

Safe & Just Michigan

Fall
2024



Top, l to r: *Life Beyond Life* panelists in Grand Rapids (page 7): **Richard Griffin**, **Ahmed Williams**, **Saulo Montalvo**, **Ross Hayes** & SJM Community Engagement Specialist **Ronnie Waters**; Bottom, l to r: Former SJM Policy Specialist **Josh Hoe**, SJM Chief Operating Officer **Kate McCracken** & Nation Outside Co-Executive Director **Tony Gant** at our Signature Event (page 6).



Top: **Priya Sarathy Jones**, keynote speaker at our Signature Event, outlines action items to reduce the burden of fines and fees on justice-impacted families; Below: SJM Director of Outreach and Community Partnerships **Ken Nixon** (right) chats with a neighbor at the Unity in the Community event in Lansing.

LOOK INSIDE

Page 2: A word from the executive director

Page 3: Inside Voices: Hear opinions on monopolies, mental health, hope and more

Page 4: Medically Frail Parole fix signed into law

Page 5: State media coverage of criminal justice reform issues

Page 6: From Fines and Fees to Free and Fine: A night to celebrate with Safe & Just Michigan

Page 7: Life Beyond Life hits the road

There is no 'real world' beyond the one you currently live in. — Adam Grant, page 7



Safe & Just Michigan

119 Pere Marquette Ave. Suite 2A
Lansing, Michigan 48912

517.482.7753

Monday-Friday • 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

Ashley Bellant:

Grants Manager

Barbara Wieland:

Senior Communications Specialist

Cassie Larrieux

Senior Research Specialist

Dena Anderson:

Membership Services Specialist

Jared Rodriguez:

Main Street Legislative Services

Jazmine Wells:

Policy Advocacy Manager

John S. Cooper:

Executive Director

Kamau Sandiford:

Clean Slate Program Manager

Kate McCracken:

Chief Operating Officer

Kenneth Nixon:

Director of Outreach & Community Partnerships

Noah Smith:

Capitol Services

Ronnie Waters:

Community Engagement Specialist

Veronica French:

Office Manager

Zack Whaley:

Communications Specialist

Keep in Contact:

email: info@safeandjustmi.org

web: www.safeandjustmi.org



www.facebook.com/safeandjustmi



x.com/safeandjustmi



www.instagram.com/safeandjustmi

Stay Connected After Your Parole

We are always delighted when any incarcerated member is paroled. If you would like to stay in touch, please call or write us with your new information.

Take Action

Encourage your friends, family and networks to tell their legislators, pastors and leaders of organizations about Safe & Just Michigan, our latest reports and the need for sensible justice reforms that will make our communities safe.

From the director's corner

With the November 2024 election about a month away, I want to share some thoughts about how elections and the politics around them shape legislative work. There are few issue areas more politically sensitive than criminal justice policy, and for those that work in this area, it feels like we have been in election season for the entire 2023-24 legislative session.

When Democrats gained control of the Legislature following the November 2022 election, this was a historic surprise - the first time since 1984 that they controlled both chambers - and they did not want to turn around and lose the House in 2024. With a slim 56-54 majority, they would need to hold all of their seats or flip new seats to offset any losses, and they were now defending incumbents in some places they did not expect to win and that would be a challenge to defend. This created a dynamic where legislative leadership felt they needed to protect their members from voting on issues that could hurt their vulnerable members during election season (e.g. through 1000s of mailers calling them "soft on crime" for their pro-reform votes).

Unfortunately for us, but unsurprisingly, criminal justice reform was one of the areas that legislative leadership felt was too risky for members to vote on — at least unless enough

Republicans agreed to support the issue so that it could be defended as bipartisan. Republicans, however, saw criminal justice reform as an effective attack on Democrats and had little incentive to work in a bipartisan way. So, for most of this session, there has been a standoff and little has gotten done.

