
RICHARD ZITRIN

Out of jail, through a garden

NEVER BEFORE have lawyers been so reviled. Even the jokes are brutal: lawyers as road kill; lawyers as the one thing sharks won't eat ("professional courtesies").

I write often about lawyers, and I confess it's usually to criticize more than to praise. And yet there are many people with legal training who meet the highest standards of the profession — or, for that matter, the human race.

Two of the special ones are Mike Hennessey and Cathrine Sneed.

Many know something about Hennessey, the sheriff of San Francisco. A humanitarian who's also a tough cop, he began his career as a lawyer for Sheriff Richard Hongisto, making sure that prisoners' rights were protected even while they were in jail. As sheriff, his goal is to never see his prisoners again — by helping them develop alternatives to criminal behavior.

I met Cathrine Sneed when she was a student at New College School of Law. A young (and poor) African American woman with two toddlers, she nevertheless gave her services to our "collective" (it was the '70s, after all) — lawyers, legal workers and lay people dedicated to better representing those accused of crimes.

Most of us were idealistic white, middle-class kids, with enough money to do our *pro bono* work without any effect on our lifestyle.

Sneed was different, even then. She was committed to helping poor people — especially people of color — get out of jail, not because she could afford to do it but because she *had* to do it.

Sneed never became a lawyer. She found something more impor-

tant. Instead of defending those accused of crimes, for the last two decades she's dedicated her life to trying to keep those convicted of crimes from ever coming back to our jails.

It is a daunting task, but Sneed has found a unique way to do it.

In the vast expanse of the San Francisco County Jail in San Bruno, she created an organic vegetable garden. The garden grows produce to feed the homeless.

Jail prisoners get to work in the garden, nourishing the crops and watching them grow. As they do, they learn a basic and invaluable lesson: We all choose a life in which things grow or things are destroyed; we learn how much better it is to help things grow.

The Garden Project has been an extraordinary success. It expanded from the jail to a garden "outside" where people worked after they were released. The produce from the outside garden is sold to restaurants like Chez Panisse, whose founder, Alice Waters, long served with me as a member of the Garden Project's advisory board.

After ex-prisoners work in the outside garden, they graduate to the Tree Corps, a public works program. It plants trees. Some are receiving their first regular paycheck ever. And, more importantly, they're not heading back to jail.

It's an extraordinary story, one which can be replicated in other cities across the country if they have the desire and the leadership of someone like Sheriff Hennessey.

I just read that a garden has been started at Rykers Island in New York City. Good for them.

Perhaps the folks there heard Cathrine Sneed speak at one of her trips around the country spreading the gospel. When people who have had a rough deal in life watch things grow by the sweat of their own brows, they change. There is new hope for those people, and with that, new hope for all of us.

San Francisco lawyer Richard Zitrin is co-author of "The Moral Compass of the American Lawyer" to be published this month by the Ballantine division of Random House.