An Activist Life Oral History Project

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

LOIS AHRENS

Interviewed by

AMBER TUCKER

October 27 and November 21st, 2008
Northampton, Massachusetts

Narrator

Lois Ahrens has been an activist and organizer for social justice for more than forty years. In 2000 she started the Real Cost of Prisons Project which brings together justice activists, artists, justice policy researchers and people directly experiencing the impact of mass incarceration to work together to end the U.S. prison nation. The Real Cost of Prisons Project created workshops, a website which includes sections of writing and comix by prisoners, a daily news blog focused on mass incarceration, and three comic books. She lives in Western Mass with her partner.

Interviewer

Amber Tucker is an undergraduate at Smith College.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Three 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Amber Tucker.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Ahrens, Lois. Interview by Amber Tucker. Video recording, October 27, 2008. Women's Activism and Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Lois Ahrens interview by Amber Tucker, video recording, October 27, 2008, Women's Activism and Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Ahrens, Lois. Interview by Amber Tucker. Transcript of video recording, October 27, 2008. Women's Activism and Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection.
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Transcript of interview conducted October 27 and November 21, 2009 with:

LOIS AHRENS
Northampton, MA

by: AMBER TUCKER

TUCKER: Okay – could you just start with your name and maybe a little about how you— came to live in Northampton?

AHRENS: Okay. My name is Lois Ahrens and I was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1947. I lived there until I was almost 18 years old and then, like all people growing up in Brooklyn at that period of time, the idea was to escape to Manhattan — not to live in Brooklyn. So, I escaped to Manhattan.

I ended up going to college for one year – Queens College – and then I dropped out and I started working. I worked in New York for a number of years and then I left New York to take a cross country trip, which took a very, very long time. This was like, in the '60s when people did things like this.

I ended up eventually moving to Austin, Texas and I lived in Austin from 1970 to 1980. During that time the main focus of my political work — and even before that — became what was then called gay liberation and what was then called women's liberation. And sometime in the late 1970s I met a woman who ended up getting a job teaching at Smith College, so we ended moving here. So, that's how we ended up here in Northampton. I've lived here ever since. I've lived here since 1980 and its 2008 now — so a long time. I guess longer than I've ever lived anywhere. But, my whole entire life, regardless of what else I've been doing, I've always been a political activist and an organizer.

TUCKER: Great, can you talk a little more about your upbringing? Your younger years, were your parents politically involved? Did they encourage political discussion in the household?

AHRENS: I was born in 1947, so that was right after World War II. And I grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn — East Flatbush it's called. On my mother's side of the family, my grandmother really — she lived in an apartment — I mean, we all lived in a little apartment. But *she* lived in a little tiny apartment downstairs from our little tiny apartment (laughs). And her children, although not

necessarily my mother, but her other children — my aunts, or one of my aunts and one of my uncles — were very politically active in the ‘30s. They were part of the communist party and they were active politically, I mean they were very engaged politically. My mother was the youngest and so she kind of missed that, but yet she grew up around it.

My grandfather on my mother’s side, who I didn’t know, worked in a factory as a cutter. Making clothes, being the person that cut the patterns. And he was a trade unionist. They were both born in Europe — my grandmother and grandfather and they were Jewish. So, when I grew up, when I was still very young — it was right after the war and a lot of our relatives had been killed in the war. There were a lot of people I knew all around me who had lost family members in the war and also people who people thought were dead were found to be alive and coming into our neighborhood. As so — that as a young person — it was like all these people rose from the dead.

I also knew a lot of kids that I went to school with, whose parents had survived — or one of their parents had survived concentration camps and got out of the camps and married somebody else — but a lot of, a number of kids that I went to school with, their parents still had their camp numbers on their arms.

So, that was what I was born into. On my father’s side of the family — they had been here much longer — they weren’t recent immigrants, and they were much more established as Americans. We would go to their house to celebrate these kind of American holidays like Thanksgiving (laughs) and I don’t know what other American holidays we celebrated, but that was were we would go for our American life. So, in that way it was a more politically involved or aware upbringing than most kids had. I guess. But of course I didn’t know that.

I think there was something about having grown up right after the war. I was thinking just a couple of days ago — these people who lived down the block from me on the corner, they were moving out and this Black family was going to move in and the house was firebombed. And you know like, they tried to set it on fire and I don’t remember how old I was, like ten or eleven and I remember being shocked that all of these Jews weren’t outraged by this, having just lived through the Holocaust. You know? That sense, that awareness didn’t transfer to other people’s lives. And I remember thinking this at a very, very – I mean, I don’t know I was maybe like ten or eleven — so for whatever reasons, I think a combination of things, I think I was always very aware of the injustices that I perceived.

I think the other thing is — and this may be from when I was a little bit older — I think that being gay from a very early age, or knowing that there was a difference that set me apart, I think put me outside in some way as a viewer of things, as more of an observer of things as a kid than maybe other kids. I mean, it's not like I didn't have friends, but I think there was some kind of observer status because of that. So, I think that just that combination of things just kind of propelled me into thinking politically.

Some aunts and uncles were very political, I mean they were no longer doing political things, but they had all this, you know, Marxist analysis that they had left over from their youth that they couldn't shut off (laughs). I mean, they would always be going on and on and on, but I mean they weren't active. And I think that was something that I always realized even as a young person, that it wasn't enough to do the bla bla bla, you know? You actually had to do something too. Because I heard a lot of bla bla bla.

TUCKER: Alright, so could you talk a little bit more about your involvement with the Gay Liberation Movement and with the Women's Movement?

AHRENS: Well, when I was still living in New York in the mid-sixties, there really wasn't a gay liberation movement. There were gay bars and there was this was this one organization called the D.O.B. [Daughters of Bilitis] which was a women's, a lesbian organization. And it there were two organizations, one was for men called the Madacheen (sp?) Society and one was the D.O.B. and actually, one of the women who was one of the founders of it — Del Martin — just died a couple of weeks ago.

It was basically a little bit social and a little bit political. At the time the belief system about gay people was that they had some kind of mental illness and so a lot of the programs and things like that had at the D.O.B. had like psychologists that came in to basically talk to gay people or gay women and say "No, you're not really sick, you're not really crazy, your relationships aren't crazy." So there was some of that and there was also some of very beginnings of feminism that were brought into the D.O.B.

Like, I remember going to hear Kate Millett, but she wrote a book called *Sexual Politics* and it was one of the early, early, early books, feminist books and it was before the book was published. She came in to read chapters of it to people and all of this was news to like, everybody. I mean, people knew it, *intuitively*, but nothing was ever written like this before. Except like, the First Wave of the

women's movement was completely buried, nobody had any awareness until women's history started again.

All of that was buried and people just didn't know anything about either own their history or about the kinds of struggles that women had in the 1840s, '50s, '60s up until the vote. That was completely unknown. I mean it wasn't taught in schools. There were no books. There was nothing. Except the books that were written back then that were in the back, back, back, back, back of some library.

So, in a way even though everybody some of these things kind of intuitively, they didn't have any substantiveness. They didn't have any materials. They didn't have anything concrete to read. There was nothing to read. I mean it's almost — I mean when I think back on it now — it's almost unimaginable how much has been created in terms of history, in terms of written materials and newspapers and in forty years. So the D.O.B. was kind of a place for that.

TUCKER: And what does the D.O.B. stand for?

