

**J:** Where did you grow up?

**P:** I grew up in Lake Worth, Florida.

**J:** Ok and what was your family like, or your education- your schooling system?

**P:** Let's see. I went to catholic school from K-3, I went to a Baptist school for 4th and 5th grade, and then public school from 6th grade on. I graduated from high school in 3 years at the age of 16, and I never found out that - I wanted to go to college - I didn't find out that you could get student loans or scholarships until I'd been in prison a couple years. So, I think that's kinda one of the failures - the class failures - of our education system, but that's kind of another story. My father was a postal worker for 30 years until he retired and he was uneducated in the sense that he got drafted in his senior year of high school to fight in World War II. My mother is an immigrant from Mexico and she has a 6th grade education, and so anyways, like I said, I grew up in Lake Worth, Florida. I graduated high school in 1982, I went to Mexico- I travelled around Mexico for a year, I taught English as a second language, and in 1983 I came back to the US and I joined the US Army as a military policeman. Then as a military policeman, I was stationed in Germany in a Customs Unit and then Fort Lewis as a military police investigator.

**J:** Wow, and how would you describe your life before incarceration?

**P:** In what sense?

**J:** I guess, what were you doing before your incarceration?

**P:** I was a military policeman in the army.

**J:** What was your first encounter with the criminal justice system?

**P:** Um, becoming a military policeman.

**J:** In what way has that experience affected your personal relationships, if at all? Like, how has your experience as a military policeman or as someone who was incarcerated, how has that affected any of your personal relationships or your life in general?

**P:** Well, one of the things I would say about the military policeman aspect is, I think that that was just one experience. One of the things I make a lot of comparisons between the military and prison is that they both can be fairly brutal and dehumanizing experiences, and in a lot of ways, there are a lot of similarities going from one to the other. Let's see, so I guess... your question is

how has my criminal justice experience of being incarcerated, how has that impacted my relationships?

**J:** Yeah, if it has at all.

**P:** Well it hasn't impacted my relationships, just because basically... do you mean personal relationships?

**J:** Yeah or interpersonal relationships, or do you think that your experience with the criminal justice system has altered your life in any certain way?

**P:** Well I mean it altered my life just by virtue of the fact that... well I would say the most obvious thing is I don't think I would be doing what I am doing now, which is prisoner rights advocacy, if I hadn't gone to prison. I think that's the most obvious one, like if I hadn't gone to prison, I would have probably continued my career in law enforcement. So, I kind of look at what I'm doing now as law enforcement as well- it's just the notion that the law should apply to everyone, and I'm not sure I would have had that perspective if I hadn't gone to prison myself.

**J:** That makes total sense. How would you describe your life while incarcerated or while in prison?

**P:** In what sense?

**J:** Well you mentioned, and obviously feel free to share what you want or don't share if it is uncomfortable...

**P:** No, no this isn't my first interview. I've done a lot and I've never declined to answer a question.

**J:** OK, so you said that it was a very dehumanizing experience, and that's what we have heard from a lot of people and what we know from our research, and so I kind of just want to know what your experience with that was like?

**P:** Well, you know, one of the ways I sum it up is that especially when talking to a lot of people who haven't been incarcerated, I kind of think I've experienced probably more privation and oppression than the average American ever will. So, I think that's kind of one context, and I think that one of the things for me is just prisons are literally systems of total control and you're subject to literally the whims of a bunch of people that aren't especially educated, a little bit of sadism, a little bit of maliciousness. That said, I'm not saying that all people employed by

prisons or jails are like that because they're not. You wind up in a situation where the people who are like that are really given free reign to torment and abuse the people in their captivity, to impose their views and beliefs on them, and the other thing is they pretty much have total impunity when they do it- it's not like there's a lot of control or oversight over them and that and the casual brutality is one of the things that I think really surprised me when I went to prison. But more than that I think, was realizing at some point - not too far into my incarceration - that as far as the people responsible for every aspect of my life, that they really didn't care about me, they didn't care if I lived or died, and they viewed everyone in their care and custody as literally pretty expendable. And that regardless of what happened to the people in their care and custody, as long as no one escaped on their watch, no one was losing their job and no one was having any negative impact-- didn't matter who got raped, who got killed, who got mutilated, who died of medical neglect, their jobs are secure-- the only thing that's gonna be a problem for them is if someone escaped. As long as that didn't happen, the whole edifice tumbled along. It didn't take me long to figure that out. I think that's just kind of at the initial level.

