



# ALLIANCE OF FAMILIES FOR JUSTICE

**2019 REPORT**

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## INTRODUCTION

2019 was a phenomenal year of growth and progress for the Alliance of Families for Justice. We are proud to share all we have accomplished, which we could not have done without the help and support of our members, volunteers, supporters, allies, donors and funders. We continue to bear witness to the incredible strength of families impacted by incarceration, who transform their pain into power, and fight for a just system for their loved ones and for society as a whole.

## LEGAL & FAMILY SUPPORT UNITS

In 2019, we significantly expanded our direct support services with the official launch of the AFJ Legal Support Unit and Family Support Unit, which work hand in hand to address the pressing legal, social, emotional, and mental health needs our families experience. All of these services are free. Our Legal Support Unit provides a vital set of services to incarcerated individuals and their families. It takes a multi-pronged approach to providing legal representation to people in prison as well as advice and resources for their families. The focus is on legal issues that affect the rights, concerns, and quality of life of incarcerated people and their families. It is staffed by two experienced full-time attorneys; Kwesi Dash and Tajuana Johnson. The Unit has been in official operation for a little over one year and has assisted over 300 clients in that time. The Family Support Unit is led by our consultant Yao Obiora Dibia (fka Rommell Washington), LCSW, ACSW, an incredible healer with decades of experience, steeped in the issues our families encounter. The Family Support Unit consists of weekly family empowerment circles; and individual and family counseling services. In the first year of operations the unit assisted more than 100 people.

## GINO BUSH FELLOWSHIP AND ITHACA ORGANIZING

In 2019, we launched the Gino Bush Fellowship at the Alliance of Families for Justice: Ithaca. Our first Gino Bush Fellow is Rose Fleurant, who is based in our Ithaca office and works closely alongside AFJ's Central New York Coordinator, Phoebe Brown.

Throughout the fellowship, Rose has been building support in the Ithaca region for our felony disenfranchisement campaign, developing community partnerships, and welcoming formerly incarcerated people home.



About Rose:

*“I have been on Turtle Island all my life, welcomed by the indigenous peoples while at the same time unwelcomed by colonizers who stole and settled on this land. I am a member of the Student For Life Association, which has expanded my generational roots, giving me deep insight, knowledge, and experience. Additionally, I participate in various grassroots organizations and groups working towards justice and healing including For Brown Bleeders, Multicultural Resource Center, Mentors for Change, Bramble, and the statewide Justice Collective. My purpose is to live with nature, to*

*flow free like the rivers and the wind, and to fiercely grow strong on the smallest cracks of the thickest man made pavements, I am here to stay forever. I am here to love and to give unconditionally and to rebalance the equilibrium of pachamama. My colonized name is Rose Fleurant and I am another seed of revolution.”*



The namesake of this fellowship is Mr. Gino Bush, Jr., an inspiring and steadfast community leader who passed away in late 2018. Mr. Bush moved to Ithaca in 1980 and quickly became an advocate for racial justice in the community. He established a “Circle of Recovery” program to support black men recovering from addiction and later expanded the program to support boys at Ithaca High School as they learned to navigate racism, classism and adolescent masculinity. He served on the Community Police Board in the 1990s, speaking out against racism and the use of force in the department while also giving credit to the department for increasing transparency in recent years.

## FELONY DISENFRANCHISEMENT

We made great strides with our felony disenfranchisement campaign this past year. Many legislators have stated that they would support this effort, including some wonderful new allies. In November, after meeting with our team, Sen. Kevin Parker introduced a bill which would restore the right to vote to incarcerated people in New York State. This is a major step forward after a year of hitting the pavement and building support for our campaign.

A concurrent goal that we have with this campaign is getting our members civically engaged. Having the right to vote is one thing; exercising that vote is another! Many of our members were not voters prior to getting involved with our organization and campaign. After getting involved with us, we have seen that they have become more engaged in not only the voting process, but also in civic activities in their communities. We have also done a great deal of public education for formerly incarcerated people, especially people on parole, many of whom do not know they have the right to vote. This has been a way to tangibly get more people involved in the civic process in the short-term while continuing to pursue our long-term goals.