AHRENS: Daughters of Bilitis. It was a place for that and it started on the West coast, two people started it – Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon. Del Martin just died and Phyllis Lyons is still alive — so, that was one thing that was happening.

The other thing that was happening was the Civil Rights movement. And I think everybody was looking at the Civil Rights movement as an example of people struggling. I mean, what was happing with the Civil Rights movement was really in the forefront of people's minds. I think — I mean it was, like everywhere. I mean it was on the news. It was on the cover of *Time* magazine, you know? It was on everybody's minds and I think that had a huge impact on those of us who were starting to think about change from the women's point of view and also from the gay point view.

I wouldn't really do much, I mean I would go sort of go to these meetings, but —and that was the other thing — there wasn't really that much to do (laughs)! I mean, that was really part of it, there actually wasn't that much to do.
In a way, it wasn't really until the Stonewall, until that happened — and that was in '68 — I mean things were very — things were very in a lot of ferment. There was the Vietnam War — I was active in organizing against the Vietnam War, I mean there was Stonewall, I mean there was a lot of ferment. I don't think there's any equivalent — that there's been any equivalent. It was sort of like, wherever you went there were people questioning things.

And it was happening all over the world, in Paris, Czechoslovakia, Nicaragua. All of these places were it was all happening at the same time – with people feeding off of each other in a really good way.

Anyway, Stonewall happened and I was living with this friend of mine from high school who was this gay guy. He was Puerto Rican and was really like — kind of a — really —queen. Alright? And that's who was at the Stonewall. I mean, it wasn't like these sort of button down kind of white guys, you know? That really wasn't who the population of that bar was.

So, Ray was there that night of the Stonewall and he came back the next morning and he said, "You wouldn't believe what happened down at the Stonewall last night." And he told me what happened and so the next night we went down there together. And the place was quarantined off and there were cops everywhere and it was like a battle ground. It was clear that — it wasn't clear how momentous it was — but it was clear that there was this really amazing shift, especially for this group of gay guys who were really a very — not exactly a tough group of gay guys (laughter).

Anyway, so that started happening and then there were organizations that started forming as a result of that. There was just this mix of what was happening. About the late 60s or the early 70s, there were starting to be papers that were put out by women that were these different kinds of manifestos and were circulated in different ways. I don't even know how — sometimes they would circulate in gay bars — because there was no place, there were no centers, there were no newspapers, there was no radio station. There was nothing. I remember talking to friends of mine about what was going on and questioning what was going on and then around the same I ended up moving to Austin.

Well, I ended up traveling around the country and then ending up in Austin. Austin had a very big gay, big lesbian community at the time communities were actually forming and a very big and diverse women's movement from sort of reformist women on the one had to more radical women on the other and everything in between. So I ended up living in a household with people that had all been part of SDS (Student for Democratic Society) and all of the women — or many of those women who associated with that became leaders in the women's movement.

So, I just naturally became part of this movement because it was something that was so right and clear to me. I mean, we may not have had all the information, but we knew that what we were thinking about the role of women

was accurate. We did all kinds of things, I mean did *everything.* We started a million organizations. We started a newspaper. We ran candidates for city council. We had protests, we — the woman who argued Roe v. Wade – Sara Wennington — she was part of the women's movement of Austin and there were a lot of people helped out on that case.

The night before she went to argue that case, this friend of mine who was this guy who went to Law school with Sara was furiously xeroxing all of this stuff that she was going to bring with her. The two of us spent all night xeroxing this stuff that Sara then took with her to argue that case. When the case was decided, she came back and of course it was months and months later — she was back living in Austin — I mean she never left Austin and I remember there was a thing called the free clinic, like a free medical clinic in the center of Austin. Everybody who had been part of the Abortion Rights struggle, problem pregnancy counseling — all of these things that we were doing all got together to hear Sara talk about what she thought the effect of what she thought would be of the Supreme Court ruling for Roe v. Wade. I remember it clearly, we're all sitting like on these little benches in this waiting room of the Free Clinic and there was Sara explaining what the decision was going to mean.

It was — it was dramatic. I mean, you know? We didn't know how dramatic it would be but it was very, very dramatic. So, I took part in all of those things and I organized a bazillion things. We organized like, a feminist counseling service out of those different kinds of services and consciousness raising groups and I mean there was just a lot of activity with many, many, many hundreds of women — all kinds of women — who were involved in it. All kinds of women and all kinds of points of view that were constantly —sometimes were working together, sometimes were arguing with each other.

I remember someone brought in a copy of *Ms.* magazine and on the cover of *Ms*. magazine was this picture of this woman with a black eye and it was first time anybody actually talked about violence against women in that way. There was talk about rape, but not about battery and the person oddly, coincidently, weirdly enough that wrote that article was Del Martin, the same person that started the D.O.B. It's very weird. And so she started the Daughters of Bilitis in like the 1950s and she ended up writing this book called Battered Women and there was this cover of *Ms.* magazine an article that she wrote.

We all started talking about it — a whole group of us got together — and we thought we should just keep talking about it and keep talking about it and we

did and eventually we decided we'd start a battered women's shelter. At the time there was a battered women's shelter in England, in London. There was a battered women's shelter in Minneapolis. And there was a battered women's shelter in San Francisco. I think there might have been something or other in Boston and that was it for the country. So, we basically just made it up. I mean, we did a lot of reading. We did a lot of talking and we started announcing that we were starting to work on this. And all these women whose mother had been beaten up, whose sisters or themselves just started sort of coming to these meetings and started telling us what was going on. So, we opened this shelter for battered women — it's called the Center for Battered Women – it still exists — and there were three staff members at the time and I was one of them. We started this shelter which started small and now unfortunately, I think is now the biggest shelter I think in the country. It's like just huge, humongous and it's not a good thing, I don't think. So, I did that —I mean, there was a very long lead up to it, of course, I mean because we had figure out what the hell was going on and we had to train ourselves to do this work. Then over a period of a couple of years the shelter grew and we raised money.

Over a period of years what happened was basically — and this had happened to the rape crisis movement too — it was changing from a movement into a social service and there were sort of competing ideologies. We always thought that you couldn't stop battery without questioning patriarchy — that's the language of the times — and so, you know, a lot of what I did even when I was doing all of this direct service work was, I would go out and I would talk to all of these women – you know, women who were in WIC programs, women who were getting welfare about what was going on and have political conversations, talk about our services but have political conversations.

But more and more what started happening was that the people who were —this is such a complicated topic — I mean, this is so ironic — there was this book, it's called *The Prison and the Gallows* and it's written by this woman named Mary [inaudible] and it talks about the rise of incarceration and institutionalized incarceration in the United States. She looks at different movements, different social movements — victim's rights movements, the battered women's movement and the death penalty movement or the anti-death penalty movement and how they were transformed and in some ways co-opted to actually set the stage for the level of incarceration that we have now and it's a very, very interest book, very, very interesting book.

So, I get this book, I heard about it and I thought "Oh, this is really interesting" because I was part of the battered women's movement, I was part of the women's movement and now I'm part of the prison abolitionist movement, you know, all of these years later — and so I started reading the book and in the first chapter on the battered women's movement, she quotes me! It was totally wild — so it's like this weird circle — but what I am saying is that there were so many influences in terms of governmental influences, in terms of what they were supporting and what was put out there and the requirements for funding. All that the movement actually changed, was transformed and co-opted [it] into something that was not a political movement.

