC wins reversal in the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals of a lower court order dismissing a civil rights case brought by George Hamilton, who was nearly beaten to death by the Aryan Brotherhood after a prison official refused to put him in protective custody. The case then settled.

**2010**

2/10/2010
Along with co-counsel, OJPC files *Serenity L. v. ODRC*, alleging that the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation & Correction (ODRC) failed to make reasonable accommodations to provide Plaintiffs, who suffer from severe mental illness, with access to government benefits, and that ODRC also failed to provide appropriate pre-release discharge planning to accommodate Plaintiffs’ disabilities. The case eventually settled with the state agreeing to provide various services to members of the class.

6/9/2010
As a result of advocacy led by OJPC, City of Cincinnati directs the City’s Civil Service Commission to promote the fair hiring of people with criminal records by not automatically rejecting such applicants and requiring consideration of several factors, such as the relevance of the conviction to the specific job and evidence of the applicant’s rehabilitation.

**2011**

9/7/2011
Governor Kasich grants clemency to OJPC client Kelly Williams-Bolar, whose case became a national cause célèbre after she was convicted of two felonies for sending her two children to a suburban Akron school district where they did not reside. Governor Kasich commuted Ms. Williams-Bolar’s felony convictions to misdemeanors so that she would not be barred from seeking work as a schoolteacher.

**2012**

6/5/2012
OJPC, along with co-counsel, wins a reprieve of Abdul Awkal’s execution from Governor John Kasich. Later, the trial judge finds Mr. Awkal incompetent to be executed due to serious mental illness.

10/29/2018
SB66 becomes law. It expands record sealing eligibility for people with criminal records.

**2014**

7/16/2014
OJPC wins *Cordell v. McKinney*, in the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, which reversed a lower court’s dismissal of the federal suit Philip Cordell brought after a correctional official rammed Mr. Cordell’s head into a wall, resulting in permanent damage. After losing the appeal, the defendant settled the case.

**2017**

7/26/2017
OJPC wins *Darrah v. Krisher* in the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, which ruled that the lower court improperly dismissed Kevin Darrah’s civil rights suit alleging that prison doctors denied effective medical treatment for a painful condition and instead prescribed an ineffective treatment to save money. The state then settled the case.

12/25/2017
OJPC frees Tyra Patterson from prison. Tyra was wrongfully incarcerated for 23 years for murder and robbery, crimes she did not commit. Less than one month later, Tyra joined OJPC’s staff.

**2018**

9/28/2018
SB4 becomes law. OJPC played a substantial role in the passage of this bill, which expanded the ability of human trafficking survivors to expunge their criminal records.

6/26/2012
Governor Kasich signs into law SB 337, which creates Certificates of Qualification for Employment (“CQE”). Passage of the bill was one of OJPC’s top priorities during that legislative term.

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5/1/2020
OJPC opens its Columbus Office.

6/4/2020
In partnership with the Cincinnati Black United Front, OJPC publishes “Protests and the Pandemic: Recommendations for a more equitable Cincinnati,” a list of eight recommendations for police and prosecutors to respond to the two imminent threats to the livelihood of Black citizens: police brutality and the current pandemic. The City of Cincinnati eventually incorporated these recommendations into an ordinance.

1/9/2021
Governor DeWine signed HB 136 into law, which bars the death penalty for people with serious mental illness. Spurred by its representation of Abdul Awkal, OJPC was part of a coalition of advocates and organizations that worked hard for the passage of this bill.

1/9/2021
Governor Kasich grants clemency for OJPC client Thomia Hunter, who was serving a life sentence for the murder of her abusive partner. OJPC represented Ms. Hunter through Justice for Incarcerated Battered Women, a collaborative project led by OJPC.

4/14/2020
OJPC and the ACLU of Ohio file Wilson v. Williams, a habeas class action in response to a COVID-19 outbreak at FCI Elkton, a federal prison in northeast Ohio. The federal district judge issues a preliminary injunction, providing for potentially pathbreaking relief in what at the time was one of the worst outbreaks in the federal prison system. Ultimately, the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals vacates the district court’s preliminary injunction, though it affirms OJPC and the ACLU of Ohio’s theory of habeas jurisdiction, allowing future suits like ours to go forward.

8/22/2022
OJPC celebrates its 25th Anniversary.

8/1/2019
Beyond Guilt client Angelo Robinson, who served 22 years for murder and drug trafficking, is released.

7/19/2019
The New York Times publishes a front-page story on Beyond Guilt client Angelo Robinson.