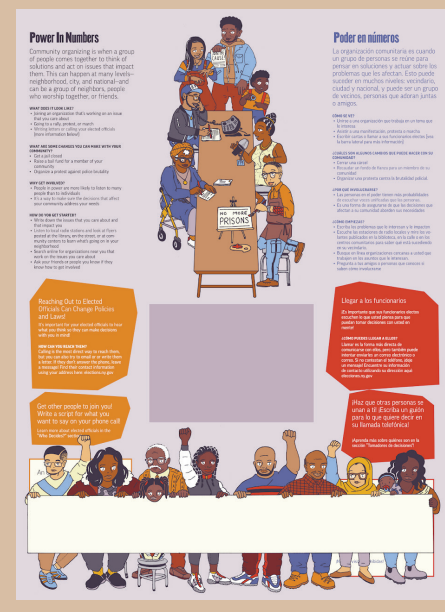


*Felony disenfranchisement meeting with Sen. Kevin Parker.*

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND OUTREACH

Each month we hosted a community organizing meeting, usually held on the third or fourth Thursday of the month at the National Black Theatre located around the corner from our office in Harlem. These meetings were used to discuss issues of concern to our members, share news and events, organize activities and create a safe space for sharing and healing. We also used these meetings to welcome home people who were released from prison.

Four of our monthly meetings are used as special occasions: a tribute to women in May, a



## CENTER FOR URBAN PEDAGOGY: MAKING POLICY PUBLIC

AFJ was selected for the Center for Urban Pedagogy’s “Making Policy Public” project. Through this project, CUP collaborated with AFJ members to develop a beautifully designed poster about the importance of civic engagement that spoke to our directly-impacted families. After working hard with designers over the course of a year, the poster is ready to be printed and distributed!

We will distribute these posters throughout New York State to encourage directly-impacted families to vote and become leaders in their communities, which is especially important during this upcoming election year!

tribute to men in June, a family dinner in November and a holiday dinner in December. We take time at these events to give special recognition to our dedicated volunteers.

Our members distribute our materials at bus departure locations and events throughout NYC and upstate New York. Information about our work is included in a monthly newsletter, Building Bridges, prepared by another Albany-based non-profit and distributed inside all DOCCS facilities. Quarterly, we host a radio program, “On the Count” on WBAL, 99.5 FM that can be heard throughout the Southern Tier of NY, including inside the prisons in that region.

We distribute our online monthly newsletter to more than 3000 subscribers. Each issue is packed with information about policies, events, and advocacy activities.

## CLOSE RIKERS

In the fall of 2019, we concluded a community engagement project focused on the mayor’s plan to close Rikers. Throughout this project, we held public education forums in directly-impacted communities in Manhattan and Brooklyn to spread awareness about the plan and build support for the closure of Rikers. We are pleased to be able to say that it was highly successful. We engaged directly-impacted organizing fellows who coordinated various community education forums to build support for the plan, attended and testified at hearings, published Op-Eds, and developed and distributed public education materials to counteract the rampant misinformation about the plan. The plan was approved by the City Council and is now moving forward.

## REGIONAL CONFERENCE WRAP-UP

Throughout 2018 and 2019, we co-hosted regional conferences with ally organizations in major regions of New York State. These regional conferences explored the impact of mass



Buffalo Regional Conference

incarceration on families and communities. In 2019, we hosted conferences in Buffalo, the Adirondacks, and Albany, which followed our 2018 conferences in NYC, Ithaca, and Peekskill. This was a project of the Justice Collective, a network of organizations strategically located across New York State in regions where clusters of prisons are located. Together we built a strategy to enable us to have a larger impact across the state regarding issues of concern to our constituents. Each conference enabled us to build new relationships with like-minded organizations and directly-impacted families in each region, strengthening our state-wide network and deepening the public conversation around these issues.

Thank you to our fellow members of the Justice Collective for bringing this two-year, six conference project to fruition!

## FAMILY RETREAT

On August 2-4, we convened at Powell House for the second year in a row for a beautiful, healing and moving family retreat. The youngest attendee was two years old and the eldest was in her 80's! Families traveled from all over the Northeast. Many of the same children that attended last year returned this year and had a blast reconnecting. There were many new attendees as well, especially teenagers, who found a supportive community of peers with similar lived experiences.

