



Bonnie Kerness

Celebrating 50 years of working for healing justice with AFSC



BONNIE KERNESSE STARTED her extraordinary 50-year journey at the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) as a young tenant organizer in Elizabeth, NJ. She helped build a citywide coalition to support the right to housing. Before that, she was an organizer during the civil rights movement in the South. There, she developed a deep anti-racist analysis that drives her work to this day.

During her early years at AFSC, Bonnie was profoundly influenced by Quaker elders who sat on committees that supported the local work. That included Faye Honey Knopp, Asa Watkins, John Robinson, Fred Hilger, Alfred Sidwell, Winifred Canright, and others. She learned that “there are Friends and then there are those that need to be

educated; there are no enemies.” That principle holds up today as Bonnie reflects on her lifetime of activism, most of it at AFSC’s New Jersey office. AFSC afforded her the opportunity to do the kind of lifetime work that she had promised herself to do, as a white anti-racist advocate for peace and justice.

Bonnie recognized that the carceral system in the United States was in a profound spiritual crisis. Her steady and passionate commitment to dismantling these systems has had local, regional, and national impacts. She helped raise awareness of the human rights violations that occur daily in U.S. prisons, highlighted the humanity of people inside, and ensured that their voices are brought forward as the struggle for change continues.

I had the opportunity to work with Bonnie in the area of healing justice when I was in the national AFSC office as well as the Newark, NJ AFSC office. Hard to believe she has been at AFSC for 50 years—yet I can't imagine AFSC without her. I continue to marvel and appreciate not just Bonnie's passion for the work but her fierce commitment to each of those most adversely impacted by the "justice" system. Congratulations and thank you Bonnie.

PAT CLARK

While I reflect on Bonnie's work towards healing and justice, I'd like to lift up her commitment to young people. I've marveled at her work with the Liberation Summer campers, interns and young volunteers. Bonnie has been and continues to be an amazing teacher, facilitator, colleague, and champion to me.

LEWIS WEBB

Bonnie is truly someone special, from the inception of our first meeting, that turned into an internship and then a lifelong friendship and forever supporter I am honored to know her. Many thanks for all you've taught me and still do.

HASSANAH SMITH



Advocating for housing justice

In 1968, housing advocates in Elizabeth asked AFSC to help them stop destruction of housing stock in that city. By 1971, Bonnie and her team of VISTA volunteers worked to support families toward their goals of housing stability. They organized Elizabeth's first public housing tenant organizations, block clubs, and apartment complex tenant organizations, eventually leading to the

creation of the Coalition for a United Elizabeth in 1973. That Coalition was successfully devolved by AFSC in 1975 and led to the creation of St. Joseph's Social Service Center and the Coalition to House the Homeless. St. Joseph's has since grown into a full social service agency that continues to this day.

Bonnie Kerness is a Living Legacy of Results, of Love & of Service to others, to improve & progress issues of humanity in carceral spaces. Her work will live “far” beyond her years & our children’s path has been made better because of her. We can only try to be the light she shines upon us all to truly appreciate her calling.

CUQUI RIVERA
Latino Action Network,
Criminal Justice Reform Chair

Bonnie continues to inspire me with her boundless energy, determination and generosity. It has been a privilege to witness her force of will and love that impacts so profoundly. She is the living embodiment of an inspiration. Thank you, Bonnie, for welcoming me into your orbit.

JONATHAN SPITZ

Bonnie has played a formative role in shaping the person I am today. Her compassion, dedication, and criticality inspire me every day, and I consider myself blessed to know her. Thank you Bonnie, for being an amazing mentor and friend. You serve as a constant reminder of what it means to strive for justice.

LIZZY KENAH



Supporting people in reentry

Every day, people return to communities from prison and confront a range of challenges. AFSC’s Family Stabilization Project was unique in that it saw reentry as a family issue, ensuring a holistic approach that supported people returning home. Bonnie supervised a small staff that went into Essex and Union County jails to support people who were soon to be released.

