Bio: **Bonnie Kerness** is the current coordinator of the Healing and Transformative Justice Project in the Newark office of the American Friends Service Committee. She has been a lifelong activist committed to prisoners' rights, and founded the Prison Watch Project in the late 1970s after watching activists condemned to prison and the human rights violations they experienced. She has become an outspoken advocate for prisoners' rights as human rights, specifically for speaking out against the use of solitary confinement and sensory deprivation as form of punishment. Bonnie began her life as an activist as a young teen, and continues to serve as a role model to young women leaders.

An Interview with Bonnie Kerness
Conducted by Leadership Scholar Beth Breslaw, Class of 2011
Edited by Nicholas Salazer

Beth Breslaw: Can you tell us your name and what you do?

Bonnie Kerness: My name is Bonnie Kerness, and right now I coordinate the Prison Watch Project for the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Healing Justice Program out of Newark, [New Jersey.]

BB: How long have you been working for the AFSC?

BK: I came up from the Southern Civil Rights Movement in 1970, and spent about a year looking for a place to continue my community organizing. The AFSC had a housing and Urban Affairs program in Elizabeth, New Jersey at the time and I began working with them then.

BB: What were your first visions of women?

BK: My grandmother always seemed to me to be a very strong woman. She raised seven children, she was divorced in an era when women did not get divorced, and she was very full of life, very lively. So, she was certainly an impact. I lived with her for nine years.

My mother was a typical woman of the fifties, who emphasized things looking good, being dressed well, the whole set of fifties consumer values, which I chafed against. So, it was two very different visions of women. The vision of my mother was carried forth on small ten–inch television screens on television programs and advertisements and newspaper advertisements. It was that kind of 1950s perspective: a chicken in every pot, a car in every garage, and very middle class–perspective.

BB: Can you think of an experience you had with either your mother or your grandmother that kind of solidified who you identified with more?

BK: I was awfully young. I don't know that I identified with one or the other. I chafed against who my mother was and that set of values as early as being ten years old; she didn't really like children. If I have to come down on one side or the other, my grandmother loved her children and loved her grandchildren and my mom was not crazy about her children, her children's friends, or kids in the park. Her perspective on things was very limited to looking good and shopping well.

When we lived with my grandmother shortly after World War II, very close by were a whole host of aunts, uncles and small cousins. I think it was a communal atmosphere.

When my parents were economically [able], I was about 9, they moved to Queens. I was, and remained, extremely lonely. There was a sense of isolation in me as a child. And I think it was because moving from that collective atmosphere to an isolated atmosphere. I don't know that I thought about it very much, except having the feeling of loneliness, and as my generation progressed, by the seventies, there was a sense of living a more collective life, or a life with collective values.

BB: How did your family embody that?

BK: Well, there were certainly a number of other children that lived with us. My youngest son is adopted, and my oldest was fostered, and then I had three biological children. This was an era in parenting of many divorces, so that mom and dad would get divorced and nobody wanted 15 year old Joey. Not that I blamed them, but Joey ended up living with us, as did a number of friends who fell on economic hard times. So, it was a collective atmosphere with people moving in and out of the house, things being decided by a group of people, including the children. It was multicultural, with children and adults often dialoguing with one another. It was a relatively political household when my kids were teenagers. Not that it wasn't difficult [but], economically it was very difficult supporting other people's children. But there was richness to those times, where that was an acceptable form of living, an acceptable way of living.

BB: Can you explain particular events that influenced you to become a civil rights activist?

BK: I can remember reading something when I was ten, and making myself a promise to take a child that no one else wanted, when I was twelve, on these little ten inch television sets, right after the Supreme Court decision *Brown versus Board of Education,* and those very young children tried to go to school in the South. What I saw was them being hosed with fire hoses by white men, white adults. I saw them being bitten. I saw dogs being brought up right to them, and I don't know if they were biting them, but the kids were screaming. And that was an enormous imprint on me.

I did chafe against middle class values. We lived in Queens and it was a very middle-class area. I began to volunteer at the University Settlement House on the Lower East Side. I taught arts and crafts, about which I knew nothing, but I met the first gang members I had ever met in my life. I met my first kids of color. I met my first heroin addict. I met my first politically astute kids. I was fourteen, and it was the gift of being taught, mentored by other fourteen year olds, who I could listen to much more readily than adults. I met my first community organizers there, and I think that had a very profound effect on me. I was able to go to their summer camp and live with the kids my own age from that neighborhood, and I think I'm still absorbing the things that I learned from them.

I think the other influence from the Civil Rights Movement was music. Pete Seeger lived a couple of miles down the road and came every night he would sing labor sings, Civil Rights songs, old movement songs, and I think it was around that time that Nina Simone broke into the consciousness, or at least my consciousness, and her music was profoundly militant.

