

STATE OF THE UNIONS

# Both Were Once on Death Row, Now They Share a Life Helping Others

By Vincent M. Mallozzi

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Nine years ago, Sunny Jacobs and Peter Pringle were living in a seaside cottage in a sleepy coastal region of Ireland, when a man from Detroit who had been accused of murder and rape, a man they had never met, arrived at their home.

“He was a black man in his early 50s who had just spent 20 years in prison,” Ms. Jacobs said. “He was angry, which I will admit made me very nervous when he first arrived.”

Their troubled visitor, who had accepted an invitation extended by the couple, had been wrongfully convicted of the crimes he allegedly committed, which resulted in two decades of his life senselessly wasted behind bars.

“We both knew exactly what he had gone through,” Mr. Pringle said. “We felt his pain, we understood his anger.”

Ms. Jacobs, now 71, and Mr. Pringle, 80, had each lived a similar nightmare — she in the United States and he in Ireland — both caught in the slow wheels of their nations’s criminal justice systems. They were both dragged onto death row, where they spent a decade and a half awaiting execution, before their convictions were overturned for the murders that they steadfastly maintained they did not commit.

“It was an extremely dark time in our lives,” Mr. Pringle said.

On Jan. 29, Ms. Jacobs and Mr. Pringle will be at the United Nations headquarters to attend a screening of “Fallout,” a documentary that will shine an investigative light on those dark times.

Mark McLoughlin, who directed and produced the film, which follows the lives of Ms. Jacobs, Mr. Pringle and two others in the difficult aftermath of their exonerations, said he was

“concerned by the fact that a victim of the state becomes classified as an enemy of the state as they fight to establish their innocence.”

“I was specifically interested in the trajectory of their lives after prison,” Mr. McLoughlin said, “which in most longer term cases have been destroyed.”

To avoid such plight, Ms. Jacobs and Mr. Pringle — who were married in November 2011 in New York and were the subjects of a Vows feature — have created the Sunny Center Foundation, which is based at their home in Ireland and at a donated property in Tampa, Fla. They welcome men and women who have been wrongfully incarcerated, providing them with spiritual, emotional and physical support to ease them back into society.

When in Ireland, they also make sure to maintain “some alone time,” as Ms. Jacobs put it, starting with breakfast every morning together, but not before they feed their cat and their dog, and their goats, donkeys and hens.

“All of us live together on what you might call a little bit of a farm, with a magnificent view of the ocean,” Ms. Jacobs said. “As far as entertainment goes, we have 11 grandchildren between us spread out in Los Angeles, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, so keeping up with them is entertainment enough.”

“Otherwise, Peter and I are more than satisfied with going for a long walk on a beautiful evening, and coming home and reading a good book,” she said. “Of course, things are a lot different when an exoneree is staying with us, then everything changes, all of our attention gets focused on them.”

Since 2010, there have been 14 exonerees who have traveled to meet the couple, with the man from Detroit being the first. The majority of the exonerees have had their spirits lifted and been given a renewed sense of purpose by Ms. Jacobs, Mr. Pringle and a handful of professional counselors and therapists affiliated with their foundation. Others, however, have not been able to return to the productive lives they were leading before they were wrongly convicted and jailed.

“When you are imprisoned, love is the first thing that disappears from your life,” Ms. Jacobs said. “So the first thing we do for our exonerees is make them a part of our family, we invite them into our home and shower them with unconditional love.”



“When you are imprisoned, love is the first thing that disappears from your life,” said Ms. Jacobs, who met Mr. Pringle in 1998 at an Amnesty International event in Ireland.  
Christian Michael Delfino for The New York Times

The 14 exonerees, which included a woman from Holland and a man from Taiwan who arrived with an interpreter, stayed with the couple for anywhere from two to four weeks, “depending on the psychological condition of each individual,” Ms. Jacobs said.

The first week, she said, “is all about them getting their stories out, so we mainly listen,” and the second week, “is when we begin to share our own experiences with them.”

By weeks three and four, their fellow exonerees are encouraged to meditate, participate in yoga and pray, and are provided with tools that the couple say went a long way toward their own emotional and spiritual recoveries.

“The greatest tool is forgiveness,” Ms. Jacobs said. “If you hold on to that anger and resentment, then there’s no room for happiness and love in your heart, and you start destroying your own life.”

Other tools come in the form of trauma specialists and counselors, “and that’s where things get expensive,” Ms. Jacobs said, “which is why we need donations to keep our foundation running.”

Ms. Jacobs and Mr. Pringle are hoping to expand their base of operations in the United States and Europe through donations and future fund-raising events. Thousands upon thousands of frequent flier miles have already been donated to the couple’s foundation.

“We run on an extremely minimum budget,” said Ms. Jacobs, whose work has already taken her and Mr. Pringle to 12 countries.