We are hoping that some of this session's unfinished business will be taken up during the post-election "lame duck" period, and that we will see a more ambitious legislative agenda on criminal justice issues next year (the start of the 2025-26 legislative session).

With thanks,

John S. Cooper



*Executive Director
John S. Cooper*

How to submit letters to 'Inside Voices'

"Inside Voices" is a forum for readers of Safe & Just Michigan's printed newsletter. To submit letters, send your 150-300 word letter to **Inside Voices, c/o Safe & Just Michigan, 119 Pere Marquette Drive, Suite 2A, Lansing, MI 48912**. If you have access to our Jpay account, you may also submit your thoughts that way with "Inside Voices" as the top line of the message.

Please specify if you want to have your name listed with your entry, or whether you want to remain

anonymous.

Subjects can include legislation, sentencing, parole, other criminal justice reform topics such as prison programming or topics of your choice.

We'll share as many of your letters to Inside Voices as we have room for in our newsletter. Some may be edited for space. In addition, we will share selections of them in our electronic newsletter, which is sent to more than 10,000 supporters each month, and on our website.

Inside Voices from around Michigan

Monopolies hurt people who are incarcerated

The definition of monopoly is: exclusive ownership through legal privilege, command of supply, or concerted action. In prison, we have several different vendors that we can purchase clothing from. However, there is only one vendor that we are allowed to purchase food and hygiene from: Keefe. This company is allowed a monopoly because they're the sole provider for the supplemental things we need to maintain a somewhat healthy existence while in prison.

Now we are being told that Keefe is raising the prices again in the prisoner store, with no other vendors to choose from. We as prisoners are forced to sacrifice between getting hygiene, vitamins, medications or food items.

Just an FYI. I thought the law prevented these types of atrocities from occurring. It appears it is OK to allow a company to monopolize prisoners because we are not considered humans.

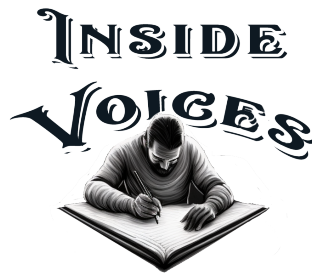
~ Deangelo Jones
Newberry Correctional Facility

Harsh sentences lead to 'death by incarceration'

Over the last 40 years, Michigan has slowly but undeniably adopted "Death by Incarceration" for prisoners serving life sentences. Prior to sentencing reforms that began in the '80s, lifers were in one of two categories; those not getting out (about 25 percent), and those who were getting out (about 75 percent). Half of those prisoners who were released had their sentences commuted and the other half received sentence modifications through the appellate courts.

The old school administrators had it right. Serial killers cannot be lumped in with non-shooters and felony murder cases. Painting everyone with the same "life means life" brush in the context of mandatory life sentences is what amounts to collective punishment. Separate the prisoners you fear from the prisoners you are mad at. ...

Example: five young adults rob a liquor store. The owner is shot in the course of the robbery and dies. They all get convicted and sentenced to



mandatory life under the felony murder rule. The shooter is 17 years old, two are 18 years old and two are 20 years old. The 17-year-old gets a chance at parole because in 2016 the United States Supreme Court made mandatory life without parole sentences illegal for 17-year-olds. The two 18-year-olds get a chance at parole because in 2023 the Michigan Supreme Court made mandatory life without parole sentences illegal for 18-year-olds. The 20-year-olds die in prison because Michigan doesn't recognize a prohibition on collective punishment.

Collective punishment — a penalty inflicted on a group of persons without regard to individual responsibility for the conduct giving rise to the penalty. Collective punishment was outlawed in 1949 by the Geneva Conventions.

~ Dennis Vertin
Egeler Reception and Guidance Center

Accountability doesn't come easy

When I was sentenced to prison, the reason was to be punished for the crime that I committed and also to be rehabilitated. My rehabilitation is solely on me because regardless of how many classes or groups that I volunteer or am recommended to take, I'm not going to change until I'm ready. ... I know that growth comes from facing the most uncomfortable situations, questions and conversations.

