

RPECnews

The newsletter of the Richmond Peace Education Center

November—December 2012

Ms. K to the FCC: ‘Cut Phone Rates For Prison Inmates’

By Charles Robideau

As a chill wind whipped across the courtyard outside the Federal Communications Commission office in Washington, D.C., shortly after noon on Thursday, Nov. 15, Lillie Branch-Kennedy (known to Richmonders as “Ms. K”) stepped to a microphone.

“I’m here to talk about the high cost of prison phone calls and what they’ve meant for my family,” she told about 75 demonstrators at a rally organized by the national group Strong Families, Safe Communities.

“Fair rates, Now!” chanted the crowd, voicing the rally’s demand that the FCC order states to stop telephone companies from charging exorbitant rates for telephone calls from prison inmates to their families.



Lillie Branch-Kennedy (Ms. K) addresses rally at FCC headquarters (photo from Center for Media Justice)

Ms. K related that what she called her family’s “prison telephone nightmare” began in 2002 when her son, at age 24 while attending college, was convicted of

accessory to robbery and imprisoned at Wallens Ridge, a high security prison in the farthest southwest corner of the state, over 200 miles from home.

“Telephone calls became the only way to stay connected to our son,” she said. “It was one of the only ways for him to keep his sanity, and mine as well. These phone calls were all I had because visitation was limited due to how far the prison was and a lack of accessible transportation.

“So began the daily calls from our son to us. I thought these were normal collect calls that would cost 25 cents to approximately \$1.99. Imagine our shock when we received our first bill from MCI, the prison telephone company – a bill for \$226.50.

Continued on Page 6

RPEC Auction Combines Fun And Fund-Raising

By Grant E. Rissler

Gales of laughter and generous bids swept the room repeatedly at the Annual RPEC Auction on November 10. The crowd, including Congressman Bobby Scott, enjoyed great food, a live auction and separate silent auction for several hundred choice items donated by RPEC members. “It’s fun!” said Torenzo Hill, a first time attendee. “People are seri-

Continued on Page 4



Another bid in the silent action.

Photos by Grant E. Rissler

RPECnews

is a publication of the
Richmond Peace Education Center
3500 Patterson Avenue
Richmond, VA 23221
Phone: (804) 232-1002
E-mail: rpec@rpec.org

RPEC Web Page:
<http://www.rpec.org>

RPEC Staff

Executive Director: Adria Scharf
Asst. to the Director:
Paul Fleisher
Conflict Resolution Coordinator:
Santa Sorenson
Office Manager: Johnnie J. Taylor
Administrative Assistant: Dana Snead

2012 Board of Directors

Chair: Ellie Meleski
Vice-chair: Zandra Rawlinson
Treasurer: Gordon Davies
Secretary: Anne-Marie McCartan
Renee Hill
Tony Scott
Cricket White
John Williamson
Charol Shakeshaft
Anne Weber
Amy Woo
Maryam Ansari
Dwayne Bennett
Kenneth Dance
Lucretia McCully
Patrice Schwermer
Elizabeth Wong

Newsletter Committee

Editor: Charles Robideau
crobideau@gmail.net
Bill Gerow
John Gallini
Judy Bennett
Adria Scharf
Francis Woodruff
John Williamson
Renee Hill
Robin Farmer
Santa Sorenson
Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez
Thad Williamson

Opinions and announcements in RPECnews are those of the individual writers and are not necessarily endorsed by RPEC.

RPECnews is published 6 times per year and has a circulation of approximately 1100. We welcome article and calendar submissions.

Reflection

Adria Scharf

Director, Richmond Peace Education Center

At my polling place at Maymont Elementary School the line of people stretched the entire length of one hallway wall and back down the other side. There were elderly people with canes. Parents with babies. Dozens in work attire, late for their jobs thanks to the long 90 minute wait. Someone at the far end of the hallway actually passed out after standing for an hour; the paramedics were called.

Voting, let's face it, wasn't exactly easy. For some frail citizens, it literally posed a danger to their health. For others, long lines meant lost wages. The state's new ID requirements placed an added burden on many. There was plenty of justifiable cause for complaint. But there were remarkably few complaints in that line. None, in fact, that I heard.

