

360 Degrees of Incarceration

By Francine Russo

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"I'll always be someone able to rob you": inmate John Mills | Photo: Sue Johnson/Picture Projects

"I hate that sound. The key," says incarcerated teenager Cristel in a shaky voice. "And I hate the cuffs, the sound. . . . They go sclk, sclk, sclk—I just can't stand it. When they put them on you, they feel so cold."

"I was ready" for a fight, her schoolmate victim Lupita recounts angrily. "But I wasn't ready to . . . Have somebody cut me up like a little piece of rag doll or a little piece of meat like that, you know."

"Initially, I thought there was no hope," rumbles the deep-voiced family court judge. "Because of the seriousness of the crime, we made an agreement that the child would be there until 21 and never get out early."

As these voices emerge from your computer—of the prisoner, the vic, and the judge: all real people—you can guide your mouse to slowly scan Cristel's prison room with its girly bed and stuffed animal, the courtroom, the judge's chambers. Click on your choice of

cameo photos, and you'll hear a prison guard griping about Cristel's release, the prosecutor explaining why she tried Cristel as a juvenile, Cristel's mother trying to make sense of her daughter's crime. The voices are accompanied by shots of Cristel's home, the intake room of the prison, squad cars, scenes of everyday life, inside and out. They are all part of a dynamic new Web site, 360degrees.org: Perspectives on the American Criminal Justice System. It's a knockout, taking debate about incarceration out of the egghead realm and making it visceral.

Cristel Medina's story is not the only one here. You can drop into John Mills's cell. The 22-year-old armed robber bitches about his lumpy mattress while confessing, "I'll always be someone able to rob you, shoot your house up, take your car."

The title "360degrees" reflects both the structure and theme of this Web documentary, which was designed to offer multiple perspectives on criminal justice. Just as the camera appears to pan around each room, so the commentary also shows every side—criminal, victim, prosecutor, defense attorney, families, scholars, and criminal historians. The idea, say Alison Cornyn and Sue Johnson of Picture Projects, is to inspire dialogue—and to instigate change.

"There are a lot of myths about incarceration," says Todd Clear, Distinguished Professor of Criminal Justice at John Jay College and an adviser to 360degrees, "and this is an important part of contemporary society. This country's prison population is the largest per capita in the world. For a country that values freedom yet locks up more people than anywhere else, it has to ask itself some hard questions about its policies."

The site, says Clear, will bring together two key constituencies who usually never converse. "One group is those with direct experience of the criminal justice system, personally or through family and friends. The other is those who only know what they read and hear, all from the point of view that more prisons make us safer."

This isn't Cornyn and Johnson's first venture into social action. Their studio was founded in 1994, when they and former partner Chris Vail signed on as the design team for a site to showcase photographer Gilles Peress's Bosnia photos. After their attention-getting Farewell to Bosnia, they worked with other artists and academics to produce Web documentaries: their award-winning *akaKURDISTAN* with Susan Meiselas (www.akakurdistan.com) and *Re: Vietnam—Stories Since the War* with Marc Weiss for POV and PBS (www.stories.org).

Cornyn and Johnson got the idea for 360degrees after reading *The Real War on Crime*, a report by an independent commission. "We thought," says Johnson, "that we could interpret this data of the 2 million Americans who are in prison and make it come alive." The facts about this social crisis, they think, have been buried in statistics and technical reports that make them unreal to the average person. Not on their Web site. Besides the dramatic personal accounts, it proffers crime statistics through quizzes, games, and interactive maps.

But getting funding for a Web documentary—a new, hardly recognized art form—was not easy, and the documentarians, whose studio subsidizes their art by creating commercial interactive sites, needed outside help. Cornyn and Johnson teamed up with Joe Richman, an independent producer for NPR, who helped them get access to two prisons, one in Rhode Island and another in North Carolina. Johnson and Richman went into the prisons together and gave tape recorders to selected inmates and officers. Some of these "diaries," recorded over six months, will be heard on Richman's NPR Prison Diaries series, which airs on All Things Considered each Tuesday in January. 360degrees will feature a more extensive selection of these narratives.

The team had a harder time getting cameras into the prisons. Though the pictures on the site look as if they were shot in video, in fact Johnson was forbidden to use a video camera inside. Instead, she shot each space in pieces with a still camera, 20 degrees at a time. To create the effect of motion, she uses QuickTime VR, a technology used mainly by real estate sites to show homes for sale. "The panorama was important," says Johnson, "because we're asking, how can you immerse yourself in someone else's life—360 degrees?"

The site's three interactive forums also attempt to look at incarceration—along with race and class—from every side. On this segment of 360degrees, there are e-mail exchanges between criminal justice experts, judges, lawyers, victims' rights proponents and other activists, ex-cons, gang members—and you. Cristel and John will also be able to participate, by reading transcriptions and mailing in their responses. This ambitious project includes an online teaching component, the Social Action Network. The six-week course for college and high school students is already being used by small groups from the South Bronx and the Lower East Side who'll get together both on the Web site and in person and have a chance to talk to justice professionals and ex-offenders. Their assignment: Design a plan for revamping the system.

360degrees is a growing concern. "New stories will be added every other month for two years," says Cornyn. "Then, hopefully, this will be handed off." Picture Projects' idea was to create the site as a pilot for a national program to be run by a social service or educational organization.

"Some of my students who don't talk a lot in class were active online," reports Maria Finn, an English teacher at Hunter College who participated in a test run last year. Her students listened to the stories and debated issues like whether prison was for punishment or rehabilitation. They also did interviews with people in the system, like correction officers or ex-offenders. "Cristel's story got them very excited," she recalls. "It made crime very real to them, not just something they see on TV."