

## DN83

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Joshua B. Hoe

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Hello and welcome to Episode 83 of the decarceration nation podcast, a podcast about radically reimagining America's criminal justice system. I'm Josh Hoe, among other things, I'm formerly incarcerated, a freelance writer, a criminal justice reform advocate, and the author of the book writing your own best story, addiction, and loving hope. We'll get to my interview with Kaitlin Owens in just a minute. But first, the news.

I guess the biggest news on my end is that my interview with Amanda Knox came out last week. If you've not heard it yet, you can find it on the crime story podcast page, and I will include a link in the show notes. When I was in prison in Michigan. She was in prison in Italy. And so in a weird kind of way. I did follow what was going on with her. And it was really interesting to talk with her and I hope you all get a chance to check it out. I thought it was a really good interview. She was interviewing me and it was I really enjoyed One of the main projects I've been working on over the last year has been a package of expungement bills that could make it easier for hundreds of thousands of formerly incarcerated Michiganders, to clear their criminal records after they ever made crime-free for a number of years. Just a few days ago, the package passed one of its biggest tests its highest hurdles as it was given the thumbs up by the Senate Judiciary Committee here in Michigan. Keep your fingers crossed that the full Senate will pass the bill when they return from summer break in July. Several months ago, I was invited as a guest to see pack which is the largest gathering of conservatives in the United States every year, as you might remember c pack cabin right at the start of the COVID outbreak. As all of you know I very much believe that criminal justice reform is a bipartisan concern. And I was very flattered to be one of the few progressives invited to the conference. Anyway, let's get to my interview with Kaitlin Owens, the American Conservative Union Foundation, about dignity legislation. This will be the first of my two interviews from CPAC 2020.

Kaitlin Owens is the policy analyst for the American Conservative Union Foundation's Nolan Center for Justice. In this role, she researches and writes on a number of different topics, addresses, and justice in the criminal justice system, prison conditions transition after release, and ways to reduce recidivism rates. However, her main area of focus is the ACUFS dignity for incarcerated women campaign. The separate lead by CDF seeks to address the unique needs of women in our federal justice system by ensuring health needs are met and human dignity is maintained throughout the system. Welcome to the decarceration nation podcast. Caitlin

Kaitlin Owens

thank you for having me.

Joshua B. Hoe

My pleasure.

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Joshua B. Hoe

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I always ask the same first question. How did you get from where you started out to working at ACF and on criminal justice issues

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Kaitlin Owens

2:49

So I am turned with CPAC right out of college so I graduated in 2016 of December and moved right into DC In January, and I made friends with Davidson, Fabian, who we've spoken with, and he and I just clicked. And I, honestly, I didn't hear criminal justice reform. I heard criminal justice. And honestly, it was just a way to stay in DC. And so I took it. And I slowly realized that I had been living a life of the tough on crime kind of generation, as you would say, a lot of it's just for my parents, you know, being very staunch Republicans, but I slowly began to educate myself on what is really going on in our prison system. Just, you know, the non violent offenses that we, you know, put people in prison for just don't make a lot of sense, especially, you know, as conservatives, we care about where our taxpayer dollars are going. And so locking people up for a long period of time just doesn't make sense. And so I slowly began to realize you don't have Not to be tough on crime Smart on Crime is the best way. And it's really not even soft on crime. You know, we're still holding people accountable. And that's really what matters just not for long periods of time. So that's how I've gotten here.

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Joshua B. Hoe

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That's one way to conservative parents as well. I totally understand that that pathway. So we're here at CPAC. And so would you like to say anything about C pack or about kind of the criminal justice aspects of the commerce?

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Kaitlin Owens

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Yeah, sure. So CPAC is unlike any conference I've ever been to one because it's huge. It's gigantic. But two I have noticed, and other people may notice something different, but I noticed two separate kinds of people. It's the older generation and the college generation, the millennials. And so what how criminal justice really comes into it is the tough on crime and the smart on crime. And so bringing them together and really educating them on criminal justice reform is really fun to watch, you know, kind of them interact and learn. And this year, we have a virtual reality, going through prison speaking about real life, people that went through the system as juveniles, and really hearing the testimony of them. I think putting a story into words and actually living that out or seeing it, you know, through our virtual reality just makes it more real. And that's obviously what we want.