She provided free counseling to released individuals, couples, parents, and children. This included a group of women who met once a month for five years in preparation for their loved ones coming home. It also included helping formerly incarcerated people and families recognize symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Bonnie inspires me daily with her deep commitment to the rights and wellbeing of our incarcerated brothers and sisters. Whether speaking in front of TV cameras or networking behind the scenes, from the state legislature to the church to the classroom to the protest line, Bonnie is always humble and faithful with her message of social justice and truth. She is a white woman who demonstrates what it means to truly be an ally to Black and Indigenous People of Color. Her integrity and steadfastness, her patience and persistence in the face of injustice, have taught me life-changing lessons on how

to be useful in the struggle as I continue to work with men and women in prison. I thank you with all my heart, Bonnie, for being the uplifting leader you are.

ELEANOR NOVEK

As a radical filmmaker, working with and knowing Bonnie has reminded me of the dedication one needs to continue to move forward when organizing in this country. Oftentimes, when the thought of “giving up” creeps in, I think back to Bonnie and I’s work and conversations. Thank you Bonnie for always believing me and trusting with telling your story.

DARYL BROWN



Working to end solitary confinement and improve prison conditions

Every year, Bonnie and her team at the Prison Watch Program respond to about 1,000 calls and letters from people in prison and their families nationwide. When the program started in the mid-’90s and the letters started to come in, Bonnie learned of cases of people subjected to the brutality of solitary confinement—now recognized as torture. To support people who face long-term isolation, Bonnie worked with people inside to create a Survivors Manual, written by and

for people who had been in control units. That resource has been mailed to thousands of people in prison for over 20 years. That publication was followed up by “From Her Mouth to Your Ears—a manual by and for women living in prison.”

Bonnie has testified at state legislative hearings, been interviewed by the media, supported academic studies, and mentored young people who are now working to abolish solitary confinement. Her advocacy efforts alongside incarcerated people,

I met Bonnie at least 30 years ago in the context of doing support work on behalf of political prisoners in general, and Sundiata Acoli in specific. I was impressed by her commitment, selflessness, political insight and clarity, empathy and her embodiment of anti-racist practices and beliefs. Bonnie is a “long-distance runner” in the social justice marathon. I deeply respect, admire and cherish her and all that she means to so many political prisoners and warriors for social justice.

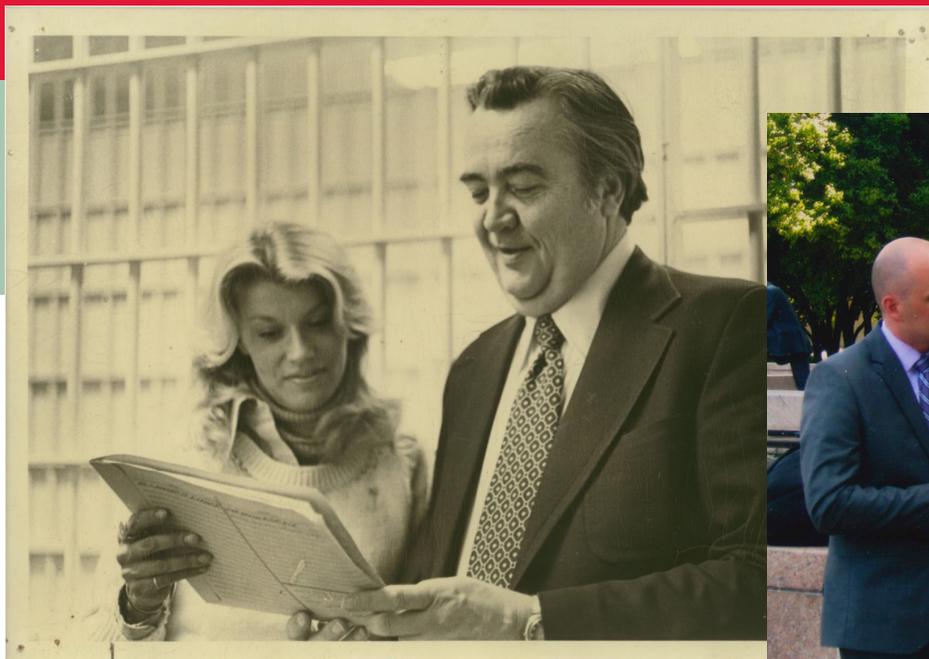
SOFFIYAH ELIJAH, ESQ.