4/30/2019
OJPC launches Beyond Guilt, a project which works to free over-punished people who have served long sentences for serious crimes and who have demonstrated rehabilitation.

6/14/2019
The brainchild of Tyra Patterson, “Time Saved vs. Time Served,” an evening of intersection between art and social justice told through stories of incarcerated women, is held at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati.

10/24/2020
“Time Saved vs. Time Served Mural Project” dedicated. This Cincinnati Art Works mural, which was designed by Tyra Patterson, Russell Craig, and Jayme Santini, depicts five women directly impacted by the criminal legal system who were giving back to the community.

5/1/2020
OJPC opens its Columbus Office.
Monday, June 15, 2020, I missed a call from a man named Bob Mounts. He left a message wanting to know if his son might benefit from a bill sitting in the Senate Judiciary Committee, Senate Bill 256. I was aware of the bill. It had been given a couple hearings earlier in the year, but it was impossible to know what would happen with that bill and dozens of others. Covid-19 work was all-consuming and pandemic-related bills were the priority.

Senate Bill 256 would bring Ohio in line with 21 other states that had eliminated life without parole sentences for kids—or JLWOP as it’s known.

Bob and I connected the following day. I learned that his son’s sentence fell within the scope of the legislation. We spoke at length as he told me what happened back in 1998.

Cliff Mounts grew up in a small town along the Ohio River in Jefferson County, not far from Steubenville. His parents split up when he was about seven. Cliff’s father attributes the breakup to tensions that came as a result of being a biracial family in small town Ohio in the late 80s and early 90s. Cliff was often ridiculed by other kids because his mom was black and his father was white. Cliff’s father said Cliff was never really accepted by his mother because of his very fair complexion. Not long after the breakup, Cliff developed an attachment disorder and would become very anxious if he was ever separated from his father. Learning difficulties in school followed. By the time Cliff reached the age of 14, he had very few friends—only a couple older teens—and was working through abandonment issues. His academic capabilities were on par with a second-grade student.

On the night that changed Cliff’s life in May 1998, his two 16-year-old friends devised a plan to steal TVs, VCRs and anything they could from the elderly woman who lived next door. The boys were under the impression there was no one home.

The 16-year-old boys brought beer and a gun to Cliff’s house that night. They came in through Cliff’s bedroom window. When they told Cliff their plan—to steal things from the old lady next door for cash—Cliff refused to participate. They made an ultimatum with the gun in hand. If he wouldn’t go along with the plan, they would steal from Cliff’s house instead. Cliff reluctantly went along.

The woman who lived next door was like family to Cliff. When the boys woke her up breaking into the back door, she emerged from her bedroom and they hit her in the face, knocking her out. Then one of the boys jumped on her and instructed Cliff to help. They tried to cover their tracks and their fingerprints by setting fires on furniture all around the house. Before long, the house burned and Cliff’s next-door neighbor, the woman who was like a grandmother to him, was dead.
The next morning, Cliff told his dad what happened. Cliff’s dad immediately called the police. When Cliff was separated from his dad and taken into custody for questioning, he lied and tried to protect his friends’ involvement. Questioning of 14-year-old Cliff continued without his dad or a lawyer. Once the sheriff realized Cliff wasn’t telling the whole truth, investigators guessed that Cliff was the ringleader and from that moment he was treated as the mastermind of the entire crime. Cliff was charged with aggravated murder, aggravated burglary, aggravated robbery and aggravated arson.

Cliff’s defense attorney tried to convince him to take a plea deal. Cliff recalls being taken by the prosecutor and his defense attorney into a room and being told if he didn’t agree to the plea deal, Cliff was going to get a life without parole sentence. They wanted Cliff to agree to a 43-year to life sentence but told him not to worry. Cliff would be out in 15 years if he was good because of the “good time law.” Like any scared child, Cliff agreed to do what the adults were telling him to do.

After the hour-long phone call with Bob Mounts, I asked him if he would be willing to come to the Statehouse the following week. Bob didn’t have reliable transportation or money to travel the 100+ miles to Columbus from his home in eastern Ohio, but he said he would do anything to help his son Cliff. I assured him we could work it out. He agreed to testify on the bill at the next hearing scheduled 8 days out.