On the issue of white supremacy, having a daughter when she was eighteen, a black daughter, "well, I want you to drive me up route 80," and her saying "what are you, crazy? We'll get stopped." And it was like, "well gee, I thought I wasn't a racist." Being confronted with my own racism. I have other stories like that, and for me that is a big part of what I'm doing now. I'm asking white folks to reflect on their own racism. Which is very hard for white folks to do, particularly left wing whites. Whites who think, "I'm left wing, I'm in social change, I am therefore not a racist." And having to gain the understanding that if you grew up in this country with white skin you were a white supremacist. There is no getting away from it. I remember being on the streets of Newark years ago, walking up the streets by myself at night leaving work, seeing cops on every corner. And my first thought was, Newark is an armed camp. And my second thought was no. They're there to protect all the white people as they leave the city.

BB: Can you explain the difference between an organizer and a leader? Do you see those as gendered terms? Could you describe an experience you had as an organizer or a leader or whatever you want to call yourself that was affected by your gender?

BK: Community organizers are very specifically not leaders. Once I was trained in the south, you are taught to gather people. And a lot of times that takes money. So you gather people, you feed people, it's the group that decides what the needs are. So there's no leadership. It's more facilitation.

I don't see myself as a leader. I've always seen myself as a community organizer, and it doesn't make any difference if I'm organizing a tenant union, I'm organizing family members of prisoners, or I'm working with a welfare rights group, but an organizer is very different than a leader. And perhaps this is my own prejudice or my own bias, but leadership is a male construct.

BB: What does women's leadership mean to you? Is it important?

BK: When I think of leadership, I even think of the difference between MLK and Rosa Parks. Rosa Parks did something. She had come out of a workshop at Highlander two weeks before and she was chosen to do this thing, and even though she's wholly revered, she's not a leader. MLK was a leader. Ralph Abernathy was a leader, and then later on in other movements we saw other male leaders. I don't think it was until some of the seventies movements, and some of them, not all of them, where women were leaders. When I looked for role models, some of the seventies women of the Panthers, [such as] Angela Davis, I could think of her as a leader. I'm still not totally comfortable with the term, but she certainly was.

BB: How did it change the way you viewed leadership, to finally have someone step into the spotlight and accept the word "leader"?

BK: I never thought of it in terms of leadership. I thought of it in terms of people who set an example for me in a good way to live, a good way to speak out.

BB: Would you say that there is a gender factor in individuals you look to, to be role models?

BK: Well, the people who trained me from the time I went to the South were women. They were strong African women, for the most part. So, that was my experience in the South. Even in the Tenants Movements, women were the backbone of most social change. The Tenants Movements [and] the Welfare Rights Movement were all women. The Democratic Freedom Party was hugely [made up of] women; the Panthers, Elaine Brown, and later on Assata. So, that maybe that's my eye. I normally gravitate toward women. I had been organizing in the Prison Rights Movement, and again, largely working with families of people in prison, which meant mothers, which meant wives, and sisters. It wasn't until I began writing in to some of the political prisoners, those panthers, those BLA members, those American Indian Movement members, and some of the white radicals, that I began being mentored by the males of the species.

BB: Why do you think social change, is often driven by women?

BK: I think of the Women of All Red Nations, which was an activist group in the seventies saying, "a nation isn't conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground." I think women, generally, are the work–horses of the world, whether it's economics, or the raising of children, or social change. And I think because of our attachment to our children, we're wired to be [more] sensitive to what children need in order to flower. I think that encourages involvement in whatever issues are going to better our children.

BB: Can you tell about a time, an experience you've had, balancing being a mother and being an organizer?

BK: Well, it was often taking four or five children with me when I had a meeting because not only wasn't there anyone to leave them with [but] I couldn't afford to leave them with anybody even if there was somebody. The conflict of taking [care of the kids and work.] At this time, I had two very young children. And Stacy had decided to swallow a bottle of aspirin. So, it was getting her to the hospital, and getting her out of the hospital, and taking Jonathan with me, before my seven o'clock tenant meeting, being in that tenant meeting and trying not to be distracted by her stuffing the toilet up. There were a hundred examples like that. Fortunately, I was in a field where I could bring my children, because everybody brought their children. Children are just an ongoing part of life, especially in poor people's lives. But there were certainly conflicts and distractions.

BB: Do you think the fact that you could have your family be so involved with everything that you were doing was a draw for community organizing? Can you see yourself having gone down any other path?

BK: It certainly made life a lot easier, and, again, it was the times. The times were collective times. I also put myself through school. I got my Bachelor's in Social Work and my Masters in Social Work during that time. And that was another difficulty. My senior year in college there was a three-week teacher's strike. So my kids came to class with me, and that was an experience for the other folks in class. I was an older student. It was very challenging. I was always grateful for the acceptance, not only of my teachers, at that time, [but] the AFSC, and the people I worked with, to have my children around, but I wasn't the only one.

BB: Can you describe how you made the transition from civil rights work in the South to prison rights issues?