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Joshua B. Hoe

5:35

So, way too often, when we talk about kind of criminal justice reform or about incarceration, we end up talking mostly about men, because there's just so many more men in the system, unfortunately, but a lot of the work you've been doing is a lot more about women in prison. So could you talk a little bit more about the differences and kind of what you've learned in that process? Yeah.

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Kaitlin Owens

5:59

Of course. So right when I started working at ACU with criminal justice reform, I really dove into the women incarcerated issue. And I really started to notice that there's so many things that you know, that women don't get provided, such as feminine hygiene products, which is so simple and a basic need, that men don't have to think about. So that's a different aspect when they're pregnant. And if they're still incarcerated, going through labor and delivery shackled, which is just mind boggling. You know, this is a human being that we're strapping to a gurney and she's in pain, and then also solitary confinement when she's pregnant. That can deal that can hurt you know, her mental aspect that can hurt the child. And if we're pro life, you know, generation or pro life conservatives, why are we harming, putting harm to, you know, the unborn child. So those are some of the things that we address with ACU and dignity. And we've done it in multiple states. I think it's 15. And counting Virginia just actually passed unanimously yesterday. So we're super proud about that. But yeah, this is a, you know, huge issue. And like you said, I mean, prisons weren't designed for women, they were designed for men, and not a lot has changed since then. And it's really just treating human beings like human beings. And when you think about that, and you know, put a name with a, you know, put a face with the name, it becomes more real. So,

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Joshua B. Hoe

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Do you want to talk a little bit about kind of the politics You just said you passed a recent very recent bill, it was at Virginia. And do you want to talk about like kind of how that happened and kind of how people came together to make that happen?

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Kaitlin Owens

7:54

So something that I will know is, especially in this day and age, you know, just with politics now, it's very rare that we, you know, we as conservatives can come together with, you know, liberals and Democrats. But this issue is super easy to do that. So about three years ago in 2017, a delegate k Cory from Virginia passed through an in hiking bill. And I actually just called her up after she passed it and thanked her and she's a Democrat. And she and I began a close relationship. We stay and we stayed in touch for these three years. And she said, Alright, Caitlin, she called me up this past session and said, I think it's time I want to do, you know, I

want to prohibit chocolate while pregnant. And I want to ensure that there's visitation rates with minor children and mothers, because that's super important. I want to make sure that the baby doesn't just leave the mother After she's born, or he's he or she is born, so, you know, similar things like that. And so I was like, Yeah, let's do it. So we called up our friends from cut 50 and said, Hey, we have a delegate that is super excited to run this legislation through. And we got some great republicans on board delegate, Nick freed us and john McGuire, and it passed unanimously yesterday. So it's really about you know, just making those relationships beforehand.

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Joshua B. Hoe

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And what have you learned in the process of making those relationships over the time you've been working on this that other people might be able to use to like when they're starting to have these discussions in their own states?

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Kaitlin Owens

9:48

Yeah, I think one you really need someone on the ground, whether it's someone local or in DC, you really just need to make sure that you have the right people in place that can say the right things. And every state is different. So what I would say to people that, you know, want to do this in their state is one, you know, find a grassroots organization, whether it's a state policy network, whether it's ACLU, really, a lot of people can come together on this. The second thing I'll say is, you really have to know what you want to do before you ask, you know, a delegate or a representative or senator to introduce it. So you can't just come in blind. It's not gonna work, it's not gonna pass and you also have to have support of or at least let them know the Department of Corrections, sheriff's all of that because they'll more than likely oppose it if they're not brought in earlier.

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Joshua B. Hoe

10:52

And with some of these shackling kind of considerations Have you had to how have you been able to work with departments of corrections to get around Some of that because usually in my experience, they are generally very excited about making changes to security procedures.

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Kaitlin Owens

11:06

I think before we say this is wrong, this is right kind of thing. We just simply ask questions on what their policy is currently because again, every state is different. The second thing we do is bring them statistics. So from the American Medical Association, the obstetrician gynecologist department, they have you know, put out statistics and studies saying that this is not humane and this is going to hurt her or her unborn child. So, we have statistics but then we also we also say, you know, go to them and say look like when they're in labor and delivery. shackling should be a last resort. If the nurse or doctor says yes, they need shackles, are there a flight risk, then

yes. shackle them. But to the greatest extent possible, we shouldn't do that. And then I think a lot of the times they, we have to give depending on the state, whether it's, you know, a red state or a blue state, sometimes we have to give on, you know, not on shackling up until they're in labor and delivery. So, even if they're pregnant, you know, there comes a certain time where we'll say, Okay, now let's stop.