**J:** Wow. (pause). Wow. How would you describe your life after incarceration?

**P:** Um, I don't know, kind of I guess like going out into a bigger cage. I mean, I think that's kind of the reality of living in a police state, you know, you've got a bigger cage and a smaller cage, but I mean we're surveilled, we're policed, we're subject to being... one of the things I like to point out, to state the obvious, is that I'm at higher risk of being killed by the police than I am by a mass shooter. As is every other American in the country. So, I'm acutely aware of the police state that I live in, so I don't know, it seems like it's just a matter of being in a bigger cage. One of the things I like to say is the food is better and the sex is more frequent, but at a lot of levels there's not really a huge -- I mean there's the obvious things of yes there's freedom of movement and things like that that you don't have in a prison, but I think I'm acutely aware of the ways we're surveilled or controlled and policed and in ways I don't think was the case even 30 or 40 years ago in this country. At least in my recollection, it doesn't seem like this in the early 80s for example and it seems like there's been a qualitative and quantitative clamping down on pretty much all aspects of American life for people inside and prison and outside a prison.

**J:** And has it been difficult to adjust to that? Or like, I know a lot of people often find it difficult to find employment after incarceration or in specific states, they are still disenfranchised from voting? Has it been difficult for you to adjust to those kinds of aspects?

**P:** No, none of that's been a problem. That's in the context you know I got out of prison on December 16, 2003, and my employees picked me up from prison so, you know, I mean, I created the organization that employs me so, but I realize that's probably kind of the outlier. That doesn't happen to too many prisoners either, the ones that have businesses or means before they

went in is one thing, and not that many create anything while they're inside. But, like I said, I created the organization that employs me, so, I was literally picked up by my employees when I got out of prison. The voting thing hasn't been a huge issue - it's funny because after I got out of prison I moved to Vermont and Vermont's one of the states that allows prisoners to vote, so as a convicted felon in Vermont I voted there. I moved to Florida in 2013 and in the meantime, I got my voting rights restored in Washington - I got them restored in '05 or '06, whatever year it was, I got them restored in Washington at the time, and so that hasn't-- I mean but I'm also the guy, I don't think that voting really is that big of a deal-- I mean I don't have candidates to vote for... I'd like to be able to vote for candidates that don't support the death penalty for example, and I don't have any candidates to vote for who think like that. At least on criminal justice issues we don't really have any significant differences of any type between the major parties-- we've got a bipartisan criminal justice system, everyone's down with the police state so I don't think that voting is that big of a deal.

**J:** So, kind of going along with that, what is your biggest concern with the criminal justice system?

**P:** If I just had one issue? I mean, I got a lot of issues.

**J:** Same but if you just had to choose one your biggest concerns, what would that be?

**P:** Its size.

**J:** With that, what sorts of reform do you hope to see in the criminal justice system and for that specifically?

**P:** Well, I think that reducing prison populations is a number 1 issue, but that doesn't seem to be happening in any significant way. Of course the other issue is the conditions of confinement; the way people are treated behind bars. Medical neglect is the big one, but now we just get into the whole laundry list of everything wrong—we're seeing this with COVID for example: the conditions that prisoners are held in, how they're treated, the lack of transparency, the impunity for misconduct by people employed in the criminal justice system at every level. I think that one of those things is that when you think about it in 1980, the American prison system was probably around one fifth of what it is today, and that said, in 1980, it was filled with plenty of problems too. The difference is, here we are 40 years later, and the system has gotten 5 times bigger, but the problem's have also remained the same. It wasn't like "hey it grew 5 fold and they fixed a lot of problems along the way, but it's like, the problems from overcrowding to brutality, lack of medical care, has basically expanded along with it. Those problems never got fixed, and if anything, it's a lot more draconian. A lot of the privileges or whatever the prisoners had like

higher education (in the 1980s, prisoners could get a higher education in prison), today they can't for the most part. I think those are kind of the bigger issues--the first one is the size, and then you get down to the conditions of confinement. There's also mundane things too like court access for prisoners- that's been largely eviscerated thanks to the Prison Litigation Reform Act, and other measures. I think that those are kind of the bigger issues-- you could just do a laundry list of everything that's screwed up here.

**J:** I'm really passionate about policy too, and so I've been doing a lot of research about certain policies that can impact prison populations, so I think that all of those are good aspects.

**P:** Yeah, but you know it's like one of those things though. Like, no one's talking about zeroing out the prison population and right now HRDC, we represent the estate of Vincent Gaines, a Black prisoner who was starved to death. You can have all the policy stuff in the world, but when people are still being starved to death and no one's getting charged or punished as a result of it, or people are being burned to death, I think it just really puts the whole poverty of the whole context of policy into context.

