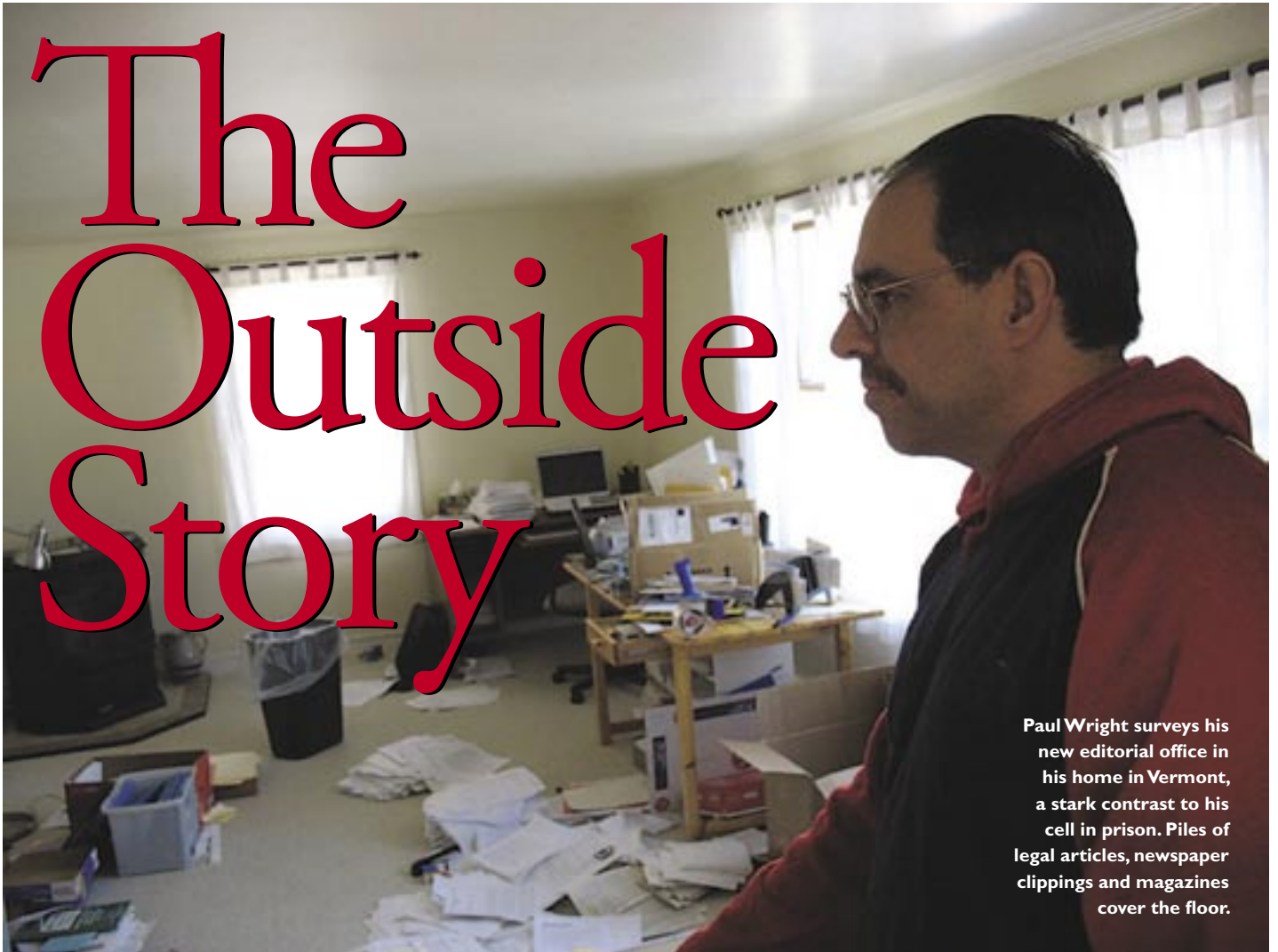


The Outside Story



Paul Wright surveys his new editorial office in his home in Vermont, a stark contrast to his cell in prison. Piles of legal articles, newspaper clippings and magazines cover the floor.

An ex-con's magazine fights for prisoners' rights

BY JENNA FISHER

YOU COULD SAY THAT PAUL WRIGHT'S CAREER as a magazine editor was launched in 1987 when he killed a man. It was Super Bowl Sunday. The New York Giants were playing the Denver Broncos. Wright, 21 years old and six days shy of completing his military service, fatally shot a man in a botched holdup attempt—he was robbing a cocaine dealer who turned out to have a gun. Wright claimed self-defense, but he was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to 25 years in prison in Washington State.

"I guess I didn't make a very good criminal," says Wright today. His job as a book fetcher at the prison legal library gave him the chance to study prisoner-related law. And conversations with fellow inmate Ed Mead helped foster an idea about what to do with all that information. Why not start a magazine?