Unfortunately, some of the hardest questions that I have had to answer did not come from the facilitators in my groups, the books I have to learn from or even the parole board I will have to face, they came from my sons. My kings. Recently, I pushed open a door to be transparent with them, responding to any and everything they wanted to ask, from my relationship with their father to the crime against him that brought me here. ... In this

process, I had to expose my past character shortcomings ... Even though he was the abuser, I wasn't always innocent.

I had to learn I can't get defensive with things they want to know because I owe them the truth. ... This is giving them some of the pieces to fill in the blank parts of their lives, their gapped memories and their unsolved inquiries to start the healing process, and it is worth any discomfort that I must face.

~ Felicia Hale
Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility

False hope is hurting us

Criminal justice reform's all talk and no action. It does nothing but hurt the incarcerated every time they hear things are looking up, just to find that nothing's going to happen for this reason or for that reason. Every other year's an election year for something. If nothing gets done during election years, then you might as well say nothing's ever going to get done. Stop giving false hope because it just causes depression when inmates put all their hope in something that fails to happen. I'm not saying don't do anything; I'm saying actually do something.

Also, everyone's starting from the wrong point. The point that the criminal justice reform needs to start is with the legal system as a whole. Locking up innocent people and blocking their every attempt of trying to get the truth out isn't the way to reduce the population of people that are incarcerated. There are too many groups that are "trying to do 'criminal justice reform' and 'innocence groups,'" but no one seems to be doing much besides getting a lot of donations with no results. Why not become one big group that truly takes care of all of these things that are needed? And when giving information to the incarcerated, tell them that nothing can happen unless they are willing to do something with you. Because when you just tell the incarcerated what you're doing it just builds up false hope.

~ Timothy Lee Solloway
Saginaw Correctional Facility

POLICY UPDATE

Whitmer signs fix to Medically Frail Parole law

Just 1 person paroled under Medically Frail Parole law's first 5 years

At an average age of 41 — up from 39 just the year before, according to the Michigan Department of Correction's most recent annual statistical yearbook — Michigan has one of the oldest prison populations in the nation. This has presented several challenges to both the prison system and the people who live within it, and no one knows that better than the people who find themselves with increasing medical needs in prison as they age. Not only are prisons not set up to deliver the wide range of medical treatments an aging population requires, it is also exceedingly costly to do so, putting a strain on both the MDOC and state taxpayers who foot the bill.

That's why the Michigan Legislature passed a medically frail parole law in 2019. The law was intended to create a pathway to parole for people incarcerated on parolable sentences who have a disease or health condition with a terminal prognosis or who have a disability or health condition that interferes with their ability to complete daily tasks of living, such

as eating or bathing.

The first five years of the law's existence resulted in just one person gaining parole. People who had supported passage of the medically frail parole law watched with dismay while the COVID pandemic surged, claiming the lives of 176 people in MDOC prisons, while many people hoping for parole under the medically frail provision were denied.

That's why we supported the introduction of Senate Bill 599, sponsored by state Sen. **Erika Geiss** (D-Taylor), which addresses problems in the existing medically frail law. It allows the parole board to use discretion to decide where to place a person released under medically frail parole, including a nursing home, hospice care facility or family home. Gov. **Gretchen Whitmer** signed SB 599 into law on July 23.

By allowing terminally ill and seriously disabled people to be paroled to care in more appropriate settings, the new law will also save the state money. The medical costs of people incarcerated in state

prisons are paid out of the state budget. However, Medicaid or Medicare dollars — which largely come from the federal budget — will pay for medical care for people who receive a medically frail parole.

