

VOTE'S MISSION:

VOICE OF THE EX-OFFENDER (VOTE) is an organization dedicated to building the political power of people most impacted by the criminal justice system, especially formerly incarcerated persons (FIPs,) their families and loved ones. Through leadership development, community education and voter mobilization, VOTE will ensure that our constituents are at the center of transforming the criminal justice system.

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Spy Boy Ricky Gettridge walking out of
Jefferson Parish Jail

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Spy Boy Ricky Gettridge

When Spy Boy Ricky Gettridge, accompanied by Donald Chopin, went to register to vote on May 24, he was asked to bring documentation of any criminal records. Ricky had no idea that there was a warrant out for his arrest from charges from 2002 when he had failed to report for probation. Ricky hadn't understood the process of initially reporting and was under the impression that he had served his time. He was originally charged with check fraud after a contractor took advantage of him and paid him with bad checks for his work. Ricky served two years for this.

Once Ricky learned of the warrant, he immediately reported to law enforcement and was held in the Jefferson Parish Correctional Facility, facing up to 10 years in jail for violating probation. Since it was a probation revocation case, the judge would not allow Ricky out on bond. His pro-bono legal team, including lawyer Sister Alison McCrary, hoped to pay the \$5,400 in restitution and backed-up probation fees so that Spy Boy Ricky could be released, the case would close, and the matters would be resolved. In order to raise this money, a Facebook event telling Ricky's story was created, an event was held at the Golden Feather Mardi Gras Indian Gallery and Restaurant, and donations were collected at Mardi Gras Indian practices, second lines, friends' homes, and drum circles in Congo Square.

Thanks to generous contributions and a community member who loaned the remaining funds, Spy Boy Ricky was released on June 24, in time for the last second line parade of the season. He was greeted at the correctional center with a tambourine, a pineapple Big Shot soda, and a snickers bar. We are so glad that Ricky was released since he is a very special member of the New Orleans community and he has been involved with VOTE in the past. According to Sr. Alison McCrary, he "has been at nearly every second line and Mardi Gras Indian event since he was a youth, singing and playing his tambourine." Spy Boy Ricky has even performed at Jazzfest and been featured in the HBO series, "Treme."

Ricky plans to register to vote soon and, to help portray the chilling effect that he and other formerly incarcerated people encounter when they register to vote, VOTE is hoping to plan voter registration drives and events to occur before the November state elections. Stay tuned!

Member & Adviser Profile

Luis Bernardez

Luis Bernardez was raised in New York City, but has been in New Orleans for three-and-a-half years now. He enjoys spending his time running and reading. Luis can be found running five to six kilometers everyday and reading everything that he can get his hands on. He especially prefers reading “anything that has to do with the betterment of humanity.” When asked about his favorite book, it takes Luis a moment to pick just one, but he decides on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

Luis has been involved with VOTE for almost two years now and says that he was introduced to VOTE by multiple people. He was drawn to VOTE because the organization resonates with his point of view and philosophies. Luis has always wanted to make a difference and saw VOTE as a way in which he could do so. Seeing himself as an underdog motivated him even more to try and spread VOTE’s philosophy and bring it into realization. Luis sees the political proactiveness and political awareness as VOTE’s best feature. He sees the way that VOTE breaks down barriers and preconceived notions as unbelievable. Luis is happy to be a part of an organization that wakes up the sleeping giant.



Left: Makani Themba-Nixon, Right: Luis Bernardez at the Paralegal Training Class held in the Tulane University Library

Makani Themba-Nixon

One of our advisers, Makani Themba-Nixon, is the Executive Director of The Praxis Project, a nonprofit that helps communities use media and policy advocacy to advance health, equity and justice. For example, the organization is currently trying to build tobacco control policy advocacy in communities of color. We are very fortunate to be working with Makani Themba-Nixon since she has a very strong background in organizing, as well as media and advocacy. Before The Praxis Project, she was director of the Transnational Racial Justice Initiative (TRJI), an international project to build capacity among advocates to more effectively address structural racism. Makani also directed the Grass Roots Innovative Policy Program (GRIPP), a national project to build capacity among local organizing groups to better engage in media and policy advocacy to address institutional racism in welfare and public education. In addition, she has worked with the California State Legislature, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference/Los Angeles, and the Marin Institute for the Prevention of Alcohol and Other Drug Problems. Makani Themba-Nixon has published articles and case studies on race, media, policy advocacy, and public health. Her latest book is *Making Policy, Making Change*, which examines media and policy advocacy for public health.