The result is *Prison Legal News*, a magazine written by and for prisoners. It provides a way for inmates to share news about court cases so that those who might want to file appeals or new cases will have

access to the most recent developments.

Between the early 1900s and 1998, more than 200 prison publications were born, according to James McGrath Morris, the author of "Jailhouse Journalism." One of the most famous is the *Angolite*, a bimonthly news magazine published in the Louisiana State Penitentiary. It covers issues related to life in the slammer and has won several awards for journalistic excellence. Though the number of prison magazines seems to be shrinking, inmates continue to produce new titles. Most contain artwork, poetry or fiction on plain, photocopied pages. Some cover pop culture outside of prison. Some are prisoner-funded; others are supported by the penal institution itself.

And then there is *Prison Legal News*, founded in 1990 by Wright and Mead. Several things distinguish it from other prison magazines: It is highly controversial—it has been banned by prisons in several states. It has helped fuel at least 20 cases across the country that have overturned bans or attempted bans by prisons on prison publications. It is the only independently funded prison maga-

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zine that has successfully outlasted its founder's time on the inside. And recently, a major foundation awarded it a six-figure grant.

Many prison publications last only as long as their editors remain behind bars. But when Wright made the transition from prisoner to citizen in late 2003, his editorial offices followed him, even though his base of contributing writers and reporters remained inside prison walls. Now, about 35 percent of the readers are prisoners' relatives, prison-rights activists and lawyers. The magazine continues to focus on legal cases and prison conditions affecting inmates. *PLN* has reported on everything from excessive use of force by guards to stifling air temperatures on death row. It maintains a team of volunteer lawyers around the country, who work to obtain public records and fight cases of censorship.

Which is not to say that *PLN* has won all its fights. In 1994, Mead and Wright sued the Washington Review Board to challenge an order that Mead, who had been sentenced to 18 years for his role in a political bombing incident, have no contact with any felons while on parole. Since most of the people who volunteer and write for the magazine are convicted felons, this meant that Mead could no longer have contact with *PLN*. The American Civil Liberties Union sponsored the case, but the ban was upheld and Mead had to end his participation in the magazine three years after its founding.

Censorship has been a constant problem. In 1990, when *PLN* reported on the alleged beating of a black prisoner by a group of white guards, prison officials tried to prevent the publication of the article by throwing Wright into isolation for 20 days. He published the story anyway, but, he says, prison of-

ficials cut the article out of each copy before it was delivered to inmates.

Another issue of the magazine was banned in Washington State prisons because of a controversial article, "White Guard Black Guard: Racism in Washington Prison Continues," written by Jennifer Vogel, a professional journalist and the daughter of an ex-con. Four volunteer lawyers took the case to an appellate court, but it was sent back to the Washington State district court, which dismissed it on the grounds that prison officials have the right to censor incoming prisoner mail they think could incite violence.

To some degree, the influence of *PLN* can be measured by the fact that the magazine, which was once banned in all Washington State prisons and in at least 10 other states, can now be found in all maximum-security and medium-security prisons in the United States. It has become a thorn in the side of prisons nationwide. "We've recently been involved in some litigation with *PLN*," said Gary Larson, spokesman for the Washington State Department of Corrections. In fact, *PLN* has taken the Washington DOC to court nine times. In 2001 and 2002, *PLN* filed suits and won access to documents related to staff misconduct, environmental contamination and prison safety.

Prison Legal News reprints relevant articles from newspapers and law journals, uses state and federal freedom-of-information laws to gain access to documents and information and has its correspondents do their own investigative reporting. A typical issue contains an editorial by Wright, perhaps explaining delays in publication and providing information on *PLN* litigations. Stories carry such headlines as "Arbitrary Draconian Restrictions on Texas Parolees," "Federal Prisoner Wins Right to Marry," "Prisoners of Love" (a book review), "Pro Se Tips and Tactics," "Federal Court Orders Independent Evaluation Training and Credentialing of All California Prison Healthcare Practitioners" and "A Georgia Sherriff's Illegal Profit From Captive Workforce."

In addition to articles by prisoners (such as Mumia Abu Jamal, whose death sentence in Pennsylvania has become a politically charged subject of controversy), freelance journalists, legal-service lawyers and other authors with a special interest in prison law contribute about 5 to 10 percent of the content. For example, Rachel Meeropol, granddaughter of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg and a staff attorney at the Center for Constitutional Rights, contributed an article focusing attention on the rights of prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay.