“When Michigan passed the Medically Frail Parole statute in 2019, the state signaled a pragmatic intention in the Dept. of Corrections that acknowledges and understands that people who are medically frail don't pose a threat to public safety,” Sen. Geiss said in a press release the day the bill was signed. “Unforeseen issues prevented that vision from initially being realized, but there's a reason this bill received the bipartisan support it needed to pass: It's common sense. SB 599 provides important fixes to make sure this program operates as intended. Its passage is a rare criminal justice win for the Legislature, a win for the Department of Corrections, and, most importantly, a win for the people of Michigan, and particularly for the loved ones of medically frail incarcerated people.”

New budget directs MDOC to address phone, deposit fees

Michigan's state budget for Fiscal Year 2024-25 is now complete and signed into law, and it includes promising implications for people working for criminal justice reform.

This budget season, Safe & Just Michigan and partner organizations throughout the state embarked on a campaign to provide much-needed economic relief to incarcerated Michiganders and their loved ones.

The bipartisan budget deal agreed to in June includes language that

requires the Michigan Department of Corrections to review and reduce some fees, such as deposit and phone fees, incurred by incarcerated Michiganders and their families.

We also aim to reduce the \$5 co-pay incarcerated Michiganders pay when they see a doctor in most situations. We understand \$5 is a lot to people working jobs that pay just pennies an hour. However, that fee is written into law, and therefore cannot be addressed through the budget process. It will

require additional legislation.

We applaud our legislative champions, state Rep. **Amos O'Neal** (D-Saginaw) and state Sen. **Sue Shink** (D-Northfield Township), for advocating for this change. We also wish to thank our partners: American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Citizens for Prison Reform, the Fines and Fees Justice Center (FFJC), Humanity for Prisoners, and the Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration (MI-CEMI) for their advocacy and support.

MEDIA MENTIONS

Report reveals opportunities to strengthen expungement expansion

- *LegalNews.com*, May 8: Clean Slate expungement expansion has already brought employment, housing and education opportunities to hundreds of thousands of Michiganders since it took effect three years ago, but a new report released by Lansing-based criminal justice reform organization Safe & Just Michigan indicates simple steps the state could take to bolster Clean Slate and maximize the benefits it offers Michiganders. ... "Michigan enacted some of the strongest Clean Slate laws in the country, but over the past three years, we've identified aspects of the law that can be improved upon," said SJM Clean Slate Program Manager **Kamau Sandiford**. "We've outlined some targeted measures lawmakers could take to refine the existing process and make the expungement process easier, which will ultimately lead to more people in Michigan working at good jobs and providing for their families. There's no reason not to do this."

Early parole for medically frail inmates: Community leaders discuss the impacts

- *WSYM-TV Channel 47 Lansing*, July 2: A bill on its way to Gov. **Gretchen Whitmer's** office will allow prisoners deemed medically frail to get treatment outside of prisons. ... "Medically frail people are, by definition, people who are terminally ill or mentally or physically incapacitated," said SJM Policy Advocacy Manager **Jazmine Wells**. ... "Medically frail parole promotes better placement options and lower costs for the state of Michigan," Wells said.

A push to end juvenile life without parole sentences in Michigan

- *WXMI-TV Channel 17 Grand Rapids*, Aug. 1: Former juvenile lifers shared their stories Thursday at Calvin University. **Ronnie Waters** explains he knows he's guilty for his actions as a teenager. Court records show that in 1980, Waters shot and killed a woman when she and her husband were at a drive-in. "When I was a very young person, I made a horrible mistake and took an innocent person's life. And the penalty was that they gave me life without the possibility of parole," Waters told FOX 17. ... Waters explains he had been working to better himself by helping other inmates learn how to read and write. He added that in 2020, he got his second chance. "It was like, now I have an opportunity to show people that I'm better than the worst thing I ever did in my life," Waters said. He is now on a mission of spreading hope and healing. "I'm remorseful for my crime," Waters said. "I'm trying to live a life that everybody can be proud of." ... The organization Safe & Just Michigan advocates for other juveniles who deserve to turn a page. "People change and deserve second chances, especially kids," Safe & Just Michigan Executive Director **John Cooper** said.