They way it started — this happened with the rape crisis movement too — but it absolutely happened with the battered women's movement so that there is no battered women's movement anymore — what there are is battered women's shelters. There are people who are professional people who do this, but they're not doing it, they're not actually acting out of any kind of political context.

So after, there was like this huge battle for the soul for the Center for Battered women and all of us that were the original people — most of the original people, all of the original people that were women who had been battered, all of the people who were women of color — all of us got thrown out. We lost the battle. And the sort of institutionalized professional women took over and that happened all around the country. It happened all around the country and we were providing really, really good services. We just also had a political context that we were acting out of. It's not that their services became better, it's just that they were depoliticized or a-politicized.

Anyhow, so I wrote this paper about this — the only paper I have ever written— and it got published in this little magazine called *Radical America*, which doesn't even exist anymore — and that paper ended up getting published in a million books and other publications which is how it is that this women who wrote this book, *The Prison and The Gallows* actually found this paper. I mean it's completely weird. Because even though this was the experience of so many people and so many activists and feminists all over the country, there was no documentation that this is what happened. And this is what happened—

TUCKER: About the *Prison and the Gallows* — would you agree with her?

AHRENS: Yeah, yeah I do agree with her. Interestingly enough, I wrote her this fan letter after I read the book – not that I usually do that – but it was such an interesting book and it turned out, so she of course knew my name because it was included in

the book — and it turned out that she was going to be in this conference in California called Critical Resistance that happened a few weeks ago and so we met.

And now she's going to send me – the book it was published by Oxford University Press and it's incredibly expensive — even the paperback and when I saw her I said, "You know, there are so many people that are in prison that I know that would love to read this book, but there's no way I'm buying this book for them" and she said, "Well I can send you ten books." I just got this e-mail, just before I met you saying, you know, where should I send them and so now I'm in touch with her all the time.

Actually, she was doing a set of interviews out there at critical resistance and people thought or people where perceiving the conference to be like the trajectory of the abolitionist movement and so she interviewed me for that. So, it's just, it's a very odd set of coincidences. I've been recommending this book to everybody, so when you finish college you can read the book (laughter).

TUCKER: Can you talk a little bit about what's lost when movements are depoliticized?

AHRENS: Well, what happens is — what I saw happen in the battered women's movement is the battered women's movement started out of the women's movement. And the women's movement looked at power relationships and looked at inequitable power relationships and what those inequalities wrought. One of those things was a power imbalance between men and women and the whole nature of machismo. And looking at all of those various influences in terms of how they played themselves out and one way — one direct way that they played themselves out was in battery — in violence against women and in women being dehumanized or in women being seen as less than equals in order for those types of relationships to exist.

Our point of view was that you could maybe solve one person's situation of a woman being beaten up by her boyfriend or her husband by providing shelter for them, but unless the whole society were to question all of these inequities and imbalances and tyrannies that it would go on forever. So, there was this idea that it was important to provide services for women who were being really horribly beaten up and their children lives being incredibly disrupted — but in order to actually change things, you needed political change, you need consciousness raising, you needed people to talk about these larger issues. One didn't invalidate the other. They went hand in hand and that was the way that change would take

place. Actual, real change, not only the individual changes that hopefully could happen with women.

And another part, in terms of programs in the shelter — that we believe because we came out of this peer counseling model that — was that women who had gone through this experience were really good authorities on what that transformation would be for other women. You didn't need an MSW, you know, you didn't need a Ph.D. What you needed was to go through the experience and be able to think about the experience and be able to provide support and validation for women. A lot of the people who worked in the shelter were volunteers and they came out of that experience. It wasn't based on the same kind of hierarchies of the professional and the victim. It was that women were struggling together to get to a different place. And it wasn't replicating these same kind of hierarchies that existed in these unequal power relationships between men and women.

We saw that replicated in the sort same kind of hierarchy and sort of tyranny of those kind of hierarchies, but what happened was that the political became completely deemphasized — it didn't become deemphasized, it became negated and instead what it became was a social service agency, where women could come in and get treatment from other women — and sometimes not even women — some shelters actually hired men to do counseling, you know — so all of the ways that it was originally conceptualized as part and parcel of a political analysis got destroyed. This happened all over the country because some of the people saw that this was a way for them to have careers and some of it was that the government supported programs that tied battered women's shelters in with policing.

So, even though at the time there was criticism about what that would mean if it was tied in with policing, in terms of where would policing take place and who would be the objects of the policing — who would actually be arrested as opposed to walked around the block, and how that would play out. It was known to us — we knew [it] that was a risk to have a battered women's shelter linked to policing. But many shelters, including the one in Austin, actually did that and it played out exactly — and this one of the things that Mary Gothchild talks about — it played out that the people that were people that were the victims of policing became just exactly who'd you'd expect. They didn't go to suburbia and arrest the guy in suburbia – the white guy in suburbia. They arrested the black

guy in wherever — you know, in the city. So, it became a kind of selective policing, just like all policing is.

So this is like a preview — sort of fast forward thirty years later into some part of my life that deals with how policing takes place. But it was known then – we didn't know – I mean, I keep saying this, but you don't how things are going to — you know something is important when it happens, but you can't even begin to predict what the affect is – how it's going to play out over the long term, you know? Like, the Stonewall uprising, or a group of women sitting together in this kind of lofty weird place in New York talking about these issues. You have no idea what going to really – how over time things are going to change because of it – you can only see that over time.

TUCKER: I'm just going to rewind a bit. You talked about how you were involved with the gay rights and the women's rights movement and at least now, when we learn about the two movements, they are often presented separate — did you get a sense of that when you were involved with it?

AHRENS: No. I think — neither one of them is a monolithic movement — is a monolithic entity. The women's movement was huge and it was everything from—even in Austin, everything from someone like Sara Wellington who was a lawyer doing this case, Roe v. Wade — there was this person who was around who started running for the school board from Austin, who's name was Ann Richards who was part of the reformist part of the women's movement in Austin in the early seventies and then eventually became a very un-reformist kind of governor of Texas. Then were a huge — there were women who were identified as sort of a lesbian faction within the women's movement, more radical, some of them. Then there were people working for – I mean, like one of the things we did was — we did everything we could think of — but one of the things we did was we questions how women and girls were represented in school text books. Because Texas had this public adoption process were people could actually comment on the adoption of textbooks and because Texas was the biggest consumer of textbooks in the country, if textbooks got written in one way in by one of these say big history textbook people for Texas, it was used throughout the country. So it was worth spending all of this energy on textbooks, you know? So, some of it was reform, some of it was questioning the actual construct of what was going on in terms of patriarchy and going out and speaking.

I remember speaking to groups of Texas sororities about gay liberation where they looked at me like I was from the planet Mars — that I would even talk

about these things. Or incoming freshman about gay liberation in the early '70s. There was a lot of crossover of activity— from gay liberation and women's liberation. But that was at the more radical end of it — at another end of it…at a more reformist end of it. I remember once being in Houston and a bunch of us came down from Austin for this big women's conference and we got into this elevator and this woman was standing in the back of the elevator and she looked at us and — I don't know what we looked like, probably what I look like now, only a lot younger — and she said "these women shouldn't be here!" Meaning us and we turned around to see who it was and it was Betty Friedan, you know who was really pissed off that we were there trying to disrupt this reformist women's conference.