Vote Update

Maria, Vernon, Luis, Betty, Milton, Biggy, and Rosana have started meeting to plan the legislative briefing that will take place on Saturday, September 10 from 5:30 to 8:00pm. While meeting, they have reviewed the CEED campaign, creating a helpful chart, as well as signed onto individual research assignments. The group has also assigned point persons for pre-event tasks, such as: buying materials, compiling literature, creating a budget, designing a flyer, and distributing the flyer, In addition to jobs for the day of the event. The hope is that this event will educate the community about what happened in legislative session as pertains to FIP's and their access to employment.

On Thursday, July 7, Resurrection After Exoneration, held a screening of the movie, *Conviction*. According to the event announcement, "*Conviction* is a movie about wrongful conviction, starring the intrepid Hillary Swank putting herself through law school to exonerate her brother, who was wrongfully convicted and exhausted all his other legal options." The movie was based on the real story of Kenny Waters who was wrongfully incarcerated for 18 years and was finally declared innocent with the help of Barry Scheck of The Innocence Project. There was also a panel following the movie that included a speaker from The Innocence Project and John Thompson who spoke about the similarities between his story and that portrayed in the movie.

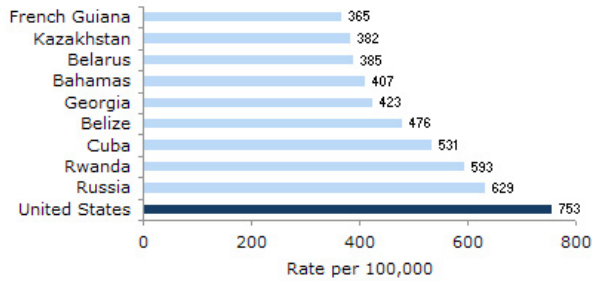


In celebration of the 50th anniversary of the original Freedom Rides, the Plessy and Ferguson Foundation, which was created by descendants of the protagonists in the legal case, has organized a Freedom Ride route to Washington D.C., stopping in Montgomery, Atlanta, Charlotte, and Greensboro, on the way. The goal is to fight back against the Cradle to Prison Pipeline and to fight for our modern day civil rights issue of Justice in Education.

The Freedom Riders for Justice in Education left New Orleans on July 26 to retrace the Freedom Rides trail, meet with living legends from the Civil Rights movement as well as powerful youth community organizers on the front lines of our modern day civil rights battles. For example, they joined with the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama to fight back against racist immigration laws directly harming students, and in Washington D.C. they joined with hundreds of thousands of other teachers, students, and concerned citizens at the Save our Schools March and Call to Action. Save our Schools is made up of parents, teachers, students, and community members who call for putting local stakeholders back at the center of education policy in order to better serve communities.

The education and social justice organizations participating in the Freedom Rides hope to fight against the privatization of public schools while rebuilding a new generation of schools founded on the idea that students come first and that education is a basic human right. The Freedom Rides were meant to be more than an event but rather a part of the larger movement for Justice in Education.

**Top 10 Countries with Highest Incarceration Rates
(Most Recent Year, 2006-2009)**



Source: CEPR analysis of ICPS data

An example of what the presentation consists of

Our intern, Bernadette, created a Mass Incarceration Presentation including:

- national, state, and local incarceration statistics
- information regarding how gender and race play into incarceration
- hardships FIP's face upon release
- landmark cases
- the Global Commission on Drug Policy's response
- the federal government's response
- the city's response
- VOTE's response

If you would like to see the Power Point, please send her an email at brabuy@berkeley.edu.

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**JOIN US FOR THE NEXT MEMBERSHIP MEETING
WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 7th AT 7PM AT THE RAE HOUSE**