**J:** Yeah, that's true. There's so many gaps in all of the policy that could be created that still doesn't even tackle any of the lists of problems (pause) I do have a few questions about some of your work.

**P:** Sure.

**J:** So I know that you are the executive director of the Human Rights Defense Center and you also co-founded the Prison Legal News magazine. Could you tell me what inspired you to do that type of work and what specifically each does?

**P:** Well basically, what inspired me to do the work was, well, I came to prison and I felt oppressed and I wanted to do something about it. That hasn't really changed in the past 30 years. So basically, Prison Legal News, I started that in 1990 with another prisoner named Ed Mead. We started the magazine and the goal was to basically give prisoners and their families a voice in what passes for criminal debate or discussion in this country. Also, to give prisoners and advocates timely, reliable news. That was one of our goals, which I think we've met. Basically, we kind of tumbled along and did that, but when we started the organization (Prison Legal News in 1990) we had ambitions to do more than that and the problem was just getting the resources to do them. Pretty much, we were an all volunteer organization until 1996 when we hired our first employee, and then starting in 1997/1998 we started distributing books when we published our first Mass Incarceration Anthology: The Selling of America, and then by 2009 we'd gotten into book publishing, we started our Litigation project and at that point, that's when we decided that

the name Prison Legal News didn't really reflect what we were doing as an organization-- we weren't just publishing a magazine. By 2009, we were publishing Prison Legal News, publishing and distributing books, doing litigation and we were doing a lot more advocacy, so at that point, that's when we decided to basically restructure ourselves organizationally, and that included changing our name, so that's when we changed our name to the Human Rights Defense Center. Basically we have projects now-- so Prison Legal News is a project of the Human Rights Defense Center. Our other magazine, Criminal Legal News is a project of the HDRC, PLN publishing is our book publishing arm, we're doing that. Our litigation project, we have a FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) project, so, we have different projects in the organization that do things. I think that the name Human Rights Defense Center reflects just the reality of what we're doing organizationally and the fact that we've steadily expanded. We've gone from an all volunteer organization started by two prisoners in maximum security prisons with \$300 between us (that was our 6 month budget to start the magazine, was \$300 in 1990) and today we have, I think it's 17 employees and [are] on a million and a half dollar budget.

**J:** Wow, that's incredible. I notice that you also serve as a member for the National Police Accountability Project. Specifically today, in today's climate, what has that been like, especially as more attention has been given to police brutality and the deaths at the hands of police officers?

**P:** Well, I joined the National Police Accountability Project shortly after I got out of prison in 2003 and I've been a long time member of the National Lawyers Guild, and from, in fact I'm going to date myself to say I think that I've been a member of the National Lawyers Guild for 32 years now. Makes me feel old. From 1995 until 2007 I was the jailhouse lawyer, co-vice president of the National Lawyers Guild, and pretty much after I got out of prison, I found that there's more stuff to do with relation to HRDC and criminal justice reform, and I kind of felt that being on the board of the National Lawyers Guild- which is a very diverse organization- wasn't really meshing with I think the work I was doing with HRDC and that's why I thought it might be a better use of my time and my expertise to join the board of the National Police Accountability Project and step down from the board of the National Lawyers Guild, so that's what I did. I've been on the board of the NPAP since 2007, and for the last 2 years or so I've been the National Vice President of NPAP. I'd say as someone who's been very concerned about police brutality by police as well as brutality and corruption by prison and jail officials, I think that in some respects this has been a big awakening in some sense, on the other hand it's like "we went through this with the Rodney King beatings, we went through this with Ferguson", and it seems like, I don't know if getting older makes people smarter- like I don't think I'm any smarter now than I was say 30 years ago or 20 years ago, but I think that one of the things that getting older does is it gives you perspective. I think that right now, I think that we're seeing a lot of wholly justified and long overdue outrage over the slaughter of people by the police in this country. Whether or not that's going to lead to any lasting change or reform, I don't know. I look

back (I'm 55 years old) at my lifetime-- we go back to the Watts Riots in the 60s and to all these other riots and uprisings that we've seen in the United States in the last 55 years which is the time I've been alive, and all or most of them have been triggered by police violence and police brutality. That said, the only change that we've seen is the police state has gotten bigger, more violent, and stronger. In some respects I think that one of the things that's happening, making more and more people aware of the scourge of police brutality and abuse is frankly the ubiquity of cell phones and video recorders and social media, so that a) people are able to record the brutality and the killings and b) they're able to disseminate it without going through legacy media outlets that act as gatekeepers and controllers of this information. I think that's what's leading to the current situation, and again, whether or not anything will come of it or whether or not we go back to business as normal, I don't know, but at the end of the day, I mean the credibility that police states have depends a certain level upon the citizenry accepting those police states, and for now, it's looks like people are starting to question that police state so we will see what happens.