Parole law fix allows release of 'medically frail'

- *CNHI LLC (Traverse City Record-Eagle)*, Aug. 4: People in prison deemed "medically frail" and near the end of their lives can be released on parole under a bipartisan law signed by Gov. **Gretchen Whitmer**, and supported by corrections officials and civil rights advocates. "Medical parole allows MDOC to get out of the business of hospice and nursing care while

shifting the costs of that care from 100 percent General Fund to Medicaid, Medicare, or private insurance," **Jazmine Wells**, of Safe & Just Michigan, told a state senate committee earlier this year. ... The original 2019 law, drafted with input from MDOC, was supported by both budget-conscious lawmakers and family members of incarcerated people, but had implementation issues. At that time, the MDOC estimated rule changes would make between 20 and 30 incarcerated people eligible for parole, with many more expected to qualify in subsequent months and years. (MDOC Legislative Liaison **Kyle Kaminski** said this was a good-faith estimate and would have likely been accurate if the law had worked as intended. ... "We are aware of only one parole to date under this statute," Wells said, in a letter to members of Michigan Senate's Civil Rights, Judiciary, and Public Safety committee.

Michigan coalition calls for Second Look Legislation to alleviate staffing shortages in state prisons

- *Legal Reader*, Sept. 5: On August 22, the Second Look Michigan Coalition released the following statement responding to the severe staffing shortages in Michigan's prisons: Today, there are hundreds of people sitting in Michigan's prisons who pose no threat to society, have served significant time, and in many cases, are unable to physically commit a crime. By offering these individuals a second look, we can make our criminal legal system more humane while also alleviating the staffing shortages throughout the state's prisons. ... Participating Groups in the Michigan Second Look Coalition include Safe & Just Michigan.

OUTREACH UPDATE

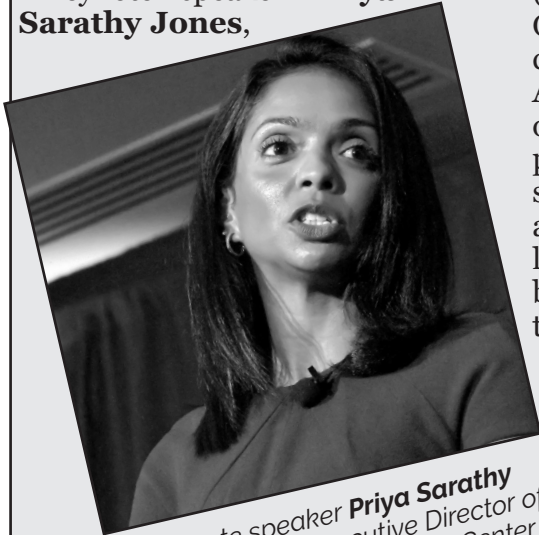
From Fines and Fees to

an evening with Safe & Just Michigan

Free & Fine

Safe & Just Michigan's 2024 annual Signature Event was called "From Fines and Fees to Free and Fine," and this year, we looked at how the costs and fees levied on justice-involved people interfere with financial independence.

Keynote speaker **Priya Sarathy Jones**,



Keynote speaker **Priya Sarathy Jones**, Deputy Executive Director of the Fines and Fees Justice Center