The weekend was packed with activities for attendees of all ages. Kevin and Dani led several writing workshops for both teens and adults. Marilyn did a fabulous job managing a multitude of arts and crafts activities for kids and teens, including t-shirt making and picture frame decorating. There were opportunities for younger children to participate in story time, run around and explore outside.





There were various self-care and healing opportunities throughout the weekend. Soffiyah led meditation and Aqirah led yoga every morning. There were several salt scrub making workshops in which participants made salt scrubs infused with essential oils. Joni, an amazing massage therapist, generously offered her services for free throughout the weekend and everyone jumped on the opportunity to get a 15-minute massage! Yao offered ear acupuncture and Reiki throughout the weekend, and led several moving and breathing sessions to keep us centered while discussing what can be very triggering and vulnerable topics of having incarcerated loved ones. He also offered one on one counseling in the evenings to help attendees process what came up for them throughout the day.

We are so incredibly grateful in particular to Yao and Joni for giving so much of themselves throughout the weekend so families could experience peace, relaxation, and healing! And we are very thankful for the staff of Powell House for making us feel so welcome and supported throughout the weekend!

## FIRST STAFF RETREAT AT BLUE MOUNTAIN CENTER

On October 31-November 3, Alliance of Families for Justice held our first ever staff retreat at the Blue Mountain Center. Over the course of the four days, the staff engaged in intensive



Staff brainstorm at Blue Mountain Center.

discussions on needs, goals, strategies and priorities for the next several years. Staff also had the opportunity to bond with one another, and enjoy the beautiful Adirondack scenery of Blue Mountain Lake.

Thank you so much to the Blue Mountain Center for generously granting us the space we needed to reflect on what we have done, and plan for what is ahead, in such a beautiful, soothing setting. And thank you to BMC staff for making the experience comfortable and enjoyable.

## DATA TRACKING: POWERBASE

We accomplished a major organizational growth goal this year by integrating Powerbase, a database for organizers, into our workflow. Through rigorous training and customization both by our staff members and by the Powerbase team, by the end of 2019 we accomplished our goal of tracking the majority of our work, including meetings, events, support circles, donations, grant management, and newsletter publishing, within this database. This enables us to have a clear picture of what we have accomplished and what our goals are for the future, and provides us with accurate and precise metrics for internal evaluation and reporting to our funders.



Bank account opening with 501C3 status.

## FINANCES

### 501C3 AT LAST!

In June of 2019, we successfully obtained our 501c3 tax exempt status! This is huge for our organization as it means we can now accept funds directly, run our own payroll, and access many other benefits that are only available to nonprofit organizations with 501c3 status. We are so grateful to our fiscal sponsors, IFCO and Alliance for Global Justice, for enabling us to carry out our mission until we were able to operate independently. Thank you also to the attorneys who assisted us in attaining this important milestone!



### GRASSROOTS FUNDRAISING CAMPAIGN

Our second annual grassroots fundraising campaign was also a great success! In addition to many returning fundraisers, we had lots of new volunteers who dove in head first! We more than doubled our donations from last year, and engaged new donors who are also excited about getting involved in other aspects of our work.

## GALA

We were proud to celebrate our third anniversary in September! Once again, we gathered at the Alhambra Ballroom in Harlem to reflect on our growth, envision the future, and give thanks for how far we've come. We more than DOUBLED our attendance and revenue from 2018 and we're so touched by all of the love and support.

It was our privilege to be able to honor the law firm of Patterson Belknap for their pro bono work providing legal representation for families whose loved ones have been killed while incarcerated, and Rommell Washington, the director of our Family Support Unit, who gives so freely of his time and energy to provide behavioral health support to directly-impacted families.



*In February 2020, Patterson Belknap secured a landmark settlement for the family of Karl Taylor, who was murdered by corrections officers at Sullivan Correctional Facility in 2015. We are proud to have been able to support the Taylor family throughout this ordeal, and we are so grateful to Patterson Belknap for their tireless work in this case.*

## FLO AND CAROL: TWO AFJ MOTHERS

To give you a glimpse into the lives of two of AFJ's most steadfast volunteers, we had Florence Washington and Carol Harriott interview each other about having incarcerated loved ones, and the impact AFJ has had on them both. Please enjoy some excerpts from their conversation:

**FLO:** How did you get involved with AFJ?

**CAROL:** Well the first time I learned about AFJ was when I went to see my son. Two young ladies gave me two fliers at a bus stop. I put them in my bag but I didn't pay them no mind.