**J:** Moving on a little bit from your job to some more broad questions... Aside from your work, what is something that you are passionate about?

**P:** In what sense?

**J:** For me, I am really passionate about music, so something like that or pretty much anything.

**P:** Okay well I'm passionate about music too, I mean I like live concerts and live music and venues, I'm big on that. I'm also something of an amateur artist. One of the things that I've been getting into lately the last couple of years has been posters and postcards as propaganda and art form, as means of the graphics and the imagery in terms of political mobilization and propaganda, so those are things I'm interested in. Also, I've gotten interested in postal history --basically it's stamp collecting but these are the stamps on the envelopes--so I've gotten interested in that. I'd say what little spare time I have, those are the things I like.

**J:** That's really cool.

**P:** The other thing I was going to say is being in Florida, I've always loved the beach and I'm kind of living my dream right now, I live on the beach so, that's all a lot of fun--it's hard to say "oh I'm passionate about this" and it's like "yeah if I want to go to the beach I just go downstairs and there I am."

**J:** That's so nice.

**P:** Yeah I feel like beach people either get it but other people don't.

**J:** Yeah 100%, I could spend all day at the beach.

**P:** The best one was one of my cousin's little girls, they came to visit me to go to the beach (I think she was like 7 or 8 years old at the time) and the classic was "Uncle Pablo lives on vacation." But they live in Detroit so...

**J:** Yeah, a little bit different than Florida. Would you be able to describe someone who has impacted your life significantly or talk about someone who has impacted your life?

**P:** Yeah, I guess in what sense?

**J:** Whoever has changed your life or has helped you along the way or honestly in any sense that you want to take it is 100% great.

**P:** I mean, I'd say that at the end of the day, I've had a lot of people that have helped me along the way and whatever modest success I've had has been very much because of the help that I've gotten and had. There's a guy named Gerald Enquist when I was in prison, he's the one that showed me how to become a jailhouse lawyer, how to file lawsuits and litigate them and win, that was a big impact. Ed Mead--my co-founder of Prison Legal News, he had a big impact on me, I mean, he's the one who taught me how to publish magazines, or a magazine, I think those obvious ones. Um, my parents actually have been huge (the years I was incarcerated my parents were totally supportive of me, they helped me every way they could. Whenever I'd go to segregation, my father would be on the phone to prison officials advocating on my behalf), so, like I say there's lots and lots of people along the way that have been super helpful--whatever modest success I've had in life, I would not be where I am today if it weren't for the help and the support I've gotten from a lot of people.

**J:** Yeah, that makes sense and that's incredible! I think my last question is what is one thing that you want people to know about you?

**P:** Gosh. Wow. Hm. One thing I want people to know about me....

**J:** Or anything that you want to say.

**P:** It's kind of weird because I guess I'm kind of a little bit of a paradox in the sense that I'm private about my personal life but I'm a fairly public person in terms of the work that I do and everything else. As far as what I want people to know about, in some respects I'd say the stuff I



want people to know about me, I'd say that they probably already know--which is what I do and the various expertises that I have and stuff like that. Everything beyond that I mean people have their own subjective opinions. So I don't know... I guess in a lot of respects I think the framework that I've operated in is I've never really been... I take the view that individuals don't really matter, and that's why I've never tried to personalize. I've never really been about myself, Paul Wright. I've always been about issues and things that are more important than the individual. I think at the end of the day individuals come and go, but ideas are what really moves things forward. I think if you focus on ideas and concepts, I think that's what gets people going. I don't really think anyone cares about Paul Wright. I do think people care about broader issues like criminal justice reform, prison conditions, whether or not prisoners and their families are being overcharged for phone calls, I think people care about that, I'm not really sure they care about Paul Wright. That's why I say "I'm not really sure that I want anyone to know anything about Paul Wright." I'd say, listen to what I have to say and judge it on its merits.

**J:** No that makes sense. I think that that's all of the questions I had, if there's anything else you want to add feel free, or to say, feel free, but in terms of questions, that's all that I have.

**P:** Okay, that sounds good. I think that's everything I've got.

**J:** Thank you so much for talking to me and taking time out of your day to answer my questions.

**P:** Okay! Sounds good! Take care.