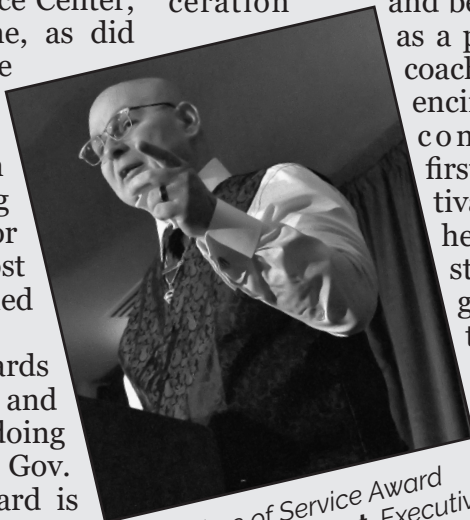
deputy executive director of the Fines & Fees Justice Center, elaborated on this theme, as did a new short film we produced titled "When Freedom Isn't Free: Stories of Michigan's Cash Pretrial System," featuring the story of Benton Harbor **Michael Hoyh**, who lost his job after being detained in jail for six days.

We also presented awards to people we admire and who inspire us to keep doing the work. Our annual Gov. William G. Milliken Award is presented to an elected official who shows determination and commitment to furthering the

cause of criminal justice reform in Michigan. This year, we presented it to state Rep. **Amos O'Neal** (D-Saginaw). O'Neal, the chair of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Corrections, successfully pushed to fund prison systems and support resources for people who are incarcerated. He authored a law protecting Michigan juveniles by requiring a detention screening tool be given to them before being detained. O'Neal is also the sponsor of bills to end juvenile life without parole, support the re-entry of former juvenile lifers and re-establish Good Time.

Our Justice Warrior Award was presented to A Brighter Way Executive Director **Adam Grant**.

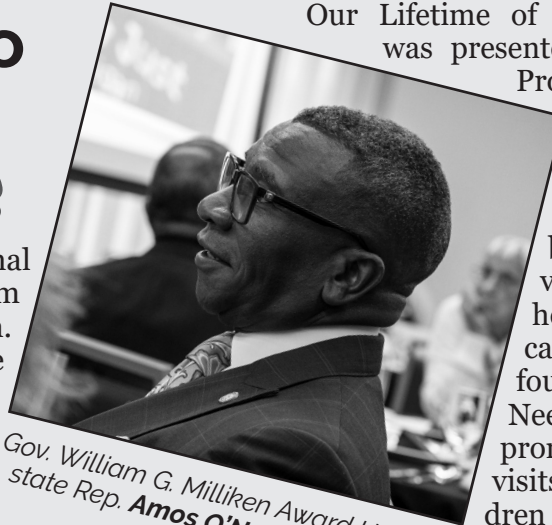
Adam came home in January 2020 after 27 consecutive years of incarceration and began working as a peer recovery coach. Experiencing collateral consequences firsthand motivated him to help others struggling to get back on their feet.



Lifetime of Service Award Honoree **Adam Grant**, Executive Director of A Brighter Way

Adam joined ABW as executive director in December 2021.

(See also 3 Things, page 7).



Gov. William G. Milliken Award Honoree state Rep. **Amos O'Neal** (D-Saginaw)

Our Lifetime of Service Award was presented to A.R.R.O.

Program Director and SJM Board Member **Monica Jahner**, who became an advocate during her 28-year incarceration. She founded Kids Need Moms to promote quality visits between children and mothers in prison and representing fellow women in class-action lawsuits. After coming home in 2007, Monica began working with A.R.R.O. and

became a co-founder of Nation Outside, whose board she now serves on. She served on the Ingham County Community Corrections Advisory Board and the governor's Joint Task Force on Jail and Pretrial Incarceration. Her work with legislators led to alternatives to incarceration and ensured first-time drug offenders could receive food assistance.



Lifetime of Service Honoree **Monica Jahner**, Program Director of A.R.R.O. and SJM Board Member

We thank event sponsors: BRD Printing, Capitol Services, First National Bank of Michigan, Grassroots Midwest, Hope Network, MainStreet Legislative Consulting Services, the Michigan Center for Youth Justice, the Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration, Premier Finishing and Resch Strategies.

