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The Atlanta Journal
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METROSPECTIVE FROM STAFF REPORTS

THIS WEEK

More lottery lunacy: If you liked last weekend's state-sponsored drawing for the Georgia Millionaire lottery game, you'll love the sequel. That's because Round 2, to be held Saturday, will follow the same *faux* game-show format. Reviews for the original show were mixed, from "tasteless" (an editorial in the Constitution) to "fun" (Lottery Chairman David Garrett). The second show will feature five new finalists.

Racking up frequent flier miles: HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros on Monday will visit Atlanta for the third time this year. He'll look at various

Breaking free of their pasts, ex-inmates learn to live clean

By Shirley L. Smith
STAFF WRITER

A group of almost-strangers gathers twice a month — just to talk — in a small cafeteria on Edgewood Avenue.

Their stories differ, but a single experience intertwines their lives. All are ex-convicts fighting desperately to stay out of prison. They are seeking what many people take for granted: a sense of belonging, friendship, security and, in some cases, advice.

"I'm trying to understand how people are dealing with society," said Duane Jett, 39, who has spent 15 years behind bars.

The sessions are sponsored by the Georgia Justice Project. The non-profit organization has helped 565 poor Georgians in trouble with the law. It offers free legal representation, assists clients with daily living expenses and pays for alcohol and drug abuse treatment.

"People come to be heard and understood," said Kevin Wilkinson, a staff member who leads the Edgewood Avenue support group. Being listened to improves their sense of self-esteem and empowers them to change their lives, he added.

For people like Mr. Jett, who is struggling to do the right thing,

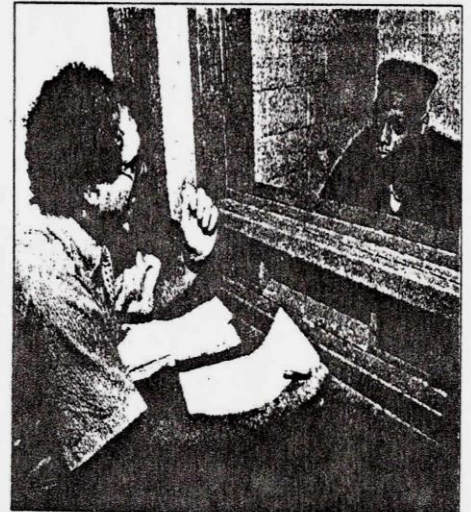
the groups provide a vital outlet for expression.

Before he was sent to jail, Mr. Jett said, selling drugs was the only way of life he knew. It was a comfortable one: "I had two [Mercedes] Benzes at 18 and a house. I was living a dream. I was young, and I didn't know the consequences."

But things have changed since he was released from prison 18 months ago: "The temptation is there, but I'm not willing

Please see **PROGRAM, D8** ▶

▶ Three Justice Project clients tell their stories **D8**



DWIGHT ROSS JR. / Staff

Legal aid: Georgia Justice Project attorney John A. Pickens (left) talks with client Blakely Hicks at Fulton County jail.

Program: Offers legal help before release

► Continued from D1

to take the risk.”

Mr. Jett has been off drugs for a year, he said, the first time he has been clean since he was 13. He also has his first job, doing janitorial work.

However, he's hoping for a better job. He just received a certificate in industrial maintenance — learning skills from carpentry to plumbing — from the Metropolitan Atlanta Opportunities Industrialization Center.

A lawyer's brainchild

The Georgia Justice Project is the brainchild of lawyer John Pickens, formerly with Kidd, Pickens & Tate.

Mr. Pickens left the law firm in 1981. “I wanted to find something more meaningful,” he said, adding that he felt called by God. The majority of his clients are African Americans who would have easily gotten lost in the judicial system, he said.

“Many didn't have counsel and oftentimes when there was a lawyer nothing much was done. And, it seemed that poor people were just being rushed through the system,” he added.

In 1986 he formally established the Atlanta Criminal Defense & Justice Project — recently renamed the Georgia Justice Project to give it a broader reach.

Try to get personal

Aside from free legal representation, the organization encourages clients to take advantage of educational opportunities and offers mentoring to ease the transition into a more productive life.

“We try to enter into personal relationships with them,” said

Mr. Pickens, who has pictures of clients posted above his desk. “We assist with finding a decent place to live, we oftentimes pay for rent for a month or two. We then also assist with jobs.”

