

M.E.E.E.L.J.

Minorities for Equality in Employment, Education, Liberty and Justice

New opportunities for former inmates and juveniles

By Brian Hollingsworth

With three telephones sitting on her desk it takes Latreese Cooke a moment to figure out which one is ringing. Shortly after she hangs up one, another phone rings and then another one. It's easy to imagine that Cooke's days are one long phone conversation broken up by intervals of silence in which she tries to get work done.

Cooke is the founder and executive director of Minorities for Equality in Employment, Education, Liberty and Justice. The Bastrop, Texas, based organization helps formerly incarcerated persons and juvenile offenders' transition back into society and successfully completes their parole period.

With multiple programs like substance abuse and anger management counseling, employment services, and family services the organization tries to address the many challenges faced by ex-offenders, their families and the families of those who've been recently incarcerated.

"I thought that MEEELJ was going to be about representing minorities, but it's not. We saw 157 people last year and probably 60 percent of them didn't look like me," Cooke says. "But they were persons struggling in a system that they really don't know anything about."

"We are into providing wellness and wholeness and support for people who have erred," Cooke says.

Cooke founded the non-profit organization in 2001 after almost 10 years of assisting ex-offenders during her free time away from her many city and state related jobs. After almost six years of work and after investing \$30,000 dollars of her own money Cooke has grown the program and turned it into her full-time career.

However, she still doesn't collect a salary for herself, and MEEELJ's operating budget continues to be primarily funded by donations and grants. At first Cooke, who is African American envisioned the organization as a way to help minority parolees and probationers. She believed that minorities had the most difficult time becoming productive members of society because once they were released there were few places for them to turn to for help and support. However, not long after she began the organization she realized that her services were filling a need for ex offenders of all types.

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Cooke recognizes that the inclusion of the word minority in the organization's title continues to create some confusion about what MEEELJ does. She's thought about changing the name, but she hasn't come up with anything that she feels better expresses what the organization is trying to accomplish. The 85 parolees that Cooke estimates the organization helps each year is only a fraction of those released in Bastrop and Caldwell counties.

However, Cooke hopes to see that number grow. With a recent contract with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to provide substance abuse counseling to recently paroled individuals in Bastrop and Caldwell counties, Cooke expects hundreds more people

will walk through MEEELJ's door beginning Sept. 1, 2006. With about 32 active program participants at this time that would be an exponential jump in the number of people that the organization can help. Although the participants who come to the organization as part of the new contract will be there for substance abuse counseling all of the organizations' programs will be open to them if they decide that they want to participate.

Cooke is excited about the opportunity to help more people, but she knows that the increase in the number of participants will put a strain on her small staff. With Cooke as the only full-time staff member and only three other part-time staffers, Cooke hopes to bring on as many as 25 volunteers over the next year.

The organization hasn't always enjoyed good relations with the law enforcement community. According to Cooke, Bastrop County was initially resistant to the organization. She believes that part of that resistance was due to her reputation as an outspoken critic of the county government. She also acknowledges that the MEEELJ was an unknown quantity and people didn't know what to expect from MEEELJ. Some critics expressed concern that MEEELJ would enable some offenders to go back to their criminal ways.

"We do not work against law enforcement, but we do not work for law enforcement," Cooke says. "MEEELJ is not an outlet to allow criminal behavior to continue."

"Now that MEEELJ has established itself as an organization that successfully helps parolees and probationers, they receive a lot of referrals from the law enforcement community."

"Anything that can help individuals get back on their feet is a positive program," says Bastrop County Judge Ronnie McDonald. "Ms. Cooke has run a lot of programs that have helped bring people back into the community."

Greg McGown's parole officer referred him to the program in 2005. McGown was released from prison four and a half years ago. After moving to the Bastrop area from Houston, McGown participated in the organization's anger management program as part of his parole.

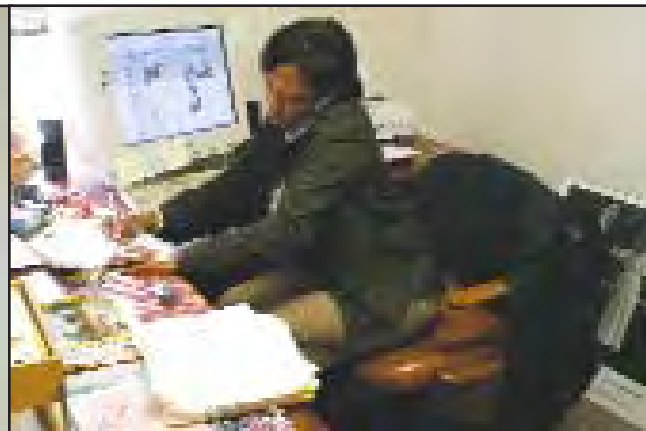
"I learned to control my anger and channel it into constructive energy," McGown says.

With a murder conviction in his background, McGown was lucky to have found a good job without using the organization's employment services, but McGown says he wishes he had met Cooke and found out about the organization sooner.

"I've been successful, but I feel like I might have gotten here quicker if I had her help right after I got out," says McGown.

"I think Mrs. Cooke and the MEEELJ program definitely gives an added edge to those who're trying to get their lives together after they've been released."

McGown is so appreciative of what Cooke and the organization has done for him that he's donated his own



Latreese Cooke is the founder and Executive Director of MEEELJ. She takes a call from a mother whose son is currently incarcerated. With multiple programs like substance abuse and anger management counseling, employment services, and family services the organization tries to address the many challenges faced by ex-offenders, their families and the families of those who've been recently incarcerated. With three part-time staff members, Last year Cooke managed 157 cases.

money to the organization, and he hopes to be more involved in the organization and it's programs once the terms of his parole allow it.

In June 2006, the organization relocated to a bigger location that Cooke hopes will facilitate her desire to expand the organization and its programs in the future. Cooke wants to open four more offices in Central Texas over the next year, so she can service all of the Austin area. But her plans go far beyond Austin.

"The goal for me is for MEEELJ to be all over the world, in all different communities through out the United States advocating and helping this population," Cooke says.

Cooke takes two more phone calls at the end of her day, one from a mother whose son was recently imprisoned and another from her daughter who wants to be picked up from a relative's house. She might be leaving the office for the day, but it's not likely she'll stop working until late at night because Cooke's family needs her, the people in the organization's programs need her, and the communities of Bastrop, Caldwell, and Eastern Travis County need her too.

For more information about Minorities for Equality in Employment, Education, Liberty and Justice or to make a donation, call 512-581-0213. You may also visit their website at www.meeelj.org.

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Rick Ojeda was a former FBI Special Agent with 25-years combined federal and local law enforcement experience. He has worked for the Houston Police Department (HCPD), FBI, and Fox News, and has worked with law enforcement such as America's Most Wanted and the National Geographic Channel.

(Rick was recruited by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Texas (S.D. Texas) in Houston, Texas (HCPD). He has received numerous awards from the Director of the FBI and the Department of Justice including commendation from the President (Barack Obama) 2009)

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