And NOW was very, very homophobic, I mean like really homophobic, I mean so it's much more complicated, what different parts of the women's movement it was, what different parts of gay liberation or gay rights or what kinds of commonality people had, political commonalities and it's not as clear cut that it was separate. It became more separate over time, but certainly the first number of years it wasn't at all. Of course, that was my experience.

TUCKER: I would like to talk a little more about your definition of being an activist and being feminist—

AHRENS: I mean I think that being a feminist was the first real cooperation for me about really looking at power dynamics and conditioning and what growing up as a girl was in the fifties and the expectations — the lowered expectations for girls when I was growing up. I knew that it wasn't necessarily that – in terms of education, in terms of what, or at least how I grew up, what seemed possible, which was a very, very, very narrow — so I think during that time during the late sixties, early '70s, was a time to really look at what was possible for me a as a girl, for the world I grew up in which was working class and not really, not really much encouragement to really do anything, but maybe to graduate from high school. Not much idea that there was anything, that there was any possibility of a bigger world or a broader world. To find out that that was not just personal, but systemic — I mean it gets played out personally, but it was systemic — it was true except in rare cases — for so many millions of girls and, so I think that was a real political awakening for me and at personal level and at a political level and I think that that woke me up in a way that nothing else had woken me up and activated me in a way that, well — I haven't stopped!

So, I think it informed everything that I do, I mean of course I still see the world through that paradigm, but I think over time, other issues get built into it. So it's not just from a feminist analysis that I see the world, it's from – as I've grown, as I've matured, as I've done other work, you know, it's from a class analysis, it's from an analysis of looking at issues of racism, issues of homophobia. I mean, we didn't even have these words — of course we had the word racism, but homophobia hadn't been coined — and you know, so all of those things become part of my world view, so that's just become one element of how I look at things. It's not a static thing, and it's certainly gotten much, much, much more complicated.

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2
November 21, 2008

TUCKER: Can you tell me about how you first became interested in prison reform?

AHRENS: Well, I was, in an odd way I was kind of oblivious to it — the way everybody else was — the way lots and lots of people are oblivious to it. I would say that there are two parallel realities. One is people's who's lives are affected by incarceration which is millions and millions and millions of people -- people that have family members in prison, people that know people going in and out of jail, -- even if it's not them – all of these millions and millions of people. Like sometimes I try to figure out how many millions is that? You know, if there are almost two and half million people in prison, and if there are five million people on probation, so then that's like seven and a half million people in the United States, and then if everybody has like ten people that they interact with – which of course they act with many more than that – then that's seventy million people at any given point, but it's probably much more than that. It's probably more than a hundred million people and that's not including all the people who work in the prison and stuff. These are the people who are feeling the affects of it — so there are all of those people 100 million people, maybe more, who know what's going on and then there is everybody else, that think they know something about the criminal justice system basically [from] what they see on the news and the garbage that's on T.V. – you know, like all the cop shows and stuff like that.

So, in a weird way, I was in group two: the news group. Maybe I was a little bit more suspicious of what I saw in the news, but in a way I wasn't much different than the average non-touched person. Then I read — this was about eight years ago. I was working for this organization — Center for Popular Economics and my job was a fundraiser for them. I wasn't — I'm not an economist, but that was my job and they put on these summer economics camps for activists every year. They've been doing it for years and years and years and I went to one more than twenty years ago. So each summer when they put these on, they have like the regular crash course in economics and then they have this special area of study.

And all these people are sitting around — all these economists, they're all supposedly kind of left, progressive economists, political economists, and they were trying to figure out what special area they were going to choose for the next summer. I had just been reading these little bits and pieces about prisons — how many people were in them — and I said "Oh, why don't we do something on prisons." And they were like "Hmmm, oh, that's a good idea, but we don't have any economists that know anything about it." And I said "Well, I can find people that know about these different subjects and I will put together the special course."

So, I started reading things, because it was like pre-internet even, I mean it wasn't that long ago, but it was — so I started reading things and I started calling people up who were doing research on financing prisons and how prisons get put in communities and what happens to them and I invited them all to come and be speakers at this summer economics CPE institute and as I was doing it, I got more and more interested in it. We brought in some people — some people actually participated in the actual workshop and there were some people who were activists — like maybe they were doing some kind of antipoverty activism. Some of them actually were doing a little bit of prison organizing, but not that many. I brought, I called all these people who were all of these high power people all over the country, who were the ones doing all the work and they all said oh this is a great idea, we'll come present. So that's how I started meeting people.

So, that was like in 2000. And I'm finding all of these people and everybody's interested and there's clearly a need for more information and time for analysis for activists about this subject and there's nothing like that existing. So as people are coming I asked them, well what do you think about trying to continue doing some project like this and everybody was interested and so when

the thing was over I started looking for money. And all these people were connected to the open society and they had gotten money – that's George Soros's money and at the time they were funding — still funding sort of projects that weren't research projects and projects that weren't connected to big organizations. I just caught it at the right moment. I mean, I didn't know I was catching it at the right moment, but I was and so they all endorsed this idea and I named it the Real Cost of Prisons Project.

TUCKER: What is it in particular that made you feel like this needed to be a project?

AHRENS: I could not, like even just putting my toe in it — just putting my toe in what I was finding out — it was like this horrendous revelation to me. And at the time I didn't even know how horrendous it was. I just saw that it was totally involved with issues of racism, totally involved with issues of class, totally involved with the degradation of urban communities and policing. I mean everything that I found out about it, I was like — I was blown away. And, I mean, here it is eight years later, and I'm still just as blown away as I was on day one. Maybe more so. I haven't ever gotten numb to it because the deeper and deeper I get, the more connected I am to people and the more I learn and the more outraged I am by it. The more amazed I am, in a way — maybe not amazed, but — that people, they're not millions of people engaged in this issue.

I think it's terrible that there are two hundred and fifty prisoners at Guantanamo. But there are literally tens of thousands of people who are in — who are held in segregation in conditions that are worse than Guantanamo — for no reason other than they were not compliant with guards, or they have serious mental illness, or they tried to be political. Those people are all in isolation units, control units, segregation units, in every prison, in every little dinky jail in the country.

And here are people that will be protesting – I mean, I was just invited to speak at an international human — at the sixtieth anniversary of the [Universal] Declaration of Human Rights which is in December — and I'm the only person, I think that they invited to talk about prisons.

And here is this assault on people — not just people in segregation, but I mean, talk about lack of human rights, people with no ability to appeal — I mean, I write to people in segregation who have been in segregation for twelve years – longer than those people at Guantanamo and in worse conditions, much worse conditions – with no advocates at all.

Anyway, so it amazes me that people on the left, progressive people — and I was one of them — could be so out of it, so completely out of it to this reality. When I first started, in a way it was like a political — when I first started the Real Cost of Prison Project, we hardly had anyone involved who had been in prison. It was basically this political and intellectual exercise. It was economists, and it was me and some other people, but most of the people — researchers — people that organized it, but certainly the majority weren't people that were in prison. And now of course, my day is filled with communicating with people who are in prison. It's mostly what I do.

That's just added understanding and depth that I didn't have when I began and so that's changed, I mean it's changed incredibly from when I first started it — I mean, I could talk a little bit about what the project was —

TUCKER: Yeah, we could go ahead and — before we go into — you mentioned just a little bit about how surprised at how people on the left and supposedly very progressive people overlook prison reform. Why do you think that is?