The next few days OJPC worked to prep Bob for testimony and to make the arrangements to get him to and from Columbus. It was an organization-wide effort. Operations handled the car rental. One of OJPC’s summer law interns left Columbus before dawn to pick up Bob and bring him to the Statehouse. We had a team of people at the Statehouse that morning. This particular hearing was critical to the success of the bill. Proponents that day would include conservative partner organizations, a former supreme court justice, a former prosecutor, two people who had been sentenced to life as children who subsequently were released, and Bob Mounts. It was a big day. Once the hearing started, I could see Bob was ready to go and eager to share Cliff’s story.

After the hearing ended Bob was eager to get home in time for his regular call with Cliff to tell him about the hearing. “We talk every day, twice a day, at 10 AM and at 6 PM so we better get back in the car.” Right on cue, at 6 pm we were almost back to Bob’s house when his cell phone rang. It was Cliff. As I drove the last couple miles into town, I could not help but soak it all in. We had a phenomenal day of testimony on a historic bill. We played a small role that required a big lift to get Bob to the statehouse to tell Cliff’s story to legislators. And now, I’m a fly on the wall listening to a father tell his son how much he loves him and to hang in there a little longer.

When I dropped Bob off at home he said thanks again and we agreed to stay in touch as the bill progressed.

Over the next couple months, Bob and I would occasionally check in on Senate Bill 256. Bob was always measured, and he never let me forget that he was trying to not get his hopes up too high. It brought cautious optimism each time I’d tell him about the bill’s progress. September 23, “we got the bill out of committee with a 6-2 vote. Things were looking good,” I said. “We’re scheduled for a floor vote in the Senate next week.” The bill sailed in the Senate by a 29-4 margin. Hearings in the House of Representatives should begin soon.

On December 18, 2020 I called Bob to tell him it was done. Senate Bill 256 passed the House 75-9 and was finalized in the final hours of the lame duck session. The call was not long, but I’ll never forget telling Bob that Cliff’s parole eligibility date would be in 2022—less than two years away—instead of 2041.

Cliff filled out an application for OJPC’s Beyond Guilt project in 2020. Once Senate Bill 256 went into effect in April 2021, there was a flurry of activity. Hundreds of people incarcerated and sentenced as juveniles just like Cliff were eligible for parole consideration immediately. OJPC was going to represent people in some SB 256-eligible cases.

Cliff’s sentence of 43 years to life at the age of 14 is the kind of extreme sentence the Beyond Guilt project was built for. I was thrilled when I learned that OJPC was going to represent Cliff before the parole board.

One of the things I value most about OJPC is that our policy work flows from our legal work and our legal work flows from the policy work. This story of how we came to know Bob Mounts and then Cliff Mounts is a beautiful example of the two facets working together.
Chris West is a native Chicagoan—“suburb adjacent”—who found her home in Cincinnati almost 40 years ago. Her mother serves as the inspiration for her passion for volunteerism and giving back to her community in small, yet meaningful, ways.

Currently West works as a nanny for an emergency room doctor in West Chester and her schedule is hectic. Despite her varying schedule, West has volunteered for many non-profit organizations since she and her family moved to the Tri-State region.

In 2019, she saw an opportunity to volunteer at OJPC but missed it, “I looked into OJPC once and then it floated away,” she said. “But during COVID the opportunity came up again, at the beginning of lockdown, but this time remotely and that was perfect. Downtown is doable but it’s still a haul from West Chester, so this was something I could do on my own schedule.”

Her mother passed away that same year and she found herself mourning the loss of her mother while also grieving the murder of George Floyd with the
world. “My mother, she volunteered in the church hospital thrift shop, her one “little thing,” once a week, every week, all her life,” said West. “So, if I could do one “little” thing to help, I thought, “it’s a start.” I can’t volunteer full time, I can’t “lawyer,” I can’t do all the things, but I can do something, one thing. So, I started taking calls for Beyond Guilt.”

There are many ways to help and opportunities to give back in both the Second Chance and Beyond Guilt projects. Taking calls and transcribing messages may seem small but have great impact on each project and on the successful transition of our clients returning home. “I actually started volunteering by answering David Singleton’s voice messages first and transcribing them to be forwarded on to the intake log to process requests for help,” she said. “That eventually morphed into working on Beyond Guilt and Second Chance, taking calls and signing people up for the Second Chance community clinics.”

West speaks to people every day and provides a comforting voice while helping returning citizens in the difficult process of navigating the hardships of re-entry. She notes that their stories are devastating yet she remains hopeful, “Second Chance is hopeful, you know? I know that by volunteering at OJPC I am signing them up to talk to an attorney who can help them,” said West. “And every staff member I’ve ever spoken with is overwhelmingly kind. Hearing their responses to clients is an amazing encouragement to me. I can’t imagine how exhausted they must be, working for their clients dealing who deal with injustice and inequities daily. Here my “one small thing” has so much meaning.”