What struck me most about Election Day was the people. Not the candidates. But the people. It's unwise to pin all your hopes and dreams on the election of any specific candidate, however decent they may be and however much better they are in key respects than the available alternative. But I for one will gladly pin my hopes and dreams on the people in that line; on my friends and neighbors and the millions like them who mobilized on November 6th to have a say in our political process, despite its flaws.

The majority of this country seeks a much fairer society and a better democracy than we have. If we, the great diverse majority of this country, dig in our heels and insist on having a say, not just on election day but on a consistent basis; if we saw a mass permanent mobilization on the scale that we saw voter turnout on November 6th. . . then there would be no limits to what is possible for our country and the world. Indeed that may be our only hope.

Peace, and thanks, to all!

All of us at the Richmond Peace Education Center join in wishing you a warm season's greetings. May 2013 be a peaceful year for you, your families, our community and the world!

Thank you for your end-of-year gifts. You may make your contribution by clicking "Donate" on the website, www.rpec.org, or by mailing a check. Thank you for helping RPEC start 2013 on a strong footing.

Our Mission

The Richmond Peace Education Center is working to build a more peaceful and just community in the Richmond, Virginia area. Since its founding in 1980, the center has been a leading voice for nonviolence and social justice, offering programs on conflict resolution and violence prevention, racial justice, and global issues. RPEC needs your involvement. Contact the office to plug in: rpec@rpec.org or 232-1002. Together, we can build a more peaceful and just community and world.

Book Discussion On Israel-Palestine

Join the Richmond Peace Education Center for a program about Israel-Palestine on Thursday, Feb. 7, at 6:30 p.m. The discussion will center around the book *The Lemon Tree: An Arab, A Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East*, by Sandy Tolan. It will be held at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Richmond (1000 Blanton Avenue).

With this program, the Peace Center seeks to develop a perspective of both peoples' histories in a way that lays the foundation for deeper understanding of the current conflict.

We invite Peace Center members and the broader Richmond community to read this book in preparation for our community discussion. The event is free and open to the public.

The book tells the true stories of two families. The Palestinian family lived in the village of al-Ramla. They built a house and grew a lemon tree in the courtyard. When the family was driven out during the 1948 war that established Israel's independence, a family of Bulgarian Jews

fleeing Hitler's Europe took over the property, which they were told had been "abandoned." Drawing on interviews, Tolan reconstructs the stories of both families.

The Feb. 7 event will include commentary from Middle East historian Michael Fischbach of Randolph Macon College.

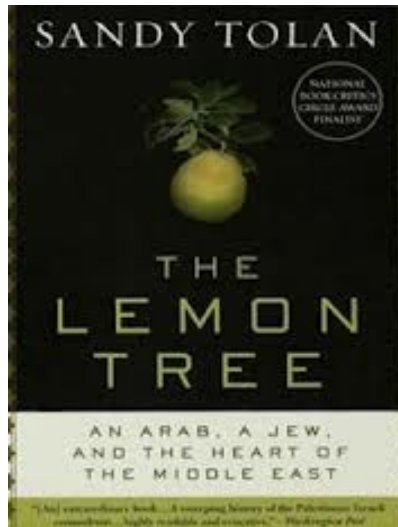
The Lemon Tree is available from RPEC (email rpec@rpec.org or call 232-1002), or the public libraries. It can also be ordered as an e-book.

The Henrico Public Library system lends it as an audio book.

An excerpt and an interview with the author can be found here: <http://www.npr.org/books/titles/138071916/the-lemon-tree-an-arab-a-jew-and-the-heart-of-the-middle-east#excerpt>.

Please let us know if you will attend the discussion Feb. 7 so that we have some idea in advance of the group size.

To RSVP, email rpec@rpec.org or call 232-1002.



Artists Invited To 'Generation Dream'

Generation Dream 2013 is the Richmond Youth Peace Project's annual Educoncert honoring the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is part of Richmond's annual Living the Dream commemoration.

We are looking for talented young artists to offer performances of up to five minutes: singers, instrumental musicians and groups, dance, short dramatic presentations, and spoken word. All presentations must reflect Dr. King's message of peace, nonviolence and social justice.