Mr. Pickens's faith is the driving force behind the organization, but: “We don't try to evangelize people or force our religious thoughts on them.”

Since its inception, the Georgia Justice Project has grown from a one-man operation to a five-member staff including two attorneys, a 14-member board and about 25 volunteers, several of whom are former clients. “We've gone from a budget of \$40,000 when we first started in 1986 to a budget of \$225,000,” Mr. Pickens said.

'A place they can go'

The money, raised through donations, pays for salaries and operating expenses. It also helps clients with housing, clothes, MARTA cards and treatment for alcohol and drug abuse.

The organization also has received money from the county to help finance court expenses in serious cases, Mr. Pickens said.

Its success is not measured by cases won, but rather how it has helped people, he said, adding that his goals are twofold: “One, I want poor people in this city to know that there is a place they can go and get quality representation even if they don't have money to pay for it.” Many public defenders are overworked and can't spend a lot of time on any one case, he added.

“Second, we are trying to get at the root causes at why people are arrested and ultimately we are trying to get people to live

crime-free lives.”

Conscientious founder

Mr. Pickens has a reputation of being a conscientious, but some say too meticulous, lawyer who can test his colleagues' patience at times. But he is well respected.

“I've had a lot of dealings with John over the years, and I've always found him to be a very competent and thorough attorney,” said Al Dixon, an assistant district attorney in Fulton County.

Although a lot of his clients are guilty, Mr. Pickens said, they are not necessarily bad people — just people who have been “broken in some way.”

With only two attorneys, he said, the organization must be selective. It accepts about 80 to 100 cases a year, and generally does not represent defendants accused of being big drug dealers or those accused of rape or child molestation.

Plans to expand services

The organization plans to expand in October. Among the services to be provided are a transitional residence for former inmates, a formal jobs program and an expanded counseling and referral service. An additional \$185,000 will have to be raised in 1993-94 to meet expenses. Another \$40,000 annually will be needed to operate the planned transitional residence and jobs program, he said.

Its contributors include the Metropolitan Atlanta Community Foundation, The Public Welfare Foundation, the Georgia Power Foundation, the Georgia Bar Foundation, Trust Company Bank, the Hewitt Foundation and numerous lawyers.

Addict exchanges desperate lifestyle for hope and a chance to help others

By Shirley L. Smith
STAFF WRITER

Ex-convict Ricks C. Anderson knows what it's like to lose hope. For 8½ years, the former drug addict lived in the streets, sometimes eating out of garbage cans.

But, with the help of God and the Georgia Justice Project, the 45-year-old man says, he has a renewed sense of self worth.

"I feel good about myself, and a lot of my energy is [directed] toward ministering to other addicts, and people with AIDS," says Anderson, who is HIV positive.

As social services coordinator for Welcome House, which provides housing and support to the working poor, he counsels others. He is also trying to re-establish a relationship with his wife and five children, whom he abandoned almost 12 years ago in Chicago.

'I pushed myself too hard'

Anderson got married when he was a junior at Tougaloo College in Mississippi. His first child was born the next year. A second was born while he was a graduate student. Looking back, he says the pressure to support his family was too much. At one point, he, his wife and five chil-



Ricks C. Anderson
Ex-convict says project associates "laugh and cry with you."

dren were living in a hotel room.

"I realized that one of the things that led me into drugs was because I pushed myself too hard," he said.

Anderson dropped out of school, but later earned a law degree in 1977.

His heavy drug use started after law school. "I started dealing drugs, mostly using, and fantasizing about making money so I could settle down, so I could study for the bar," he said.

The pressure intensified in 1981 when his father died, and his addiction got out of control. Anderson took his parents' \$26,000 life savings to buy drugs, he put his mother in a nursing home, left his wife and children, and adopted the lifestyle of a nomad.

He credits the staff at the Georgia Justice Project and its founder, lawyer John Pickens,

with helping him turn his life around.

"When they go to court, they represent you like you are paying them \$500,000," he said. "They laugh and cry with you, and they go the whole nine yards."

A decision to change

Mr. Pickens represented him three times between 1987 and 1989 on theft and burglary charges. The first time he met Anderson, the attorney not only represented him in court, but also found him a place to live, money for food and a job after he got out of jail. But Anderson reverted to his old ways and walked out on the job.