Bonnie is a force of nature! It is an honor anytime I am in the room with her. She is on my list of heroes, past and present, and a million thanks to her now and always.

JOHANNA FOSTER
Co-founder, (the former) Clinton College Bound Consortium, and Co-facilitator, Monmouth University Academic Exchange in Prison Project (with Eleanor Novek)

Bonnie has been a longtime friend, mentor, and, at times, informal therapist. And for about ten years she was my supervisor while I was working with the Prison Watch Project of AFSC as a project assistant. I really learned a lot from her. Even though I am no longer with AFSC we still stay in pretty regular contact. Throughout the years she has provided some much appreciated advice, and other assistance, with various projects related to human rights that myself and many others have been involved with. She is truly a wealth of information and does not hesitate to share it.

MASAI EHEHOSI



their families, and many others have made a tremendous impact. In 2019, New Jersey passed legislation that is a first step on the path to ending the use of the practice completely. More recently, focus turned to the abusive conditions faced by women in New Jersey’s prisons. AFSC worked to successfully bring in the Department of Justice to provide monitoring of conditions there and helped build a coalition to engage in public oversight.

Bonnie was an original member of the

nation’s primary abolitionist coalition, Critical Resistance, organized by Angela Davis and Ruthie Wilson Gilmore, serving on their Community Advisory Board. During the pandemic, AFSC led successful advocacy efforts that led to New Jersey releasing over 3,000 people due to COVID. Related efforts include petitioning for the release of imprisoned elders, which includes public education on imagining abolition.

Dear Bonnie: All these years, since we last worked together, have not dimmed in my mind your tenacity and passion. To be with you in your work was to enter a disturbing and hidden world few knew and even fewer would endeavor to end as have you. You've the ability to introduce the uninitiated and disbelieving person to the horrors of isolation, supermax, and devices of torture. Whether you were the solo author or in collaboration with colleagues, you documented human rights abuses for an array of audiences—local and the United Nations alike—always leading with the voice of those

imprisoned. It was a privilege for me to help their experience and your knowledge gain larger and larger audiences. You were part of shaping the early years of the AFSC's New York Metropolitan Regional Office, working with dedicated persons such as Fred Hilger, Asa Watkins, Wray Bailey, and Dan Seeger. It's a legacy of philosophical rigor and spiritual demands that endures in you. Challenging the criminalization of children, women, and men, you've been a Freedom Rider from your earliest years. May this continue.

ELIZABETH ENLOE
NYMRO Regional Director (1991–2012)

Bonnie Kerness is an incredible gift to the universe. I am infinitely grateful for her work, her character, her love, her commitment. I met Bonnie about eight years ago early into my research on art and mass incarceration. She has become a trusted friend, interlocutor, and advisor. Bonnie is so generous with her time and expertise. She is the embodiment of a change maker, of someone who is enacting beloved community.

NICOLE FLEETWOOD
Author of *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*



New Directions Youth Project

Bonnie led AFSC's New Directions Youth Project, which paired formerly imprisoned mentors with young people who had a first-time brush with the law. The curriculum program included history, finances, and health, with monthly trips to museums, parks, and other venues. Youth

participants worked for the City of Newark each summer, thereby opening up bank accounts and learning the mechanisms of finance. The mentors spent time with the young people outside of the three times per week meetings.

Bonnie Kerness has been doing the work of righteous angels for 50 years. Using her voice and knowledge, she highlights the horrors of this country's punitive justice system. And while there have been some small steps toward reform in those five decades, the slow progress leaves many in the community disheartened and discouraged. Bonnie's steadfast determination inspires her friends and colleagues throughout the civil society world to breathe deep, keep on and live by the words of noted activist Bayard Rustin, "These prophets taught us that God does not require us to