Two performances are set:

--Friday, Jan. 25, 7 p.m. at Richmond Community High School, 201 E. Brookland Park Blvd.

--Friday, Feb. 1, 7 p.m., at the Richmond Public Library, 101 E. Franklin St.

We are also considering taking this year's show "on the road" for a third performance.

Artists may be asked to perform in one or both shows, depending on availability and number of acts.

Auditions are required. Young people (and their adult mentors) interested in auditioning should email rypp@rpec.org.

CR Workshops Completed

In the past several weeks RPEC Conflict Resolution trainers have completed workshops with Wingnut, Asbury United Methodist Youth Leaders, and a HROC Advanced Training for the community.

Upcoming workshops are with Tahweed Prep School, Peter Paul Development Center, Life Changers Mental Health and Supportive Services, a HROC Basic Workshop and a HROC Training for Trainers 1 Workshop.

RYPP Youth Leaders Finish CR Training

Congratulations to our 2012-2013 class of Richmond Youth Peace Project Conflict Resolution trainers. All of these teens completed 15 hours of conflict resolution and leadership training Sept. 29 and 30. They are: Jamillia Al-Malik, Nikiti Arbogast, Anousheh Bakhti-Suroosh, Jordan Blackstone, Anna Brodzik, Tatyana

Burrell, Indigo Chandler, Jamie Doyle, Niasia Ellis, Nina Gates, Xavier Green, Chloe Hogan, Bryanna Holly, Nicholas Horsman, Sukana Islam, Yasim Islam, Ashley James, Stuart Lytle, Stephanie Martin, Ra-keem Morris, Josie Reiderer, Jerrell Sanders, Priya Sarkar, Savannah Smith, and Rohan Tomer.

RPEC Auction joins fun, fund-raising

Continued from Page 1

ous [about bidding]. I didn't think that many people would participate."

Hill, as many others at the gathering, was invited by friends or family to attend the event, which sold out for the second year in a row.

"The community has supported the event year after year, and that's beautiful," said RPEC director Adria Scharf, describing the auction-goers as "a mixture of long-term Peace Center members who remember when the auction was held in a little church, and new people who join every year."

The auction raises about 14 percent of RPEC's annual budget, this year netting approximately \$17,500 from ticket sales and the 147 attendees who registered as bidders. The total net may exceed last year's, making the auction one of the strongest, if not the strongest, the center has had, Scharf said.

Lia Scholl, another first time attendee remarked, "the quality of auction items is amazing and the crowd is a lot of fun."

Shanella Weatherless, a youth volunteer with the Richmond Youth Peace Project (RYPP) agreed. "It's fun to meet people you didn't know" and to be of service at the same time, she said. Fifteen volunteers from RYPP, many trained as conflict resolution workshop leaders, were on hand to help out.

Volunteers like Shanella and Bill Weber are the backbone of the event, which is organized by a volunteer committee. "I'm here because it's for a worthy cause," said Weber. "Conflict resolution is something there's plenty of need for in our world – an outfit like this that can supply it is priceless."

During a short program, four winners of the annual peace essay contest were recognized for their essays,

along with the 2012 Peacemakers of the Year, Lori Haas and Andrew Goddard – tireless advocates for preserving and strengthening Virginia's gun laws through the Virginia Center for Public Safety.

Support for RPEC was evident in the generous bids – Thai dinners for four attracted winning bids of \$150, and three nights at a Duck, N.C., home went for \$390. The highest value bid was \$1,600 for a full week at a beach house in the Outer Banks.

All of the funds raised go to support RPEC's programming which reaches between four and five thousand people a year, with the equivalent of two staff members and a modest budget.

"We need your support to make the programs possible," Scharf told the audience. "We believe that peace and justice are not pie in the sky and that we can change our world to one that is a lot freer of violence than the one we have today."



RPEC's 2012 Peacemakers Ready for General Assembly

By Charles Robideau

RPEC's Peacemakers of the Year for 2012, Lori Haas and Andy Goddard, aren't resting on their laurels. Since they were honored for their efforts to curb gun violence, they have been working tirelessly in that cause, through their leadership of the Center for Public Safety, based in Chantilly, and as individual advocates.