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Joshua B. Hoe

12:28

Yeah, I find it I mean, I obviously have personally never given birth but I find it pretty amazing that anyone would think that someone was a flight risk in the middle of

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Kaitlin Owens

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birth. No, there's no story saying that yes, she jumped off the gurney you know, delivery, so I haven't heard it yet yet. Knock on wood.

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Joshua B. Hoe

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Yeah, that would be a be some superpower stuff. That'd be like a front front headline news. Yeah. Are you I read I think that you all are working on some some probation reform stuff in Pennsylvania. Do you want to But

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Kaitlin Owens

13:00

yeah, so, um, representative, Cheryl dolger, who's a republican and representative, Jordan Harris, who's a Democrat,

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Joshua B. Hoe

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I had a funny feeling Jordan Harris was gonna be the second name and that frequently noticed the dynamic.

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Kaitlin Owens

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I was gonna say, Yeah, I actually met them in Kentucky at the UN organizations, Gala. And they worked super well together. So yeah, probation and probate, the brocation reform got introduced in both the House and the Senate. We think it's probably going to move more in the house. But right now, we're just waiting for, you know, some representatives to kind of push the bill. But, you know, getting testimony, they're getting formerly incarcerated, to tell their stories. Again, really humanizes. You know what's wrong, and what's right in the legislation process. So we're getting there.

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Joshua B. Hoe

14:00

Do you have any particular goals? You're hoping to get out of that legislation or things that you're trying to change fundamentally in the process? Yeah,

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Kaitlin Owens

14:07

I would say one, the probably the biggest thing is, you know, our goal is not to have so many people on probation for long periods of time I met, I met this man who was amazing. He was horribly incarcerated. And he is still on probation after 17 years. You know, why? statistics show that after, I think two years of being on probation, you're probably not gonna recidivate you know, and, and so it just amazed me that he had to, he has to jump through hoops and all this stuff to you know, just travel to see his family across state lines. So I'm gonna cost the state a lot of exactly, it totally does. You have to get special permission, all that. So, I mean, that's probably the main goal.

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Joshua B. Hoe

14:51

Y'all are also working on some Second Chance legislation in North Carolina. Is that right?

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Kaitlin Owens

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We are. So I'm actually not a part of that. My coworker Patrick plainness has been doing great work. That's actually a omnibus bill so that that has women incarcerated, and legislation in that as well. So we're excited about that.

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Joshua B. Hoe

15:11

Cool. And you and I both worked for a while on trying to get the first step back passed. Would you like to talk about where you think are kind of the implementation is right now and what you what you thought of that process? Yeah.

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Kaitlin Owens

15:24

So this was, you know, I hit the ground running. When I started out at ACU with first step, I really saw how the legislative process worked on the federal level, which is very different from state level. It is the first step of hopefully many steps. But you know, it was the first you know, true criminal justice reform bill that passed and you know, over a generation and you know, we were super excited about that. I know you were as well. So it's been a long time coming. I'm so happy to See all these, you know, folks being released and have a second chance at life. That's super important. I'm, I really commend President Trump for signing it, you know, for his leadership on that, especially with Jared Kushner behind him. But yeah, we hope more will come.

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Joshua B. Hoe

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And you have any personal thoughts on what you'd like to see, and maybe a possible second step? everyone's kind of been asking this since we're a little over a year since?

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Kaitlin Owens

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Yeah, I really want to see more work on the reentry side. We really need to give these folks that are coming out because 95% of you know, folks will be coming out eventually. And and what are we doing? We're just letting them out with no tools, no education, you know, not a lot of training on how to interact with folks. And so, this past November, we had a prison see pack inside prison and really spoke to them about, you know, what are the tools you need? We had a body link Which expert come inside and say, Look, you know, if you're slouching, you know, if you have your hands crossed, like all these things are body language cues. And so, for someone to come in and actually care about them, and you know, show them, this wasn't just pregnancy pack, you know, it happens all the time we have people come in and mentor them and all of that, but to have someone come in and you know, show love and show respect, because they're human beings, too, is super important. So I really want to see reentry. Be a huge next step as the next step, first step.