BK: Part of it wasn't a transition, in terms of carrying my skills with me. Organizing is organizing, whether I'm working with the Gay Rights Movement or I'm working with the Civil Rights Movement. When I came back up North, the Women's Movement was exploding. The Anti-War Movement was exploding. The African-led Lesbian Rights Movement was exploding. There were amazing women leading the welfare rights and tenants unions. So partially because of my work and partially because of my interests, I worked with each of these groups in any number of ways. I had Vietnam vets staying at my house when they had no place else to go. The welfare rights women; I sat at their knees learning from them. I had nothing to offer them. They were mentors. At that time, I also met a group of black Marxists, they were called the Vanguard, and they trained me; they gave me further community organizing training. The group was divided pretty evenly, men and women. I related much more to the women in the group. So, it was because so much was going on, that it was an easy transition. It was moving from one kind of community organizing and non-violence towards movements that use civil disobedience. And also, being very aware of what was happening to my generation.

I think that was the first time I thought of the right to defend one's self. I was very conscious of the emergence of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. I was very conscious of the American

Indian Movement. I talked about watching the children on television when I was twelve. In my twenties, [I was] watching government forces, Chicago City police kill people my own age and I didn't consider myself a great wise adult. They killed people all over the country who were Black Panthers. The FBI shot young people on the reservations that wanted self-determination, and [students of] Jackson State and Kent State campuses that were protesting the war. They killed them and fifty six thousand of them died in Vietnam. I just feel like they were killing my generation, and a little bit later, imprisoning it.

When you talk of leadership, who my generation really would have looked to, whose words ring in my head now, they're long dead. And they were very young when they died. That was the transition. It was a transition not only in terms of being an organizer, but a transition in terms of my understanding. I saw people die in the Civil Rights Movement, Schwerner, Cheney, Goodman, a woman named Violet Liuzzo; this was 1964, 1965. There was always somebody dying in the Civil Rights Movement. I think the difference was that we didn't know who was killing them. Or, we knew it was the Klan members, but it was never overtly state forces. As the years rolled on, it was state forces that were killing my generation. So that was my transition, and it was an extremely painful transition, and it wasn't until I met the people in prison that I had someone to talk to about it, because by the mid-eighties, a lot of folks had stopped organizing. A lot of those movements were very disheartened. They were neutralized by the government [by] deaths and the other strategies. It was a long transition and a painful one, personally.

BB: Would you say that you consistently, throughout that period of time, used the same organizing skills that you had developed in your early twenties? Or did you have to learn new skills or build new coalitions to respond?

BK: I was both a community organizer and part of groups, so that as an organizer, whether I was organizing tenants, or family members of prisoners it was very much the same organizing skills. When I was a member of a group I wasn't an organizer. I think what I learned to do differently through the mentorship of Ojore Lutalo, and the encouragement of some of the other political prisoners was to read, to educate myself about my white skin privilege, the infiltration of white supremacy in me and to understand my own oppression. And once that clicked in with me, I was able to go out and speak on behalf of those people in prison because I understood what I had been through with much more clarity. And I understood the bottom line politically and economically of how prisons function in this society. I was able to give a voice to [individuals] who were voiceless, and I was able to be a voice, and that was internally a profoundly different experience. I was empowered in a way that I had never been empowered before.

BB: Can you explain something you find challenging about the responsibility that you took on to be a voice for people who don't have a voice?

BK: I think the challenge is to be accurate with it. Maybe it's similar to community organizing in that I'm not the leader in community organizing and I'm not the leader in this either. I'm a reflector of what I'm being told. I'm a reflector of the testimonies of human rights violations beyond anyone's wildest understanding that come in to me every single day. It's men, women, and children–of color. It's what they're enduring. So, I have to be true to their voice.

BB: Can you think of a time that was especially encouraging, or an instance where somebody just really made it all feel worth it?

BK: When Ojore tells me I do something good that's always a great experience, but it doesn't come very often. But there's a lawyer, an activist lawyer that over the years I've respected very much. She was just recently imprisoned and given eighty-four months in prison. And I sent her my two most recent speeches and her feedback was, "these are amazing! They have to be published! They have to be printed!" And just hearing it from someone, to me, of her stature, was magical. It made me feel pretty good.

BB: What kind of impact do you think that had on your kids, and raising your family?

BK: Each of them in their own way has a healthy understanding of multiculturalism. Very accepting. My grandchildren live in white communities, which beats me. But my grandchildren have reached out to kids in their schools, in very limited ways because they do live in white communities. My kids have not made the choices that I make. I have one son who says, "When the revolution comes I'll be right next to you. But until that time, leave me alone. Just call me. Let me know." So I don't know that it's spilled over into them, into their consciousness, in ways that I would have wished for. I've had a number of conversations with activists of my generation whose kids haven't gone quite the way we would have preferred.

BB: Do you have any advice for me as I set out towards achieving my goals?

BK: Be acutely conscious, because you are a white person, of your own racism because it's there, and you'll be socked in the face with it in ways that you least expect. And set an example by the life that you live. I made a promise to myself when I was very young, to live a principled way of life, a way of life that I could be proud of, no matter what else was going on in my life. And it's brought me a lot of richness. I'm exhausted. But it has brought me a lot of richness. So, set an example, teach where you can, choose good mentors [because] sometimes, it's not that we don't have mentors, it's that we don't recognize them. There's something to be learned from everybody.