AHRENS: I think that some of it, I think is racism. Some of I think is, people on the left and even sort of liberals and progressive — you know, everybody in that big category, whatever that big category is — I think for a lot of people, they don't see it as an issue of racisms – how racism is getting played out in this country every single day. And how classism is being played out in this country every single day. That's one reason, and I think that the other thing — which amazed me and that I say to other people and I'm always pissed off when I talk to groups like that, you know Unitarians or something (laughs) I don't mean to single them out, but you know — people, progressive people or whatever, will question every single thing that they see on the news. They'll question Iraq, they'll question Guantanamo, they'll question U.S. policy on this, health care, you know ?

They'll look at and they'll have some way of analysis this, how they're being fed this lie, but when it comes to crime and criminals, they buy it as much as Newt Gingrich, you know? They buy it as much as anybody on the Right or anybody in the middle. They swallow it hook, line and sinker. They don't question how it is people are characterized criminals, who these criminals are, what's happening to these criminals, the fact that people should be punished for as long as they are, the nature of punishment.

So I think that propaganda machine, that really intense propaganda machine, has really worked it's charm or something on all of these people. That's

like, number two and then number three is depending on the age of people — depending on how old you are if you are — let's say if you are somebody who was a teenager starting in the late mid-'70s, you have grown up with this propaganda and you have grown up with this idea about crime and punishment and — this kind of retribution and prior to that, there weren't any where near as many people in prison.

From the '20s to the '70s, there were 200,000 adults in prison, and then starting in the late'70s, up 'til now, that's when it grew. There are ninety percent more people in prison now. So, people have grown up with prison, depending on where you grew up, of what's normal. People have grown up — when I was a teenager and in my early adult life, I knew people that were drug addicts and what they got was treatment. They didn't get jail. It was before, for instance, drug addiction was completely criminalize — so that's part of my experience, my personal experience. But depending on when you grew up, you don't even know anything different. You know, it's like it's in the water. And people are unquestioning because that's all they know about.

And combined with the media, combined with T.V., the disgusting, horrible T,V. shows. I mean, there's this show on T.V. it's called *Lock Down*, and it shows people in segregation. Now, I write to a ton of people in segregation and I guarantee you that none of those people are those guys with the swastikas tattooed on their foreheads, throwing shit at the guards and, you know what I mean. This is what people's idea of who's — idea of who's in prison and especially who's in segregation.

TUCKER: So what do you — so basically, how do you think the glamorization of prison — do you think that has an affect on people's perception of prison, especially activists?

AHRENS: The glamorization?

TUCKER: Yeah, with these T.V. shows like *Lock Down*?

AHRENS: I don't know that that's the glamorization. I think it's the sensationalization of it. I think people come to believe that that's how things are. You know, and they don't have any other reality. They don't have any other — they don't have their own experience of it. They don't know somebody who's lock up. They don't know somebody who's in segregation, so they believe it. And they believe it in this completely unquestioning way.

And then the fourth piece is, in terms of why people are so accepting is what I started out by talking about these parallel realities. And combined with — I went to this prison in Norfolk in Massachusetts a couple of weeks ago — or a month ago now — and you drive through this pretty little New England town in a suburb of Boston, you know, the rock walls and bla, bla, bla and this nice town center and they were all opposing having a CVS being put in the town center of this little town. And then you drive a little bit outside of the town and there are these gigantic prisons. Huge, humongous prisons, like three right next to each other and unless you know they're there, unless you go down this road, you don't find them. And that's true everywhere. Prisons are — I mean, that's a particularly odd one in a way, that group because they're like near this — these old towns, but they have to put them somewhere in Massachusetts and Massachusetts is more built up. But other prisons that I visit, you drive and you drive and you drive and you drive and you drive and you drive through these rural areas and you spend hours and hours and hours driving and then they pop up on the landscape. There they are. These big, ugly things, you know, in the middle of farm land. And unless people seek them out, you don't see them.

And the intension is — you're not intended to see them — you know? I mean, one of the things, one of the little factoids that I always use is that there are more prisons than Wal-Marts. But Wal-Marts you're designed — they want you to see Wal-Marts. You *know* how many Wal-Marts there are. They're everywhere, but prisons they do not want you to see. And unless you happen to bump into them somehow or you live in a town — or even if you live in the town, you don't even know.

I went and spoke to a group of students at Framingham State College, which is where the women's prison in Massachusetts is. It's the oldest women's prison in the United States and I said to the student who I was arranging the talk with, I said "Well you probably want me to talk especially about women", and he said to me "Oh, is that because we have a lot of women at the college?" And I said "No, it's because you have Framingham women's prison right down the road from your college." This is what I mean. And, I mean this wasn't — he wasn't special in any way. He could tune that out.

TUCKER: I actually have a — and since you mentioned it, I would like to know how your work as a women or as a feminist or as a lesbian woman has affected your work, or your prison work. Or shaped your—

AHRENS: Yeah, I mean it's interesting — I don't know exactly how it has — I mean, other than that's part of the prison that I look at things with. But I mean, interestingly enough, I think that most of the vast, vast majority of people that I correspond with and visit are men. I mean of course there's many, many, like 200,000 women in prison — I mean, a lot more in jails, but 200,000 women in prison compared to — the number of women in prison now are the same number of people that were the complete total prison population. So, the number of women has gone up enormously, but the number of men has gone up so enormously.

But it's very — I was just talking to somebody about this — about why is it with so many people that I hear from — and I've been asked by different people that put out, like different periodicals for prisoners, if I have contact with women in prison. Somebody recently asked me, you know, they wanted to write to a woman in prison at Framingham and did I have any contacts there, but I hear from very few women. And I try to, I mean I always think about why.

And even — let's say I hear from — this woman I met, is doing, is writing this book on women who were prisoners in the United States — not political prisoners, just — let's say a woman who's there because she robbed something or probably killed a husband or boyfriend or something like that. Not especially notorious women — just women in prison — and I said, when I met her, I said if you give me the names of these women you've been interviewing, I'll send them comic books, 'cause one of them's on women. So she gave me the list and I sent them and you know, I said bla bla, Vicky Blabla sent me your name and I sent them out and I never heard back from them. And not only didn't I hear back from them, I didn't hear from anybody else in those prisons.

Whereas, if I send a set of comic books to a man, even if that man is in segregation — which means he's locked down twenty-three hours a day and even when they go out, like if they have like a little bit of time outside, you know they're like in another cage — even with that, word will spread in a segregation unit about the comic books and I'll hear from the next guy over in a segregation unit. But that isn't true about women. And I don't know the reasons. I mean, I don't know whether there is a lot more shame — I mean that's one of the things, I think a lot more shame — a lot more stigma, a lot more mental illness, you know? Just a lot more things keeping women from being more outward when they're incarcerated. I mean, the incidence of mental illness is huge in prisons — I mean, it's huge anyway — but it's huge in jails. I just read this statistic that seventy-five

percent of women in jails have diagnosable mental illness. That's — that's an intense number.

You know, and more than sixty percent have been victims of child abuse and sexual abuse. There's this huge correlation between injection drug use and sexual abuse. And so women, it could be — are dealing with completely untreated in these prisons – completely untreated — dealing with a kind of, a set of issues that the men aren't dealing with. They almost all have kids and they're completely — when I say that these prisons are in the boondocks of the boondocks, there are women who are in prison that go for years without seeing their kids and lose custody of their kids. And are dealing with that, you know, that sadness and that shame. And so I think that there are all of these kinds of reasons that are very complex about why I think I don't hear from more women.