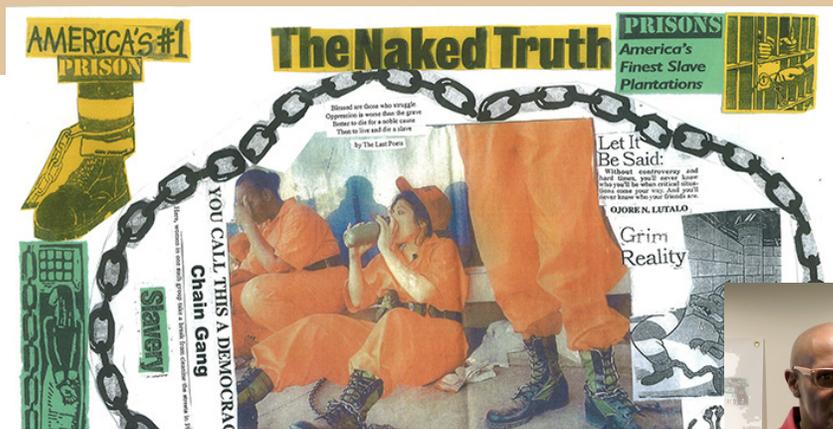
achieve any of the good tasks that humanity must pursue. What God requires of us is that we not stop trying." When Bonnie's energy is bottled, I will take a dozen. In the meantime, all thanks and blessings for showing us what can be done.

KATHY HEIM
AFSC Immigrant Rights Program

I first became aware of Bonnie's extraordinary work when I was on the Northeast Region Executive Committee and saw her presentation of the artwork generated by Ojore Lutalo during his time in solitary confinement.

I was so impressed that I invited Bonnie and Ojore to speak to my students at Wesleyan and Yale and subsequently organized a public exhibition of Ojore's collages at Wesleyan's Zilkha Gallery. Bonnie's work with Ojore is only the tip of the iceberg. She is an extraordinary activist who raises public awareness and gets concrete results that change lives, laws, and attitudes. Bonnie Kerness is a national treasure who embodies every ideal that makes me proud to be associated with AFSC.

RON JENKINS
Professor, Wesleyan University
Visiting Professor, Yale Divinity School



Art and Advocacy

Through Bonnie's decades-long partnership with Ojore Lutalo, who spent over 20 years in solitary confinement in New Jersey, AFSC has participated in the growing movement to use art as an advocacy tool. Ojore's artwork has been featured at exhibits across the country, including "Marking Time,"

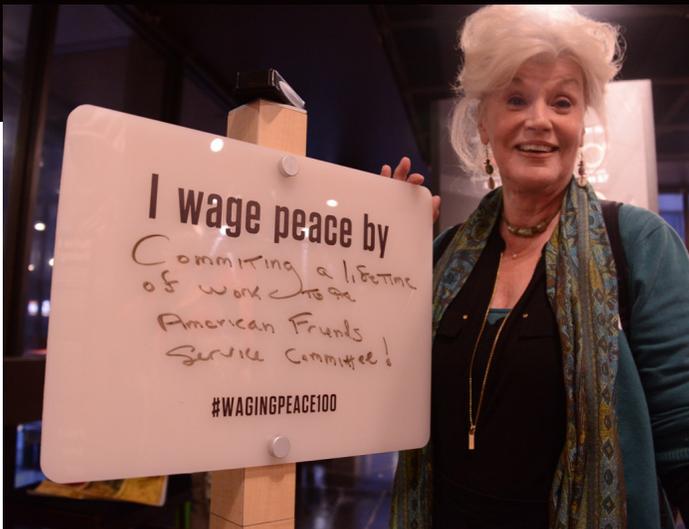
an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that explores the work of artists in U.S. prisons. Thousands of people have witnessed the powerful visuals that document the trauma imposed by prison sentences, and have heard the direct testimonies from people in prison.

Bonnie has consistently been in the lead, or was the originator, of all the important struggles to radically improve the criminal legal system that I have been involved in.

Her clarity, her passion and her courage—even when the odds are stacked against us—have been truly inspiring, and seeing that she is involved in a struggle has been enough to convince me to throw my weight behind it.

Thank you, thank you Bonnie!

TERRY KUPERS, M.D.
Prof., The Wright Institute



Only a taste of Bonnie's 50 years of organizing, advocacy, and successes can be shared here. AFSC is honored to have been the home for Bonnie to share her gifts, and through her, to have accomplished so much in New Jersey and beyond, toward dignity for all people.



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Service
Committee**

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These tributes and stories can be viewed and downloaded online at

afsc.org/bonnie