JLWOP storytelling project hits the road

Former juvenile lifers share stories, urge end to JLWOP

Ending the practice of sending Michigan's children to prison to die remains one of Safe & Just Michigan's top goals. Two years ago, we began "Life Beyond Life," a storytelling project with former juvenile lifers who've come home, thanks to a series of U.S. Supreme Court decisions, to support our legislative work.



Ahmed Williams, right, hands a microphone to **Richard Griffin**. Both were panelists in the *Life Beyond Life* event in Grand Rapids.

Using lived experiences to connect with viewers, these storytellers have the power to show viewers that juvenile lifers — often portrayed as frightening and dangerous — are instead relatable and sympathetic. Now, we have research to further bolster our cause: new research indicates the recidivism rate among Michigan's returned former juvenile lifers is less than 3 percent, far less than Michigan's general recidivism rate of 22.7 percent.

To spread the word about the need to end JLWOP, we've begun taking our storytelling project on the road. "Life Beyond Life: Stories of Hope and Healing" is a program that combines highlights from our research, video excerpts from the storytellers and live question-and-answers with the audience.

So far, we've presented

Life Beyond Life: Stories of Hope and Healing in Grand Rapids and Detroit. Audiences were engaged and receptive in both locations, and we were able to secure media attention and interviews between reporters and some of the former juvenile lifers in both cities.

"One of the things that drives me today is that I know the harm that I caused is the type of harm that you can't undo," event panelist **Jose Burgos** said. "So the best thing I think I can do is just try to make this place, this world, a better place, right?"

Since coming home, Jose has worked for the State Appellate Defender's Office (SADO) and the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth. He is also a member of the SJM Board of Directors and served as the moderator for the Life Beyond Life: Stories of Hope and Healing event in Grand Rapids.

The U.S. remains the last country in the world imposing a life without parole sentence on its children. Even in the U.S., Michigan stands out a state that continues to rely most heavily on this sentence.

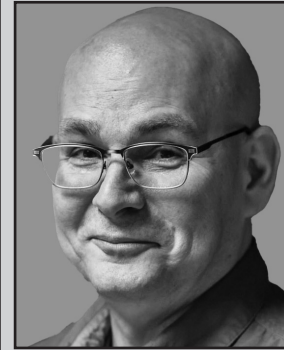
We're committed to ending JLWOP in Michigan and will keep you updated on our progress.



Panelists at the *Life Beyond Life* event in Detroit, from left to right: **Machel Pearson**, **Jose Burgos**, **Lorenzo Harrell** and **Gregory Wines**.

Three things I wish I knew Life after release

Name: Adam Grant



Title:
Executive Director of A Brighter Way

Honors:
SJM 2024 Justice Warrior Award

City: Ypsilanti

Years since release: 4.5

Advice to others looking forward to release:

1 The key to life is our relationships. Those that like you, those that don't, and the reasons for either. I would have been more intentional with my relationships earlier.

2 It is not about who you know but who knows you. Much I have been blessed with both before and after my release has come from those who are aware of me and the work I have done. My marriage, my current job, and any accolades earned have been a result of others being aware of who I am and what I do.