I guess my being a feminist is the thing that allows me to want to think about this. It's still — I still don't have any way of actually reaching out to them in ways that — you know, in more ways. One things is that when I have, when we have these three comic books, one is on women, one is on the war on drugs, one is on the financing inside of prisons, and I— when people request the comic books, when men request the comic books, I always send them all three comic books, including the women's one because I want them — people say "Well why do you, why are you sending the women's one to men?" You know, I want them to know about the experience of women. Which, I feel like is good for them and anybody else to know.

TUCKER: You mentioned that you think that the prison is intentionally racist, and do you feel like it's also intentionally misogynist?

AHRENS: Oh, I mean, it's a horrible, horrible, it's an inhumane system. It's an inhumane system, it is — I mean, if you go to a prison anywhere. Maybe not in New York City, like if you go to Ritgers Island jail, if you go — because all of these prisons are in — no matter what state they're in because of policing, because of racist policing, because of driving while black, because of walking down the street while black, because of the kinds of sentencing that goes on, because the system itself is racist, because people who are poor and don't have access to decent lawyers can't opt about of the criminal justice system the way rich people can — especially the way rich white people can, or even the middle class, there are many, many, many — there are a million African-American men in prison. A million. If you walk into any prison, no matter where you go, in the Whitest of White states, if you go up to Vermont, and you walk into a prison, you'll see

Black people. And who will you see guarding them? White people. And there is no prison, except maybe, like Ritgers Island, or you know some city — some big city jail. Maybe in Los Angeles city jails, where the, where maybe a lot of the guards a Latino, you know, maybe, but if you go into actual prisons, what you see is White people keeping Black people or people of color in cages. That is what you see and that's what goes on.

And so the degradation, the — just everyday shame the huge, huge, huge discrepancy of power. Power, I mean in the most gross form, goes on every single minute of the day. Every single minute of the day. And these are by and large white people that are rural white people that have absolutely no experience with people of color and especially black people, other than being their – locking them in cages, so to say that it's, I mean it's racism cranked up times, I mean, I don't know what, you know what I mean? The only equivalent would be like slavery. But even possibly in slavery there was more humanity between people, depending on the kind of situations, you know what I mean — if it was two slaves and one master — well this is one master and thousands of slaves, always.

So, if you take that and you take that dynamic and then on top of that, you put women and male guards watching them doing everything that you can imagine, and the kind of sexual abuse and the kind of intimidation that goes on, I mean it is horrific. I mean, which is why, which is maybe another reason — but I guess maybe not because, people don't even know — why people don't want to think about it, because it is so horrific. So, it is fraught, every aspect of the system is fraught with power, and racism and misogyny and degrading people. It's their job — they see it as their job to degrade people. And, I mean the inhumanity. They've been these studies of what happens to guards and their humanity is —and maybe they start out as normal farmers or something and their humanity is completely striped of them from doing these jobs.

TUCKER: So, I — this sounds very powerful, um, could you talk a little bit about how your involvement with the Women's Movement, which you were talking about last time, and your kind of brush with the Civil Rights Movement affected your understanding of what's happening in the prison reform system, if at all —

AHRENS: I mean, I think that everything, that all of my — to me all of the political work and all of the political thinking and activism and understanding about power and money and racism started from when I was a kid up until now. All that has led me to this point. You know? It's like to me — it's not like there was this piece and that piece and this piece and that piece — that they were distinct. I mean, they

might look distinct, but they all have sort of come together in this, because it's an atrocity. I mean, to me it is an atrocity. It's something that's happening and except for the number of people that are speaking out against it and trying to talk about it. It's tiny compared to the scope of it. So, I think that everything that I've done has led me to this point. I mean, I don't know any other way to describe it.

TUCKER: How would you say — you were beginning to say how your work with the prison project has changed you. Do you want to talk a little bit more about that?

AHRENS: Yeah, I mean it's changed me — I don't know if it's changed me, I mean I'm still — let's say I was never an especially laid back person, and I've always been very engaged in trying to involve people in making change. I mean I've always, always, always been involved with that. So in that way it's not any different. I'm not changed in that way, it's just really that, this whole world — I see these things going on this country that are so horrendous and so now I'm trying to — I'm not trying — I'm focusing on, I spend all my time doing this. I spend any minute that I can on it. I mean, so I am completely 100% engaged in it. I mean, all the time. And I mean, any amount of time that I have, I try to communicate with people or talk to people or work on policy issues if that's if there's an opening for that or talk to students or talk to people at Stop-N-Shop. I mean, you know, write letters to the editor.

I have this website, which turned into this gigantic website. I mean, this daily news blog that I post stuff to and I mean now, between the website and the blog, the last time I looked, it has like a hundred and sixty thousand distinct page views a month. That's a lot. I mean it's a lot. It's just me sitting in this little room putting things up (laughs), you know, but, so a lot of people use it. I run into people that use it. I was in California and I was giving this talk and people came up to me at the end and they said, "Oh, we use your website all the time," (laughs). You know, it was kind of funny. But, I mean, I know that people must, but I never meet those people.

So I do that to try to spread more information and that connects me with people all over the world. And of course, because of the comic books, I remember — I don't know if I mentioned the comic books — so part of the Real Cost of Prisons Project, a number of years ago, part of the project was getting these three comic books. I had this idea to create comic books.

And I mean, I'm not a comic book person, I never read comic books as a kid and I never read anything at all about comic books, but I decided this was a way to — what I wanted was a way to create materials that were accessible, but

had a lot of information and analysis in them, but that everybody would want to read. So there were three comic books and it was part of the original grant and I hired people to write them and I helped write them and then artists to create them. So, over the last couple of years, I've printed a hundred and twenty-five thousand of these comic books and I've sent out more than a hundred thousand and I literally, personally sent out every one of those hundred thousand (laughs). So, some of them go to organizers, you know, I send them out in boxes of two hundred or four hundred or something. And then some of them, individual copies of each one of them, I send to prisoners. I've probably sent about either ten or fifteen thousand to prisoners. So, a lot of them are out there. And a lot of them are also up on the website. People download them and use parts of them for flyers and stuff like that. So they're definitely out there and now a book has been made of them and so hopefully the book will be in libraries and college classes will use them and things like that, which, the comic books haven't been used that way.

So, because of the comic books, I hear from a lot of prisoners, every single day. Every single day that there is mail I get mail from prisoners. Usually, everyday I get five or six letters a day from prisoners requesting comic books. And so I send them comic books, the set of three and I send them a letter and I send them a list of places where they can get free books and subscribe to free newsletters. And sometimes what happens is I hear back from people and some of those people I've ended up starting corresponding with. Now, I have — I don't even know how many people I correspond with. A lot. A lot. I mean, it could be literally a full time job. Just trying – I mean it is – just trying to keep up with the requests for comic books, the website, the blog, the correspondence, and doing some speaking, you know that kind of stuff. Now I'm trying to publicize the book, but that has put me in touch with a tremendous number of prisoners.

And because of that, that has been the biggest change in my work. It's a very, round about answer to your question, but that contact with prisoners has been the biggest revelation. Who they are, who some of them are, and I mean, one thing is — often I get letters from people who can barely write. I mean they can barely made their requests known in a letter. That's how poor their writing is and that's not uncommon. And I write to a number of guys in prison that are completely self-taught. They taught themselves to read and write and then they taught themselves to be critical thinkers and political people. And they've become politicized in prison. Those are the majority of the guys I write to. Maybe with a few exceptions, they're all Black or maybe a couple of them are Puerto Rican or

Chicano. But the vast majority, because that's what the vast majority of prisons are Black. And they're just amazing people. Amazing, amazing, amazing people. And that — my contact with them has really, really, enriched my life. I mean, and it's deepened by political work, I mean an incredible amount.

