

THE FOURTH ESTATE ENCLOSED



STEVE GILBERT

PAUL WRIGHT — "After 10 years, there are no horoscopes, no crossword puzzles and no lonely hearts column. We're a purposeful publication, and we want to maximize the benefit we bring our readers in the space we can afford."

By Ashby Jones
Special to the Daily Journal

SEATTLE — A couple of years ago, Paul Wright read a short item in a Seattle newspaper reporting that state officials were investigating white supremacist activities among Washington state prison guards.

Wright filed a Public Disclosure Act request seeking the state's report. After receiving it he concluded, contrary to the official findings, that racism among white prison guards was alive and well.

He then contacted a writer at the Seattle Weekly, who this year turned the tip into a feature chronicling widespread hate activities among guards at several state prisons. And Paul Wright, imprisoned for murder since May 1987, received credit for breaking yet another investigative story.

Indeed, since co-founding the Prison Legal News from behind bars at the Clallam Bay Corrections Center, both Wright and his publication have been on a slow but steady ride to a strange sort of underground celebrity.

The pioneering PLN, which is entering its 10th year of providing legal analysis and news to prisoners, appears in nearly every prison in the country.

An Inmate in Washington Has Been Publishing a Monthly Magazine Chronicling Prison News for Prisoners Around The Country

That's largely due to the gritty efforts of its editor, who has steadily gained hard-won admiration and respect.

"What Paul Wright has been able to do in 10 years is nothing short of astonishing," said Mickey Gendler, a Seattle civil rights lawyer.

"Accomplishing anything the least bit productive from inside a prison is quite a feat, let alone being able to run an incredibly impressive publication."

"He gets more done on a daily basis than I do, and I have money, help and freedom," said Len Schroeter, another Seattle attorney. "He's a remarkable person, and he's truly made himself a national asset."

It is undeniably high praise for a convicted murderer, but refuting the improbability of what Wright has achieved is difficult.

In 1990, motivated by a desire to "help give prisoners a more informed voice on criminal justice issues," Wright and fellow inmate Ed Mead founded the publication on a shoestring budget of \$50 and access to little more than a typewriter and a prison law library.

Today, PLN maintains a circulation of close to 3,000, pays a salary to two employees, and boasts names such as Noam Chomsky and Rolling Stone magazine's William Greider as subscribers.

But to Wright, who has been housed at the Washington state Reformatory at Monroe, Wash., since 1992, success has been mea-

See PRISON, Page 7

SAN FRANCISCO DAILY JOURNAL

Page 1

DEC 15, 1999

■ PRISON: Magazine Sells 3,000 Copies

Continued From Page 1

sured by the ever-escalating stacks of mail he receives from lawyers and prisoners.

"The mail gives me the sense that it's providing a useful service," Wright said of the monthly publication, which typically includes an even split of general prison-related news and legal news and analysis.

"Our mission is to tell prisoners, first of all, what their rights are and, second, how to vindicate them. My sense of it is that we're succeeding at both."

In its current form, the monthly magazine runs 32 pages. Each issue features trend pieces contributed by practitioners, reviews of self-help litigation manuals, and summaries of recent prison-related legal opinions.

The look of the magazine is as sober as its subject matter — it uses no color and fills nearly all of its pages with text, something Wright seems particularly proud of.

"After 10 years, there are no horoscopes, no crossword puzzles and no lonely hearts column," he noted. "We're a purposeful publication, and we want to maximize the benefit we bring our readers in the space we can afford."

Not surprisingly, the tone of PLN is unapologetically pro-prisoner. Feature stories focus on egregious acts in prisons, and case summaries are typically laced with editorializing. In spite of this, many think the magazine retains a respectable amount of journalistic integrity.

"It's pretty clear that PLN lives in an us vs. them world," Gendler said. "But they dutifully report adverse legal developments, and their case summaries are always accurate. There's a bias, but it's still enormously useful to lawyers."

The magazine began as a 10-page mimeographed and stapled compendium of case summaries. Wright and Mead, who were serving time at different facilities on unrelated convictions, independently typed up their five pages and sent them to Wright's father in Florida, who made copies and distributed them to a small handful of supporters and subscribers.

At the time, Wright and Mead charged \$10 for a year's worth of issues. Current rates are \$15 per year for prisoners, \$25 for nonincarcerated individuals and \$60 for attorneys and law firms.

Largely through word of mouth and the committed efforts of Wright, Mead and another prisoner, Fred Markham, who is now the magazine's circulation director, the magazine slowly took off. By 1992, it had 300 subscribers, a number which doubled the following year.

"Once a prisoner sees a copy of the magazine, it's an easy sell," said Markham, who met Wright at Monroe and worked hard to circulate the magazine there and during a subsequent prison stint in Texas. "You just have to convince the prisoners that PLN is better for their health than cigarettes and coffee."

Early on, nearly everyone doubted the efforts. "I remember one of the wardens telling me that the PLN would never work — that we'd be finished with it in six months," Wright said, "but we kept getting enough \$10 checks to put out another one, then another one, and another one. Somehow the number has reached 3,000."

Adding to the improbability of PLN's success are the repeated attempts by states to bar the publication from reaching incarcerated subscribers.

The Washington Department of Corrections censored the first three issues and the May 1999 issue, which reprinted Seattle Weekly's prison guard story. The magazine recently wrapped up litigation in Washington and Michigan, is currently litigating in Utah, Oregon and Alabama, and may soon file suit in Nevada and Colorado.

"Certain states have established an aggressive vendetta against PLN and Paul Wright," Gendler said, "and they'll do or say just about anything to get it censored. It makes what he's achieved all the more remarkable."

The censorship efforts no longer faze Wright, who says he rarely has trouble finding pro bono legal assistance.

"We've got the censorship litigation down to a fine art," he said. "We've got a network of fantastic lawyers out there who fight hard for us. We usually do quite well."

Others credit Wright for PLN's courtroom success.

"To be very frank about it, Paul Wright's a pain in the ass," Schroeter said. "But that's unquestionably part of

the reason he's been so successful — because his commitment is absolute. He'll talk your ear off about his ideas and beliefs, and he'll do it with passion."

One topic Wright is less garrulous about is his life outside prison, including his murder conviction.

Wright said only that he was in the process of robbing a drug dealer when the drug dealer tried to shoot him. Wright shot back and killed the man. Because he committed the killing in furtherance of a robbery, Wright was convicted of felony-murder, which attaches an automatic first-degree murder charge. At the time, he was 21 and had just finished a three-year stint with the Army.

Wright will be released from Monroe in January 2004, but he said little about what he plans to do after he's out.

"I'd like to spend time with my family," he said, referring to his wife of seven years and his two small children. "Of course I'd like to find a way to keep PLN going as well."

Schroeter, for one, would like to see Wright released sooner.

"It's absolutely ridiculous to keep Paul Wright incarcerated," he said, adding that Wright recently became a vice president of the National Lawyers Guild. "He's self-taught, his supporters love him and he provides an immensely valuable service."

But, Schroeter added with a laugh, "the truth is that he's probably more dangerous to his opponents on the inside."

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