With the 2013 session of the Virginia General Assembly looming, their primary current concern is to prepare to counter the inevitable flood of pro-gun and anti-gun control legislation from the National Rifle Association and its local backers, the Virginia Citizens Defense League.

During the 2012 General Assembly, Andy, Lori and their allies followed 65 bills, Andy notes. Of those bills, 30 would have weakened gun control laws. "We stopped 23 of them," Andy said, while seven were adopted. Of 12 bills submitted to strengthen gun controls, all failed.

While bills for the upcoming 2013 session have yet to be filed, Andy and Lori are on the lookout for some especially dangerous measures.

Of particular concern on the watch list would be an introduction in Virginia of the "Stand Your Ground" legislation that was adopted in Florida and was deemed a crucial factor in the murder of Trayvon Martin. Since its debut in Florida, "Stand Your Ground" has turned up in 20 other states and the term has begun appearing in the legislative wish lists of Virginia gun advocates, who have until now been focused on enhancing the existing "Castle Doctrine."

Lori had a close look at "Stand Your Ground" in September when she travelled to Florida to participate

in hearings on the law held by a special task force created by Florida Gov. Rick Scott.

The task force was led by supporters of the law, and what Lori heard during two days of testimony was more support. When she addressed the group she knew that flat opposition would be futile, so she urged only that it was "morally responsible to examine the issue," and that the task force should endorse "the most reforms that could save the most lives."

As Lori anticipated, when the task force issued a report in early November its first recommendation was that "all persons have a fundamental right to stand their ground and defend themselves from attack with proportionate force in every place they have a lawful right to be and are conducting themselves in a lawful manner."

Lori noted also that since "Stand Your Ground" was enacted the rate of "justifiable homicide" has tripled in Florida, with Trayvon Martin one of many victims.

MLK Day Rally Jan. 21

When RPEC members start filling out their calendars for January, 2013, they should raise a flag on Monday, January 21 – Martin Luther King Day. That's the day for the annual rally of gun control advocates at the Bell Tower by the State Capitol, sponsored by the Center for Public Safety. This will be the 20th such rally.

The event will begin at 2 p.m. Participants will no doubt be surrounded and mocked by gun advocates with holstered weapons on their hips.



Lori has also traveled to Aurora, Colorado, where on July 20 twelve people were killed and 58 injured in a mass shooting in a movie theater, and Oak Creek, Wisconsin, where on August 5 seven people died in a mass shooting at a Sikh Temple. At each place Lori met with survivors and relatives of the victims, "welcoming them to the sad club of survivors," she said ruefully.

Another legislative threat high on Andy's watch list is a possible attempt by the gun lobby to bring to Virginia a constitutional amendment that was recently adopted in Louisiana. This would apply a standard of "strict scrutiny" to any gun-related legislation. This would require courts, if asked, to determine whether gun laws meet a "compelling government interest," failing which they would be declared unconstitutional. If such an amendment should be adopted in Virginia, Andy explained, "this would put at risk any restrictions now in place."

Andy and Lori will again be pushing a bill to require background checks for any gun purchases, not just those at gun shops and shows, but also those via internet. Most of their legislative work will be trying to prevent bad pro-gun legislation. "If nobody does the defense, they'll get everything they want, and that would not be a good outcome."

Ms. K to FCC. . .

Continued from Page 1

During the first four years we spent over \$10,000 to stay in touch with my son – for him to hear a friendly and loving voice and for me as a mother to know that my child is in the best of health, best of spirits and safe.”

Today, after six more years of phone calls from her son, Ms. K’s husband estimates the family has spent over \$25,000 in phone bills.

“The cost of the prison telephone system is an unfair burden on the children, families and loved-ones who are trying to stay connected, trying to support the prisoner through self-help initiatives,” she said. “These prison phone calls should

exist for the purpose of prisoner rehabilitation and successful re-entry, not to making companies like Global Tel Link richer.”

Global Tel*Link (GTL), which is the prison phone contractor for Virginia and 19 other states, is the current corporate entity of what began as MCI. When Ms. K’s son placed his first call home, MCI had merged with WorldCom. In 2007, MCI WorldCom’s prison phone division was acquired by GTL, which in 2009 was itself swallowed by a consortium of Veritas Capital and GS Direct, the latter of which is owned by Goldman Sachs. So it seems likely that some part of what Ms. K pays for her son’s phone calls ends up in the pocket of the Wall Street giant Goldman Sachs.

