

Swarthmore College
Leah Gallant '15
"Coding for Justice"
June 30 - August 8
Boston, Massachusetts, USA

The Issue

In the past decade, activists and legal scholars have placed increasing emphasis on how mass incarceration, fueled by the 'war on drugs,' has ravaged communities of color across the United States. The Sentencing Project states that the incarceration rate has increased by 500% over the past three decades, making the US incarceration rate the highest in the world. Many people are incarcerated for drug-related charges: 90% of sentences served in federal prisons are for nonviolent crimes. Even after being released, being marked a felon makes it extremely difficult to find jobs, leaving formerly incarcerated people with few options to re-integrate into society. Felons are not allowed to vote in many states, and are ineligible for public housing and SNAP benefits. In her groundbreaking book 'The New Jim Crow,' legal scholar Michelle Alexander presents a deeply unsettling truth about the racist undercurrent of the 'war on drugs': there are more black people in prison or on parole today than there were enslaved in 1850.

The movement against unjust sentencing is growing, but its emphasis remains on incarcerated men, neglecting the toll that mass incarceration takes on families, communities, and children. There are 1.7 million children under the age of eighteen with one or both parents incarcerated in the US today; the average age of a child with an incarcerated parent is eight years old.¹ The instability that comes with an absent parent places these children at extreme risk of dropping out of school or themselves becoming incarcerated.

Project Summary

Only a large-scale shift in the criminal justice system will decrease the number of people in jail for nonviolent offenses, but that can only come about when a vanguard of advocates, politicians, and community organizers coalesces around the issue. The purpose of this grant will be to provide an activist toolkit for the next generation of organizers to fight mass incarceration by starting a six-week camp in for eight young women between the ages of 14 and 18 with incarcerated parents.

The focus of Coding for Justice will be computer science, political advocacy, and social media literacy. In order to practice these skills, the camp will revolve around a social media fundraiser campaign to raise enough money and in-kind gifts for the camp to continue in the summer of 2015. Camp participants will set up and maintain a blog where they will document their experiences over the summer. They will also gain real experience with website building by creating and maintaining the blog.

The camp will be hosted by Families for Justice as Healing, an organization led by formerly incarcerated women that advocates for harm reduction alternatives to the war on drugs. Coding for Justice will be located at the organization's office in Roxbury, a low-income neighborhood in Boston, MA. The idea for this camp springs directly from conversations with director Andrea James. We have reached out to the Boston Youth

¹ The Sentencing Project: Incarcerated Parents and Their Children, Trends 1991-2007:
http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/publications/inc_incarceratedparents.pdf

Fund, which pays teenagers an hourly wage to hold a summer job or internship, about the possibility of covering camp participants' stipends in future summers.

Why Coding and Social Media?

Coding for Justice is unique in its emphasis on these skillsets for two reasons: computer literacy will both enhance Families for Justice as Healing's online presence and provide camp participants with highly employable skills. With grant money from traditional one-source funds and federal and state funds drying up, today's activists must be fully versed in social media fundraising in order for their organizations to survive. In addition to writing weekly blog posts, camp participants will learn how to list volunteer positions on Idealist, publicize events and relevant articles on Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook, and use Kickstarter to raise funds for the following summer's camp. These skills, in addition to background knowledge in coding, will also increase campers' employability in the future. Software engineering is an incredibly lucrative profession; according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the 2012 median pay for a programmer was \$93,350 per year, with a job growth rate of 22% in the next ten years. With a solid head start in coding, graduates of Coding for Justice will ensure that the appallingly low rate of women in computer science—about 13%--becomes a thing of the past.

My Role

I have extensive experience tutoring, leading art workshops, and working as a camp counselor at a community organization in the low-income community of Chester, PA. I have worked as a journalist, run my own blog, and am comfortable with a variety of social media platforms. I have also used social media, primarily Facebook, to organize and build an audience for a feminist reading group in Boston last summer. Through that experience I gained a wide number of contacts with community organizations in the Boston area, including Web Start Women, Girls Who Code, and Girls Develop It, organizations that we will hire a volunteer coding instructor from.

Social movements are crippled when they are not led by the marginalized group they purport to help. I am a white girl from Cambridge, MA, which although only five miles away from Roxbury feels like another world. I have no pretenses about the privileges my race and class afford me. I am, however, determined that my privilege can be used to further the organizational capacity of Families for Justice as Healing. I will use my network of people and institutions with resources to build support during the summer's fundraising campaign.

Timeline

Late March – publicize project to relevant organizations, and community members;

interview and select coding instructor; send out applications for camp participants

April – hire coding instructor, select camp participants

May 19th – attend one-day Social Media for Nonprofits Conference in Cambridge, MA

June – Finalize syllabus and field trip schedule based on input from camp participants

June 30th through August 8th – Duration of camp

August 9th – Benefit Concert at Families for Justice as Healing