It wasn't until 1990 that Anderson decided again to get help. Broke and despondent, he woke up one morning at a MARTA station after bingeing on drugs. He took a church bus to Stone Mountain, where the DeKalb United Pentecostal Church provided a halfway house for homeless men. Through prayer, he said, he was rehabilitated after 11 months.

For two years afterward, Anderson worked for the Georgia Justice Project. He says he will never forget "the trust they put in me after they knew my background. They allowed me to believe in myself."

Manslaughter conviction helped sick woman begin rebuilding life

By Shirley L. Smith
STAFF WRITER

Juliana Moore, convicted of voluntary manslaughter, is all smiles these days as she works to rebuild her life after spending two years at the Georgia Women's Correctional Institute.

Although released from prison only seven months ago, Moore, 32, has a positive outlook on life.

"She laughs a lot and she is fun to be around," said attorney John Pickens of the Georgia Justice Project.

A different person

He remembers a different Juliana Moore when he met her in 1990 at the psychiatric ward at Grady Memorial Hospital: "She was down and depressed. Now, I see somebody with a lot of zest for life."

In 1990, Moore came close to facing a life sentence in prison or several years in a mental institution for murder. Attorneys Pickens and Douglas Ammar of the Georgia Justice Project pleaded down the murder charge to voluntary manslaughter. She received a two-year jail



Juliana Moore
She says program workers saw "what I couldn't see... I was innocent because of my illness."

sentence and eight years' probation.

"[Mr. Pickens] cared as a person and that meant a lot to me," Moore said. "They saw at the time what I couldn't see, and that was, I was innocent because of my illness."

Moore said she was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic at 26, but tried to deny it. At one point, while under a lot of stress, she stopped taking her medication.

"I started getting suicidal and homicidal thoughts, and I ended up taking somebody's life because of this, and I also tried to take my own life," Moore said, adding only that the victim was somebody she loved.

"Taking that person's life was the lowest point in my life, and I'm still dealing with that. And I haven't totally forgiven myself," she said.

Paranoid schizophrenia is a serious mental illness characterized by delusions and hallucinations, said Dr. Rosalind Mance, Moore's psychiatrist. It can be brought on by a chemical imbalance in the midbrain, a head injury or trauma.

While in prison, Moore said she received support from members of the organization: "They visited me in jail till I got out. It made me realize that I didn't have to get bitter at society, that people did care. They would write me letters and send me Christmas cards."

'They stayed there with me'

That support has continued: "They stayed there with me after I got out and helped me find a place to stay and helped me get into a day program, for recovering mentally ill people." The staff even held a coming-home party for her.

Today, Moore, who has an associate degree in criminal justice, plans to return to school to pursue a career in counseling. She is enrolled in a clerical and administrative internship program, sponsored by the Georgia Indigent Defense Council.

Jailhouse SOS put convicted man on line to clear name, get new start

By Shirley L. Smith
STAFF WRITER

Three factors were working against Theron Upshaw when he was charged with obstruction of a police officer and simple battery in 1990: He was black, unemployed and had a record.

But Mr. Upshaw thanks the Georgia Justice Project for helping him clear his name.

According to police reports, charges were filed after an intoxicated Mr. Upshaw swung at an officer. Mr. Upshaw contends that he was innocent, attacked by police without provocation.

A brawl with police

The Atlanta man admits that he had been drinking when police arrived at his sister's house in 1990 in response to a call. He and his sister had been in an argument that subsided by the



Theron Upshaw
Convicted unfairly, he had to prove himself innocent.

time police arrived.

So, when the officers demanded that he go with them to the station, Mr. Upshaw said, he refused and a brawl began.

In court, Mr. Upshaw said he told the judge he was unemployed and could not afford counsel. However, the unsympathetic judge gave him about two hours to hire an attorney. When Mr. Upshaw failed to do so, the judge tried him without a jury and found him guilty. He was given a six-month sentence in Fulton County Jail, but served only three months.

"The Constitution says you are innocent until proven guilty, but not if you are black and you don't make \$35,000. You got to prove yourself innocent," Mr. Upshaw said. "I was already convicted guilty before I walked in the door."

Comfort in trial outcome

While in jail, he said, he called St. Luke's Episcopal Church — which offers services to homeless people — and was referred to the Georgia Justice Project.

The organization got him a jury trial, on the grounds that his right to a court-appointed attorney was violated. And, after two days in court, he was exonerated.

Although he had served his time, Mr. Upshaw, who is disabled due to a heart condition, said he takes comfort in the fact that his name is clear.