TUCKER: In addition to the comics — it's kind of like an art form. Why do you think that art is particularly important to activism? Or do you think it makes your work with the prison project more successful?

AHRENS: I chose the — I mean they are very nice looking, but I chose them not so much because of, that form, not because of it's artistic — I mean I wanted them to be very nice looking. I mean, they have these glossy kind of covers and the artists are really wonderful artists and they have a lot of other work out there, but I wanted them to look like comics, you know, be the size of comics and printed on comic paper and I felt like, that for a lot of people the comic book form doesn't scare them off. You know, like a lot of times I get these things, "send me comics, I love comics." You know? Then I send them these comics about the war on drugs or prisons (laughs) but, you know I think that people aren't scared by comics, even though the comics have all the material in them. There's footnotes in them, there's glossaries in them. I mean, there are — I mean, we purposefully made the language at the sixth or seventh grade reading level. The ideas are very, very complicated, but the form is very, very accessible. And that more than anything is why I wanted comics. And that's why I think they've been successful.

The other reason why I think people love them, is that they're free! They're free. And for a lot of prisoners, prisoners don't have any access to the internet and a lot of prisoners are starved for information. And starved for information about their own lives and their own experiences and these are about their lives and their experiences and they're free. And I think that that is a really important thing about them. I mean there's this woman who's a library — getting a graduate degree in library science and asked me about what prisoners read and access to information and I said prisoners don't have access to information. They have terrible, terrible libraries — if they have libraries — and all they have in them is like Westerns like from the — I mean, they have garbage in them. I mean, most prisoners don't have access to books or money for books or there's so many restrictions for them getting books. I mean, there are these books through bars programs, but they are completely overwhelmed. And there's this huge divide. I mean, I periodically try to request reports and studied for different guys that I write to that are researchers – I mean, they're in prison, but they're researchers.

And I'll call up the Urban Institute or some big pew and I'll finally find the person to ask for the report and they'll say "Well we don't have any paper copies of it, why don't you just read it on-line" and I'll say "Well, it's not for me, it's for somebody in prison." "Someone in prison wants to read about prison?" "You know, like they're shocked. They're like "can we send something into prison?" I said, "Yeah, you can, you know, just send it. " And you know, they don't even know that they can do it and yet they're sitting there doing these studies about prisoners. But it's all on the internet and they don't have any access here. In other countries they do, but here, they don't, so it really keeps people from — just another barrier for people — who are locked up.

TUCKER: What are your hopes for the future of the project?

AHRENS: Well, I don't know. I mean, the project has been unfunded for years now. And the only — I mean I have literally a couple thousand dollars left that I still use for postage and I go to the post office every single day. So I'm keeping the postage system alive because prisoners that's the, they're the only ones that still use the mail. And so at various points I've tried to raise money for other comics, and people always say Oh do one on immigration, do one on youth, do one on the problems of coming back to communities – you know everybody has all these ideas, which of course, I have ideas too but there's no money for it. I can't fund that. I can't find funding and so that's been very disappointing and also kind of infuriating. Because they're so useful and there's no money. Even though they've been so successful, there's no money for them. And there are more of them. So I hope at least I can find money to keep them in print. Cause at some point they'll all be gone and keep me in postage. So, that's one thing and I don't even know how exactly that's going to play out, but.

Now that the book is out, there's a little press called the PR Press that published the book, but they have zero literally funding for publicity. So I'm trying to do some publicity on that to get word out about the book and try to get classes to use it and libraries to buy it. So that's my hope is public libraries.

The other actual project that I've started working on is with this person – this really good friend of mine, his name is Teo Talis Salat-El. And he's a lifer, he's in a prison in Dallas, Pennsylvania which is like the end of the earth. He's seventy-six years old and we've become really, really, really good friends. And he is a completely amazing person. He's a jazz musician and he's a prison abolitionist. He's written a lot. People have read his papers all over the world and is just an amazing, an amazing, amazing person. He's been in prison the last forty

years and he will die there. But the last number of years, what he has been doing is — he created this G.E.D. program for prisoners.

The prison has 2,000 men in it and maybe 20 G.E.D. slots a year. And almost nobody there has a G.E.D. [cough in background] and in order to get even considered for parole you need a G.E.D. and in order to access to even better jobs in the prison you need a G.E.D., but there's no way to get a G.E.D — I mean, this is one of the perversities of prison systems. I mean, it's not peculiar to that prison system, it's just that's where he is. So, he got his Bachelor's degree in prison, he got his Master's degree in African-American studies in prison, and finished all his course work for a law degree while he was in prison.

And a couple of guys approached him a number of years ago to tutor them so that they could get a G.E.D .— take the test. Because you know, you can take the test without taking the class — the prep-class that the prison offers — you just have to sign up for the test. So, Teo started these two guys and word spread and over the last number of years, he's arranged this tutoring program. And more than 200 guys have passed their G.E.D.'s. And so basically they're teaching people how to read and write and do math, which, I mean is what they need to know. And some — the youngest person is like in their early twenties and some of the oldest ones are in their seventies – lifers that have never taken a class and never done anything.

And so Teo got really, really ill and he almost died, and when he didn't die he finished the last group of G.E.D. students and what he suggested was that together we write a G.E.D. handbook for prisoners. So that they could start their own tutoring programs in prisons. And so that's what I'm working on now.

So he's written, so far he's written the introduction — and we've worked on that together and he's written all of these pieces — like this social studies piece and I'm rewriting those and we're going back and forth and back and forth. And I need to find money to at least – so some of them will be printed. And some will be put up on the website and will let people know who are prison advocacy groups so that they can download and family groups and send them into prisons. So that's – there are these different ways that it will be distributed. But it has to be, like laid out – and it's going to take – it's been pretty time consuming already. And I've only just worked on the introduction and the first draft of the social studies one. But you know, like I was just waiting to send him the first draft of the first paragraph of his that I rewrote, which is about Obama being elected president.

So he's like this intense Obama person as are – I mean, every single letter that I've gotten from anybody since the election has been something about Obama. Guys in prison — I mean, this is a monumental thing for them and monumental thing — and Teo, to give you an idea – early on in Obama's campaign, Teo's job — even though he was basically dying — was that he had to clean the showers of the unit that he's on, and he got paid twenty-eight dollars a month to do this. That was his job. And he sent me thirty-five dollars to give to the Obama campaign. So he — that was like right from the beginning. You know, every letter was "Go Obama."

So it's, you know, I went to visit him before the election to talk about the handbook and how we were going to do it and I wore my Obama shirt because I always get these pictures taken when I visit and I wanted to have this Obama shirt on. And I was walking through this visiting room and it was packed with people and almost everybody there was Black and almost all the prisoners were Black and as I was walking through, you know, like going to the concession machines, I'd walk through and all of these guys would go "Obama" – like that – like I was like the representative of Obama in the visiting room in the end of the earth in Dallas, Pennsylvania. It was so intense. You know, like I was the only one they had seen actually in the flesh with an Obama tee-shirt. So, anyway, that's the latest project that I'm working on – is this G.E.D. handbook with Teo.