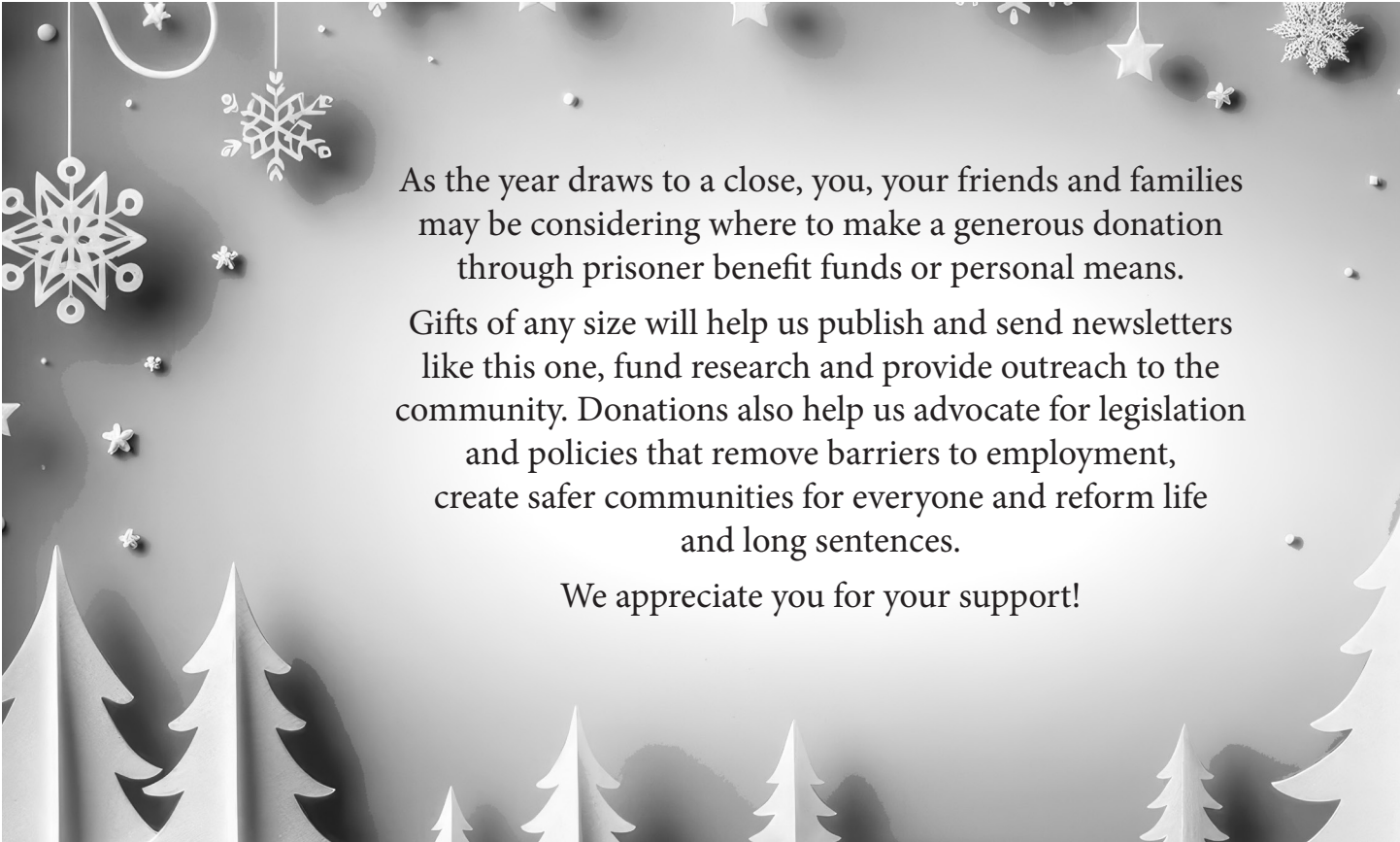
3 There is no "real world" beyond the one you currently live in. What I did in there mattered! Who I learned I was mattered! No matter how often you get the message that it doesn't, who you are is more important than who you were.

Safe & Just Michigan

119 Pere Marquette Drive
Suite 2A
Lansing, Michigan 48912

517.482.7753 (Mon.-Fri.)
info@safeandjustmi.org
www.safeandjustmi.org

Please note this newsletter was printed and distributed
by BRD Printing Inc., located in Lansing, Michigan.



As the year draws to a close, you, your friends and families
may be considering where to make a generous donation
through prisoner benefit funds or personal means.

Gifts of any size will help us publish and send newsletters
like this one, fund research and provide outreach to the
community. Donations also help us advocate for legislation
and policies that remove barriers to employment,
create safer communities for everyone and reform life
and long sentences.

We appreciate you for your support!