But the greater drain on the prisoners and their families is not what the companies pocket, but what the companies are required to kick back to the states that hire them to set up the phone systems

The extent of these kickback arrangements has been researched and tabulated by Prison Legal News, a prison rights organization based in West Brattleboro, VT. According to PLN, Virginia is one of 40 states in which prison phone companies pay “commissions” to their states. The states that don’t require such commissions are a minority, including California, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island and South Carolina.

Continued on Page 7



Demonstrators among Ms. K’s audience at the FCC.

Photo from the Center for Media Justice.

Ms. K to FCC. . .

Continued from Page 6

These commissions aren't voluntary; they are required by the states as conditions for granting the contracts. Virginia's current rate of 35 percent of the phone revenue, is middle-ground, compared to rates ranging from 61.5 percent in Alabama to 20 percent in New Hampshire.

In 2005, the contract between Virginia and the phone company set the commission (kickback) rate at 41 percent, requiring that "The Contractor shall provide revenue to the DOC/DJJ (Departments of Corrections and Juvenile Justice) on a monthly basis, based upon monthly telephone billings."

Within that contract, the company was asked to make certain commitments. One of those requests: "State how the Offeror will ensure that the Commonwealth is getting the lowest available rates."

The company's answer: "MCI's single largest cost of providing service is commission payments to the Commonwealth. MCI is confident that the Department of Corrections can get the lowest available rates by eliminating commission payments."

A year later, in 2006, the contract was amended to cut the commission rate from 41 percent to 35 percent.

According to Prison Legal News, the current rate in Virginia for inmate phone calls within the state is \$2.25 plus 25 cents per minute. For interstate calls the rate is \$2.40 plus 43 cents per minute. Local calls are one dollar a call. These rates have yielded commission payments of at least \$4 million a year to the state in the last three years. In other states, calls can cost \$3 to \$4 to connect plus 89 cents a minute after that.

The organized protest against high prison phone rates began in 2003 when a grandmother, Martha Wright,

who was blind and in her eighties, petitioned the FCC after her grandson was sent to prison. The "Wright Petition," is still before the FCC.

At the November 15 rally, the protesters were heartened when an FCC Commissioner, Mignon Clyburn, announced that the FCC has decided to circulate a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on the Wright Petition. Clyburn also accepted petitions with thousands of names urging the agency to crack down on prison phone rates.

"FCC, we need your leadership now," Ms. K summed up. "Your action at the national level will make a difference to what happens in Virginia. Pass the Wright Petition and level the playing field for

families like mine that are just trying to keep our families strong."

Resource Information Help for the Disadvantaged (RIHD) the organization that Lillie Branch-Kennedy (Ms. K) founded and directs, is active on many more issues of prisoner rights than the cost of phone calls.

RIHD organizes trips of family members to far-off prisons, trips that often require a 24-hour round trip. Ms. K keeps up correspondence with inmates, and RIHD aids prisoners after release, especially helping them preparing requests for restoration of voting and other rights.

To learn more about RIHD, visit www.rihd.org.

Ex-Felons, Now Voteless, Could Decide Elections

In Virginia in the recent election, 3,429,547 citizens cast votes for either President Obama or the challenger Mitt Romney. For every ten voters who cast ballots for president, there was one Virginian who couldn't vote because he or she was an ex-felon.

The vote margin in the presidential race was 50 percent for Obama and 49 percent for Romney, a difference represented by 50,631 votes. There are approximately 350,000 Virginia ex-felons who can't vote, seven times the number that decided the result in Virginia.

Also denied the right to vote are about 50,000 current prisoners.

To regain the right to vote, an ex-felon must petition the governor for restoration. Bob McDonnell has been more liberal than other Virginia governors in restoring rights, approving petitions by about 3,800 former felons. But that hardly keeps up with the swelling rolls of newly freed ex-felons.

Among those who couldn't vote in the recent election was Sa-ad El-

Amin, the former Richmond City Councilman. El-Amin lost his right to vote in 2003 when he was convicted of tax evasion and sentenced to 37 months in federal prison.