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

TUCKER: So, you were talking about your hopes for project and Obama.

AHRENS: [Laughter] Obama, well, I mean — my hopes for the project. At this point, other than the handbook and keeping the comic books in print and keeping the website going and doing the other work — I mean – we didn't really talk about this but, there's the prison work that I do that's associated with the Real Cost of Prisons Project and then there's a lot of work that I do in Massachusetts – which is mostly about – it used to be – I mean, this is how things changed. It used to be, originally about CORI – Criminal Record and Offender Information – people's criminal records and getting that changed. Getting that sort of more reform kind of stuff, but it's an opportunity to get people to talk about the idea of — about their ideas of criminals and criminality. You know, like does anybody get a

second chance or you know like, do you make a mistake at nineteen and have to suffer for the rest of your life? Is that what people really want?

And so I have this — my closest friend and also a person that I do a lot of this work with, is this person named Donald Perry and we started this organization a number of years ago called the CORI education project and so we do work about that and so that's the other part of my political work. It's not Real Cost of Prison stuff, it's based in Massachusetts and lately even that's changed and that's because I've gotten even more involved with actual prisons and prisoners in Massachusetts and to some degree their conditions and confinement and the kinds of control that the state exercises in terms of access to prisoners. And I have a feeling I going to be doing more of that, just because I'm doing more of it all the time.

I'm more connected especially with one prison in Massachusetts which is called Norfolk, which is this big prison for men and I went through this procedures to try and go in a give a talk to the lifers and it took me months and months and months and months and months of getting rejected and going through the appeal process to get in there and talk. And so I finally did get in there to talk and a lot of the guys I've been writing to I actually met in the flesh [laughs] and some of them are like these gigantic – I mean, there are like 150 guys, most of them lifers, some of them long-termers and so I've gotten kind of more involved in that, the access to the kind of control that is exerted over — keeping people out of prisons. And just—two days ago— there's a new commissioner of corrections in Massachusetts, I mean he's been there for a year and there's this big public meeting— hearing in Boston of him and his staff and all of these people from around the state and I don't remember what. And I sort of testified at that about how the prison system is keeping people out and I'm sure — I'm just getting more involved with that and so I'll just continue to keep doing CORI stuff because that's something that's possibly changing in Massachusetts and I'm now just more in touch with people that are working on issues of the conditions of confinement of prisoners in Massachusetts as a result of this talk I did in Boston over a year ago, a year and a half ago.

Anyway it's just another — it's just how things evolve, you know, so, I don't know exactly what I'll be doing, I just know that I'll be doing something. Like, I was just talking to this woman in Boston, we were talking about these issues of writing to people in prison and she talked about, well maybe we should approach the ACLU to see if there's some kind of case or something that can be

brought. So, who knows? You know what I mean? I mean, like, it's hard to say. Like, maybe a year from now, maybe I'll be spending a lot of time on that.

TUCKER: Is there anything else that you would like to cover? I can be about, this that's a huge question – about your life or your past or your involvement with the project or –

AHRENS: Well one thing I think I should mention, I mean I feel Iike I should mention – because I don't think I've mentioned it, is that — is a little bit about my personal life. And that is that — I mean I'm sixty-one, I'll be sixty-two in June of 2009 and when I was seventeen or something I came out and I came out before Gay Liberation and I came out before the Women's Movement. And was active — very active in both of those for many, many years. And now here I am living in Massachusetts – I don't want to screw this up – I'm so bad that these kinds of dates, but whenever it was that gay people could marry in Massachusetts – four years ago maybe?

TUCKER: Maybe a little longer?

AHRENS: I don't know what it was. I'm terrible about these kinds of dates, but anyway — whenever that was, whenever that momentous thing was, a few months after that I ended up getting married. I mean, I will living with this woman called Ellen Macramac (sp?), who I actually met as a result of the Real Cost of Prisons Project. And, so we met in 2000 and I guess 2004 we ended up getting married and so here I am, never having even imagined myself, in my wildest dreams ever — you know when people think about getting married — I never ever thought about getting married because it was completely outside of the realm of possibility or anything. I mean, I just never, ever, ever thought of it. And it was never really a big issue for me when people were agitating for marriage, but Ellen who had been married two times prior to that because she had once been able to marry men and did marry men, when it became possible for us to get married, of course she thought about getting married because she'd been married before.

So, now I'm married. And that's just a very interesting thing, you know. I mean, completely unexpected in a way, completely unexpected. And it's definitely something that signifies the amount of distance traveled from when I was seventeen years old.

Other than that I think I've talked about everything I could possibly talk about [laughs.]

TUCKER: Um, well I don't know, actually just for my own personal interest – you just mentioned the amount of distance travel. The being able to get married is amazing and also the Obama thing –

AHRENS: Yes! Obama! Yes, yes, Obama! I should say more about Obama. I mean, it's kind of interesting because I was — this morning on this show called *Democracy Now!*, there was these two different people, one was this journalist named Jeremy Scale [sp?] and another was a journalist named David Corn and Jeremy Scale had just written this thing which was on *Alternet* and David Corn works for Mother Jones and had written this piece for Mother Jones and Jeremy Scayhill's was about all of the old people, like all of the recycled people from Clinton and you know — and basically like a very bad news group, you know like starting with Madeline Albright or Larry Summers. I mean, these despicable, despicable people. And then David Corn wrote like, the other kind of article about all these people that were actually environmentalists that might actually work for the EPA and people that are interested in justice – actually working for the justice department – you know, something really weird like that [laughs] and there were both of them and I read both their articles afterwards and you know, they have this – sort of how both things are happening simultaneously – you know, who we bring in. Some of them, like these people and who's, like whether it's going to be a combination of these people with these different tendencies and who's going to win out?

All of that — so that's one level of Obama, like just the beginning. You know, like he hasn't even been inaugurated yet, but one the other hand there's the other level of Obama. And the fact that he was elected and elected by the amount that he was elected by. And who he is and this whole – what it will mean. What it means for White people and what it means for Black people. And I mean, I don't know what it's going to mean for White people. I mean, hopefully White people will be helped in some way [laughs] by it. I don't know, but at least – and maybe it was just economics trumped racism. But for Black people, just because I'm in touch with so many Black people – even though it's through letters and even through e-mails, it's a lot of people that I work with because they're family groups – they start out by working because their kids are incarcerated and they start these organizations. Those to me are some of the most powerful organizations. And because my life is very involved with issues of racism and my best friend is Black – this guy Donald and so I – the power of it to me is [pause]/ I

don't know how it's going to play out but I think it's amazing. And, I mean I don't know what it is going to mean for young people, but I think it's amazing.

And it's like, I'm like Teo – I want to see Barack Obama and Michelle Obama and the children and the grandma. I want to see them in the White House. You know, whatever that is, I want to see him like, in front of Congress and I just… I just want to see him and I'm completely into that. Sort of almost like a…there's almost like a level…like a bigger level that it's going to play out on. And I don't know what that'll be. I don't. But I think it's a hugely positive thing. And I think it's a hugely progressive thing in terms of moving people along and I'm just glad that I lived to see it. You know? I'm really glad that I lived to see it. And I feel like that's what a lot of people my age and older feel – you know we lived to see it – this completely unexpected thing. So it's — I just think there's a resonance for people that it's so important, but I don't know what it's going to mean. But I think it means something good. I think it means something good.

TUCKER: Alright, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Amber Tucker, December 2008