In an investigative piece, journalist Silja J. A. Talvi went undercover to report on workshops at the American Correctional Association's winter fair, where one session featured film footage of a paranoid but nonviolent prisoner who was strapped naked to a chair for 16 hours and died. She reported: "The session was facilitated by Todd Wilcox, the medical director of the



Salt Lake County Metro Jail, who used the imagery as an example of how to avoid costly litigation. ‘Don’t get personal with this,’ Wilcox said. ‘It’s just business.’ He reminded the audience how important it is to sever the ‘emotional leash’ that guards and nurses can form with prisoners. He also referred to some mentally ill patients with ‘Axis II disorders’ as ‘the people we affectionately call ‘the assholes.’”

In the back of each issue, Wright writes a section called “News in Brief,” gathered from newspapers or inmates, organized by state and covering such news as the dismissal of a prison official, an allegation of prison rape or an inmate death. Scattered through the magazine are advertisements pitching everything from prison law library resources to pen pal services to attorneys. There is also a short classified section (for \$40, you can buy a four-line ad to run in two issues).

The penal press has had its share of successes, but long-running publications are few and far between. Author James Morris says that because of the transient nature of prisoners and prison conditions, the mortality rate for prisoner publications is very high. Of the more than 200 publications that Morris discussed in his 1998 book, those that survive today can be counted on one hand. Of *Prison Legal News* he wrote: “The overtly political nature of *PLN* represents the emergence of something that previously had been confined to underground prison publications. But they were usually short-lived and circulated only in small numbers in the recesses of prisons.”

Funding is an ongoing problem. *PLN*’s first issue appeared in May 1990 as 10 typewriter-produced pages, and it was sent to only 75 prisoners and activists the editors thought might be interested in the magazine. Ed Mead swallowed the cost of mailing and printing—\$50. They viewed it as a six-month endeavor, since they didn’t know whether they could find a way to support it for longer than that.

Now, 16 years later, *PLN* has four full-time and three part-time employees (the highest salary is \$40,000). Since they started accepting articles from inmates in 1995, the magazine has paid its writers from \$10 to \$25 an article. *PLN* is published monthly and maintains a website where every back issue is posted.

The magazine has grown to 48 pages. It isn’t fancy—it’s printed on newsprint. It has about 4,600 subscribers. A one-year, hard-copy subscription costs \$18 for inmates or \$25 for those on the outside, and viewing it online costs \$1 per day.

How did Wright make all this possible? Through his wits (and parents who help pay for his house). Until last year, the magazine was constantly on the verge of a deficit. The budget has grown from \$600 a year to about \$160,000, and, until 2005, *PLN* was sustained exclusively by subscriptions, reader donations (most under \$50) and advertising. Last year all of that changed when billionaire philanthropist George Soros’ Open Society Institute gave *PLN* a two-year grant of \$200,000 to help boost circulation and improve infrastructure.

PLN maintains two offices. Wright edits articles and coordinates content from his home in Vermont, while in Washington State, not far from the prison where Wright did his time, an executive director, circulation manager and volunteers work out of an office where they handle business matters, layout and correspondence.

Among the challenges *PLN* has managed to overcome are two instances of embezzlement by staff members *on the outside*, the enforced separation of the original co-editors, the constant threat of retribution by prison officials for printing what they deem inappropriate

***PLN* compiles and reports news of legal interest to both inmates and prisoner-rights attorneys. Paul Wright co-founded the magazine in 1990.**



material, guards throwing the magazine out before it reaches inmates, complaints from prisoners about articles that defend sex offenders and advice not to “inflamm the snouts” (prison guards and officials).

Still, most of the correspondence *PLN* receives is supportive. Wright is frequently invited to speak at prison-law conferences and law schools, and has appeared on Pacifica Radio’s “Democracy Now” as an authority on prison brutality and prison law.

Last year, The Petra Foundation honored him with a 2005 Petra Fellowship. “Through his work with *Prison Legal News*,” wrote Bridgette Sarabi, the director of the Western Prison Project, “he has not only shown fearless leadership in advocating for the human and civil rights of the incarcerated, but has helped untold numbers of prisoners become more effective advocates themselves. Through his legal advocacy, he has helped force large prison bureaucracies to be more accountable. He has given hope to millions of current and former prisoners.”

Hope comes in different forms for those prisoners who read the magazine. Whether it’s a good or bad thing for prisoners to petition the courts in mostly losing cases, *PLN* helps them do it. And in one case, a Connecticut prisoner representing himself won an appeal based solely on the legal content he found in *PLN*.

Wright has given leads to reporters and editors from *The Seattle Weekly*, *Harper’s* and *Mother Jones*. Over the years, newspapers across the country have picked up several stories the magazine has broken, including pieces about the exploitation of prison labor by private businesses.

These days, Wright sounds less like an ex-con than your average editor. “The plan is to have 10,000 subscribers by the end of 2006,” he says confidently, arms crossed and feet firmly planted in the living room of the house his parents helped finance.

Sound unrealistic? Overly optimistic? Maybe so, but who would have thought that when Paul Wright went in for murder, he’d come out a magazine editor who, to date, has published more than 190 issues? ♦