The second time was, Soffiyah was at a bus stop at that time, and another young lady was at the bus stop at that time. She gave me a flyer. I tucked it away, too. I was gonna put it in my bag. And she said, oh we have a meeting on Thursday. I said oh too bad because I have to work on Thursday. I just tucked that away in my bag to go about my business. I never contacted them for a while.

So after I tucked away the flyer in my bag, not paying it no mind because, you know, I had gone to a couple of other organizations they were all telling me the same stuff. Oh you need to bring five people, if your son can get five people to sign up with you then we can do something, or if he can get ten people to sign up then we can do something. So, I just figure all organizations are like that. I wasn't paying AFJ no mind with their flyer.

Well one day I was home, I got to call Soffiyah and then I really got connected with AFJ. I was home one day and the phone rang, and one of my son's friends inside called me very frantic. "Oh, you know, they beat up your son; they beat up your son. They, they, they pepper sprayed and beat up your son and, and I don't hear anything at all, not making any noise." So, you know I got really, really scared. It was a Saturday. I remember I

didn't make plans to go up there. I didn't have no bus to go up there to make the emergency run, couldn't get no car, couldn't make the emergency run. So, I just panicked, and remembered the flyer from Alliance of Families for Justice, and I called and God bless, she answered the phone. Ms. Soffiyah Elijah answered the phone. Can you believe that on a Saturday? And then she heard my franticness. I was scared. I was sobbing. And she said to me, "calm down. Ms. Harriott, calm down. Calm down. Just calm down." That's what I heard, you know. "Calm down." So, she told me to calm, but, you know, you can't calm when your kid's in trouble, right.

So, after she told me to calm down, I explained to her the situation. I've never seen this in my life, and when I talk about this, I get very emotional because I've never seen this before in my life. But she, herself, told me, "give me 10 minutes; I'll call you right back." So, I hung up the phone, and I didn't pay her no mind. I just started calling other people. Organizations say they're gonna call you, don't usually call you back in 10 minutes. Okay? On the word, she called me back in 10 minutes. Flo? On the word, she called me back in 10 minutes. Said, "Ms. Carol, I have a lady that can go up Sunday and see your son and make sure he's okay."

And she got someone to get in there Sunday, and the lady called me when she got out of the visit on Sunday. She said, "Ms. Carol, your son is a little bruised up, but he's okay." That, that was the, that was how I know that AFJ –



**FLO:** That they meant business.

**CAROL:** That's when I knew I have to do something with AFJ. I have to do something with AFJ. So what was your involvement with AFJ?

Flo: Well, before I met Soffiyah, my son was incarcerated. I used to write letters and send commissary. I tried to go up a few times. The ride was just too rough for me. I met Soffiyah almost at the end of my son's sentence. Before getting involved in AFJ, I was just taking it like oh well, there's nothing much you can do. He's incarcerated. There's nothing you can do. But being involved with AFJ, it is so much that a person can do for an incarcerated person once you get involved with an organization like this. And I always believed that you need support 'cause you can't do this stuff by yourself. So AFJ was my support, is my support. I work with them. I will protest with them. I will go to Albany with them. Whatever they ask me to do if I got the time and energy, I will do it because this organization, they do what they say.

**CAROL:** Yes, yes, exactly. I call them my family.

**FLO:** Family from another mother, you know. Soffiyah and her staff.

**CAROL:** All of them.

**FLO:** They really, really come off as family.

**CAROL:** Genuine, genuine. Like I said, I went to a couple organizations and they didn't make me feel any better, and I would go in my room and close my door and cry and wonder how can I help my son. I have my church family. But even though they have people incarcerated

themselves, they don't wanna say that they do have people incarcerated themselves. It's like a stigma. It's like they're ashamed, you know. It's a shameful thing.

But it happens, and we have to be able to talk about it. And until we can sit down as a church family and talk about it then we gonna always be hurting. So, that was me. I was hurt, I was hurting a lot 'cause I, I couldn't talk to them about it, how I was feeling when my son got hurt, how I was feeling. So, AFJ really is – Flo, they're my life, how you call it? Life, what would you call that thing when they throw it overboard in the water?