“The more we can expand, the more people we can help,” she said. “Do you realize that there are over 2,000 exonerees in the United States alone?”

According to the National Registry of Exoneration, there are in fact 2,363 exonerees in the United States, which total 20,045 lost years of life.

“These exonerees, who did nothing wrong in the first place and lost huge chunks of their lives in prison, are offered little or no compensation upon their release, whereas actual criminals who served their time are entitled to receive all the financial benefits the system will allow,” Mr. Pringle said. “It makes no sense.”

Ms. Jacobs and Mr. Pringle have each written a book about their experiences, hers entitled, “Stolen Time” (Random House, 2007), and his, “About Time” (History Press, Ireland 2013).

The couple met in 1998, during Ms. Jacobs’s global campaign against the death penalty that brought her to a crowded pub in Galway, Ireland, to speak at an Amnesty International event, which Mr. Pringle had attended.

As Mr. Pringle listened to Ms. Jacobs share the horrific events of the day in February 1976, when her world went dark, he began to cry.

Ms. Jacobs, then 28, was a passenger in a car driven by a man named Walter Norman Rhodes Jr. Also in the car was her second husband, Jesse Tafero, as well as their 10-month-old daughter and Ms. Jacobs’s 9-year-old son from her first marriage.

Mr. Rhodes, who had befriended Mr. Tafero during an earlier prison stint for both men, was giving the couple a ride from Miami to the home of friends in West Palm Beach, Fla., when they were pulled over by two police officers at a rest stop off Interstate 95 in Broward County.



Six months after they met, Mr. Pringle invited Ms. Jacobs back to Ireland, where they quickly fell in love. The couple married in November 2011 in New York.  
Christian Michael Delfino for The New York Times

The scene erupted in a hail of bullets, leaving both officers dead. The police captured all three suspects and charged them with murder. Mr. Tafero and Ms. Jacobs, who maintained that Mr. Rhodes had done the shooting, were sentenced to death, while Mr. Rhodes, who testified against the couple, plea-bargained with authorities, reducing his sentence to life.

In 1981, Ms. Jacobs won an appeal and the Florida Supreme Court changed her sentence from death to life in prison. But her spirits were crushed the following year when her parents, who were raising her two children, died in the crash of Pan Am Flight 759 in Kenner, La.

“It was the most devastating time in my entire life,” said Ms. Jacobs, who still wears her mother’s wedding ring, which was salvaged in the wreckage.

Her children were cast into the foster-care system, but Ms. Jacobs still had her husband, with whom she exchanged prison letters.

“Anything he touched, or that he wrote on, or that he licked with his tongue, I was keeping,” she said. “I existed on those letters.”

But on May 4, 1990, with Ms. Jacobs still in prison, Mr. Tafero was put to death in a Florida electric chair.

“The world had become a place I didn’t know anymore,” she said.

She continued to fight for her release, which came in 1992, nearly 17 years after her arrest, when her conviction was overturned on appeal, as Mr. Rhodes eventually confessed to murdering the two officers.

Ms. Jacobs had entered solitary confinement inside Broward Correctional Institution as a “28-year-old vegetarian hippie,” she said, and exited prison as “a 45-year-old orphan, widow and grandmother.”

(Her story, along with five other wrongfully convicted death row inmates, became “The Exonerated,” a play that had its Off Broadway debut in October 2002, with Ms. Jacobs portrayed by the actresses Jill Clayburgh, Mia Farrow, Lynn Redgrave, Susan Sarandon, Kathleen Turner, Brooke Shields and Marlo Thomas).

Mr. Pringle was accused of being one of three men who had murdered two police officers following a bank robbery in July 1980 in Ballaghaderreen, Ireland. A 41-year-old divorced father of four at the time, he had been sentenced to be hanged after his conviction.

His lawyers won a stay of his original Dec. 19, 1980, execution, which was then reset for June 8, 1981. His hanging was only weeks away when, on May 27, 1981, Ireland’s president commuted Mr. Pringle’s sentence to 40 years without parole.

Mr. Pringle, who is originally from Dublin and dropped out of school when he was 13, decided to serve as his own counsel. “I became something of a jailhouse lawyer,” he said.

Mr. Pringle was eventually able to prove that an interrogating officer had written down his alleged confession before any interrogation had actually taken place. He said that in May 1995, “the case was quashed by the court of criminal appeal on the grounds that my conviction was unsafe and unsatisfactory.”

Ms. Jacobs, who was born in Rockway, Queens, and grew up in Elmont, N.Y., was living in Los Angeles at the time she met Mr. Pringle. She made an effort to remain his long-distance friend, saying she found him to be “a very honorable man.”

Six months after they met, Mr. Pringle invited Ms. Jacobs back to Ireland, this time to give a talk during a local concert he arranged in Galway.

“During that visit, we fell in love,” Ms. Jacobs said.

“We didn’t just share a past,” she added. “We had a vision for a future.”

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