In July, 2012, he filed a federal lawsuit, challenging the denial of rights to ex-felons. In a press conference, El-Amin said the lawsuit was not just for himself. "If everybody does not get their rights restored, I don't want mine restored," he said.

In his petition to the U.S. District Court in Richmond, El-Amin laid out a history of the constitutional and legislative acts that have inhibited blacks from voting in Virginia.

"Over the years, the Virginia General Assembly has turned a blind eye and deaf ear to the national trend of restoring voting rights to ex-felons."

When restoration bills are presented, he said, "these bills are routinely tabled and have yet to get even out of the appropriate committees to be voted on. There is clearly no political will in the General Assembly to pass legislation restoring the voting rights of ex-felons."

Book Review by Paul Fleisher

*Come August, Come Freedom:
The Bellows, the Gallows and the Black General Gabriel*

by Gigi Amateau
Candlewick Press, September 2012, (Ages 12-up)

One of the least-known stories from our nation's history is that of the widespread Black resistance to enslavement. From the very beginnings of European settlement of the new world, Africans and their descendants fought against the cruelties of slavery with every means available to them: work slowdowns and sabotage; escape from plantations to native settlements or communities of free Maroons hidden in the wilderness; even desperate acts of suicide and infanticide.

Young Americans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds need to hear these stories, to gain a more complete understanding of our shared history, as well as the current state of our union. Richmond author Gigi Amateau has bravely taken up this task with her new historical novel for young people, *Come August, Come Freedom*.

Amateau tells the story of the enslaved Gabriel, who lived just outside Richmond, Virginia. Gabriel, a skilled blacksmith, learned to read and write as a child. As a young man, he was inspired by stories of the American patriots who had recently rebelled against the English king, as well as contemporary reports of the Black general Toussaint L'Ouverture and his successful revolution against the French slavemasters of Haiti.

In 1800, with the support of his beloved Nan and a small core of family members and others from neighboring farms, Gabriel planned a daring armed rebellion to win freedom. He secretly began forging swords and other weapons. He and his followers would seize arms from local armories, capture Virginia's governor, James Monroe, and demand freedom for the enslaved people of Virginia. Their motto was "Death or Liberty."

His smithy's craft enabled Gabriel to move throughout central Virginia, as he "hired out" to various farms and plantations. As he traveled, he recruited people to his cause. Eventually, hundreds of recruits were ready to follow him. Gabriel believed poor whites and Native Americans would also join the rebellion once it began. Had it not been for the confusion created by torrential

rain and flooding on the assigned day of the revolt, Gabriel's scheme might very well have succeeded. Instead, the plan was postponed and betrayed. More than two dozen of the plotters, including Gabriel himself, were captured and hanged.

Amateau imagines Gabriel's life from infancy through its violent end. Her storytelling is historically accurate and detailed. Much of the book centers on Gabriel's love for Nan, a worker enslaved at a neighboring plantation. These sections provide the deepest glimpse into Gabriel as a person. Unfortunately, there is almost no remaining record of his actual words. Gabriel must surely have been a powerful, charismatic leader, but Amateau imagines less of this aspect of his character than we might like.

Although she is writing for young people, Amateau doesn't hide the brutalities of slavery. The story she tells includes beatings and floggings, the hunger and deprivation enslaved people were forced to endure, the sale and separation of families, and even references to slave breeding and the threat of rape by white slaveholders. Her story will help young readers understand that surviving such abuse was a regular part of the lives of enslaved people.

Amateau chooses her words carefully—for example, she rarely uses the term *slave* but rather identifies Africans as *the people* or *bondsmen*. Although Gabriel and Nan's story is brutal and tragic, Amateau manages to tell it in terms suitable for adolescent readers — at least those willing to face the painful facts of our nation's history. Historical documents — some authentic, some imagined — interspersed throughout the text help complete the story. And her writing turns lyrical at times, as she describes the natural beauties of the James River, and the hills and fields where the enslaved people find respite.

Come August, Come Freedom tells an important American story, in an honest and uncompromising way that will touch the hearts and open the eyes of many young readers. Amateau's novel should generate some challenging and much needed discussions in our country's living rooms and classrooms.