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**Why I Volunteer:**

Interested in volunteering? Go to ohiojpc.org to learn more and join our team of dedicated volunteers.

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**Share your Volunteer Story with Us**

Tell us your volunteer story and tag us on social media at

#OhioJPC

#WeDontWritePeopleOff

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facebook.com/ohiojpc

@ohiojpc

@ohiojpc

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In honor of Women’s History Month, we celebrated the work anniversary of our beloved senior paralegal, Sheila Donaldson Johnson, with a day of recognition from Mayor Pureval and the City of Cincinnati for her 20 years of service with the organization.

Sheila began working at OJPC in January of 2002 as a paralegal for executive director David Singleton when the center was still known as PRAC. Johnson was originally drawn to the mission and work of OJPC after having served time and overcoming addiction and substance abuse herself. “When we first interviewed Sheila, we immediately knew who would be running the show,” said executive director David Singleton. “Sheila is the heart of our organization and has used her personal story of perseverance, transformation, and redemption to help others in need of a second chance. We at OJPC and the community at large are incredibly lucky to have her with us in this work.”

During the ceremony, staff past and present shared stories of working with Sheila and how they grew both professionally and personally under her tutelage and wisdom.

From Tyra Patterson (Community Outreach), “I remember one thing that I love about her is her paving the way for people who are directly impacted. Her position and being at the law firm for so many years was inspiring for me and made me more comfortable standing up and speaking out for myself and other system-impacted people.”

From Verjine Adanalian (Second Chance), “Sheila was absolutely critical to my confidence as I was establishing myself as a new attorney. During client meetings (and many phone calls in between), she assured the clients that I am trustworthy, that I care very much, and that I can do this. My age

Continued on page 18

Tyra Patterson, artist and OJPC Community Outreach Specialist with Andrew Butler, and Sheila.

Verjine Adanalian and Sheila at Second Chance Clinic event.
Sheila’s support and the granted safe harbors of that day, almost every other human trafficking survivor client I have ever had has been a chain referral from those original clients. Trust is so important within the survivor and recovery communities, so I’m grateful to Sheila for trusting me and putting her reputation on the line to vouch for me. “

*From Michael Zuckerman (Attorney), “Here’s a short story from pre-COVID is that when I first started at OJPC, I always looked forward to the first Friday of the month, when Second Chance would go to the Justice Center to table at the re-entry information fair. I was often teamed up with Ms. Sheila to cover the table for one of the two-hour shifts those days. Getting to be with her for those two-hour sessions and seeing how wonderfully she connected with everyone who stopped by our table – as well as getting to share some incredible laughs – was a beautiful introduction to the role OJPC is able*

and background made clients nervous and skeptical, especially since most of their children were my age, so it sometimes felt like they were waiting for the real grownups to show up.

But Sheila was always there to back me up. It was hard not to internalize my clients’ concerns and insecurities since I was working through my own baby lawyer growing pains. Thanks to
to play in the community when world events allow us to fire on all cylinders. It was also an amazing welcome to being a full-time member of the OJPC family.

**From Kevin Werner** (Policy), “First, before I came to work at OJPC, I would periodically call the office to reach staffers for help in some way, usually on something related to the death penalty. Even though email existed, I would always just call. When you called the office phone number, it used to be Sheila’s voice that took you through the menu of options and directory. I came to understand that no matter who you were trying to reach, the best way to get that person was to just dial Sheila’s extension.

When I interviewed for the job, I distinctly remember being introduced to Sheila and instantly recognizing her unique voice. It was really comforting to me to put a face to the voice I would hear (and always seek out). I think she’s been the voice and soul of the organization in so many ways.

Second, I keep a note that she hand-wrote to me when I first started. It’s on a torn piece of yellow legal pad paper. “Just a thought.” The note lays out some needed changes to what’s eligible for sealing. I don’t know why I’ve kept it, but I am glad I have. It’s a good reminder to keep Sheila close to whatever work I am doing.”

Johnson’s work and deep love for her community has left an indelible mark on the City of Cincinnati and all of us at OJPC. Please join us today and every January 16th—Sheila Donaldson Johnson Day—to recognize her spirit, passion, and dedication to removing barriers for formerly incarcerated people.
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