

“A Millennium for Nothing”

Everyone has their own reasons for living in a privileged town like Princeton, New Jersey — but Jim McCloskey’s are different. “I live in Princeton,” he says, “because it is located exactly halfway between the East Jersey State Prison in Rahway and the New Jersey State Prison in Trenton.” McCloskey visits these prisons frequently as part of his pioneering Centurion Ministries program to free wrongly convicted prisoners.

You can see the results of McCloskey’s work right on the walls of his office. Instead of a politician’s me-wall crammed with framed honorary degrees and photos of VIPs, McCloskey has posted photos of the prisoners he has freed and the articles about his pioneering efforts. He and a handful of his colleagues have freed people all over the country who have been unjustly convicted. Most of the time he has proven their innocence not through DNA evidence but by thoroughly re-investigating an entire “cold case” from the beginning. All these freed prisoners — some of whom had never used a cell phone until they were released — are still a part of McCloskey’s life as he works to ease their re-entry into society.

Some thirty years ago McCloskey was a student at Princeton Theological Seminary intending to become a minister. As part of his training, he visited prisoners in Trenton State Prison, a maximum security institution. He would meet with prisoners there in a room previously used for the death penalty.

One of them, Jorge De Los Santos, convicted to a life sentence for a murder he did not commit, was not at all interested in McCloskey’s missionary work. As McCloskey explains, “He said to me, ‘You have heard my story. Now, are you

going to go home and pray for me, or are you really going to do something to help me?’”

McCloskey could not choose otherwise. His faith had taught him to stand up for the vulnerable, for injustice. He took a year off from the seminary to see how he could help. Without any legal knowledge, but driven by his sense of right and wrong, he was able to free Jorge De Los Santos within two years.

“He must have been so grateful,” I say.

“I was just as grateful to him,” McCloskey replies. “I saved Jorge and Jorge saved me. Through him I had found my destiny.” Then he adds, with a laugh, “Anyway, I would have been a terrible preacher.”

Some 2.5 million people are imprisoned in U.S. jails, according to McCloskey, thousands of them falsely. Centurion Ministries, the organization he founded 33 years ago, now has freed 53 people. All totaled, they spent a thousand years in prison. “A millennium of wasted life,” sighs McCloskey. Every year he receives around 1,600 letters from prisoners seeking his help. With the help of a staff mostly of volunteers, McCloskey and his deputy Kate Germond examine all of them carefully. If they agree to take on a case, on average

it will take 15 years to see it through.

At an annual fundraising — Centurion Ministries manages entirely on donations — many of these ex-prisoners are there. They all wear T-shirts emblazoned with a simple sentence: I DIDN’T DO IT.

The afternoon is festive, peaceful. I had expected these people to be angry and bitter, but the opposite is the case. They walked away from their anger. Somehow they accepted their fate. Above all, they truly enjoy their freedom.

Mark Schand, a gentle man of small stature, happened to be at the wrong time at the wrong place 27 years ago. His girlfriend Mia was expecting their child. She believed in his innocence and never gave up on the man she loved. Year after year, she drove every week five hours to the prison and five hours back to see him for just one hour. Last December they celebrated the first Christmas at home with their family, now enriched with five grandchildren. I can only guess about the emotions they all must have gone through when I notice a tattoo on his left arms. It reads:

“26 years, 11 months, 4 days, 26 minutes, 8 seconds 4 nothing.”

— Pia de Jong



Illustration by Eliane Gerrits