**FLO:** Life, life preserver.

**CAROL:** Ah, that's the thing.

**FLO:** Life preserver.

**CAROL:** Yeah. And AFJ, you know, really, my experience with them, and getting involved with them changed my life because it also gave me the opportunity to help other people that have family members incarcerated because incarceration has always been a part of my life, my family, but it's been all my brother, my brothers, you know, and my mom would have to go through that, and sometimes people don't realize that when a loved one, especially your children, go to prison that we go to prison too.

**FLO:** That's right.

**CAROL:** We are actually locked up too.

**FLO:** That's right. My experience has changed since getting involved. Like I said, I can really help other people. I remember calling some people

when the pandemic was like really heavy, um, and really talking them off the edge 'cause one lady she had three sons in prison and she could not talk to any one of them. And she was panic stricken.

And we talked and we prayed, you know, and I called her just to check on her. She was very appreciative and, and she knew that we at AFJ really care.

**CAROL:** That's right. You know, I would never have thought I would be doing what I'm doing. One of my highlights is when I go to the bus stop and give fliers to other people, and they're saying oh, I didn't know this organization existed. I say, YES.

**FLO:** What are some of your favorite AFJ memories? The family retreat was my favorite.

**CAROL:** Oh girl.

**FLO:** That was the first one I ever went either last year or the year before, I can't remember, but it was the best. Oh my gosh. I cannot wait for another one to come. Family retreat is my best memory, my favorite memory, and the family circles are my favorite memories when Yao take that talking stick and he shake that stick and he say who next? Who next?

**CAROL:** Pass it on.

**FLO:** Pass it on. I love the family circle, but the retreat, that, I've never been on a retreat like that before.

**CAROL:** It was awesome. And my other one was when I went to Albany, and Soffiyah told me I was going to emcee for the rally. In the park and all

these people were there. And, she told me, oh, the person that was supposed to emcee didn't show. So, you, well, guess what Carol, you're going to emcee. I said Soffiyah, are you crazy? You know she's a little crazy, right?

**FLO:** Right. But Soffiyah has a way of picking the right person for the right job. She really does.

**CAROL:** But, Flo, Flo, – she's a little crazy

**FLO:** She may be. She may be, but she – let me tell you. When I did all the calls for the family support stipends, I did almost 400 calls. And then, for all those numbers. And, I'm like, I'm not going to be able to do this. And I touched each and every one of them, I touched.

**CAROL:** She knows, she knows, the talent. I don't know how she does it, but she does good. You know, at nighttime I can rest better. You have somebody behind you to see you through when a time is rough. And, they don't want to limit you, they don't limit on the call. They just, they call us, you know. They've helped me out a lot, especially Kwesi and Tajuana, the lawyers.

**FLO:** Yeah, and the last holiday party, my son went, my, my granddaughter went, my whole family came to the party. We had a great time.

**CAROL:** Alliance of Families for Justice and Soffiyah and her team, you know, they're an awesome group of people that really, really show true love, kindness and respect to all of the people that they touch. And they don't charge us anything. You individually count, you alone count.

If there's one person in Soffiyah's office, she makes you count and this is what's so special about Alliance of Families for Justice.

**“WHETHER IT’S MARCHING, WHETHER IT’S MAKING PHONE CALLS, WHETHER IT’S CALLING TO SEE IF PEOPLE ARE OKAY. WE JUST ROLL RIGHT IN AND BE A PART OF THE ORGANIZATION. I, I LOVE IT, I LOVE IT, I LOVE IT, I LOVE IT, I LOVE IT, I LOVE IT.”**

**FLO:** Yes, that’s most special that you matter, you count, and if it’s only you then you get to help. Whether it’s marching, whether it’s making phone calls, whether it’s calling to see if people are okay. We just roll right in and be a part of the organization. I, I love it, I love it, I love, I love it, I love it.

**CAROL:** I am so honored to be a part of this organization.



*Group family retreat*



*Albany Regional Conference*

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## BOARD

We're proud to have a wonderfully diverse board of directors and advisory board who provide wisdom and guidance while at the same time enjoying the satisfaction of creating a sustainable foundation for AFJ. The relevant life experiences and expertise of our governing and advisory board members have been invaluable to AFJ's growth and development.

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**THANK YOU FOR A TRANSFORMATIVE 2019. ONWARD TO...2021!**

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