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Joshua B. Hoe

17:37

Makes a lot of sense. So I talked with David about this a little bit yesterday, too. We're in a situation right now. And you may or may not have a lot of thoughts about this. Where in the last two months, approximately 19 people have died in the Mississippi prison system. You know, I'm just asking everybody what their thoughts are on that. And so I'm asking,

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Kaitlin Owens

17:58

yeah, I mean, it's horrible. I was actually supposed to go down with some folks and just really investigate what's been going on. It's uncalled for it's and just and, you know, that what, they aren't just victims, I mean, now it affects their families on the outside. And so we really need, you know, more, more boots on the ground, we really need to focus on these people's lives behind bars, because just because they're behind bars doesn't mean they're less of a human being. And so, you know, I would just pray that, you know, they had others that love them and, you know, just prayed for their their peace.

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Joshua B. Hoe

18:49

Yeah, so, you know, I was really excited when David asked me to come here because one of the things I really like about the criminal justice reform space is it One of the few areas where all of us can still kind of be friends. We live in this really polarized society where even saying, you know, the other you know, if I say Trump people are gonna, you know, or someone says Pelosi, the world's gonna collapse and we're all actually in this space pretty much get along, actually

get a lot of work done. And, you know, it's kind of, there's a part in the back of my head that wishes the rest of the world was a little bit like that. And I was just wondering what your thoughts were on kind of working in this kind of unique space in this kind of unique political moment.

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Kaitlin Owens

19:33

Yeah. And well, I think it's a breath of fresh air. One, two, I love working with both sides. I have really come to understand what the other side and by other side I mean, little left because I didn't grow up that way. You know how they think and it's not. It's, it's just another way to get to our same goal, you know, we all want the same thing. It's just how to get there may be different. And so coming together and having a conversation, you know, with a conservative and, you know, someone on the left, whether it's whether, you know, it's someone in the administration or someone you know, in the Senate, I think we can't do work without doing that and having these conversations. So I think that's super important. And I, I honestly enjoy it.

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Joshua B. Hoe

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Yeah, me too. And speaking out, I think I mentioned David a couple minutes ago. You know, in all the work that I've done across the country, and in my own state, pretty much every time anything's happening, somehow David turns up. And so we're talking about David's Fabian, from the American Conservative Union Foundation. And he last week, he got a pardon from the president. And I will not lie, I did it. I actually danced a jig in my office. And so I just wanted to ask how you all feeling about, you know, the good news?

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Kaitlin Owens

21:02

Yeah, no, it's super exciting. I'm so happy for him. He actually pulled Patrick, my coworker and myself into his office, right when we got into work and said that the administration called him about 10 o'clock last, you know, the night before and he was like, you guys are the first to know a press release is about to come out and he could not stop beaming. And so now to see both, you know, my boss, Pat Nolan, get out a year ago. Yep. Get that clemency and now, David, get pardoned is super exciting. So

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Joshua B. Hoe

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one of the things that was frustrating to me and watching the kind of the press coverage of what happened after that is that it was almost totally missed that for people who are currently incarcerated got commuted to women for drug charges, one woman for Medicare fraud and of course we did hear about Rob Blagojevich. Did you have any thoughts about I think one thing that was really exciting about it is, as I understand it, there was a small group of people outside of the DOJ who came together to start to recommend new, new computations, which is something a lot of experts have asked for for a really long time. And so I was wondering if, you know, maybe you had some thoughts about what happened there.

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Kaitlin Owens

22:18

Yeah. Now, um, so someone coming tomorrow, Alice Marie Johnson, who Trump, you know, granted, granted clemency to. She was incarcerated, but those four individuals, and so she knows them personally. And anyone who knows Alice Murray, I know she's the most sweetest person ever. And so she had, you know, the highest things to say. And I think that she really did a good job of bringing, you know, their stories to light just because they were overshadowed. One thing I'll say about this administration, you know, whether you hate them or love them, he really does hear people out. And so I really applaud him for listening to that group of people. And, you know, again, just realizing that they're human beings, you know, they make mistakes just like us. You know, I don't want to be known for the worst mistake I did. And I still get second chances. And so

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Joshua B. Hoe

23:16

what I know, I'm really hopeful that whoever a president is start really caring about, you know, the folks that you know that that. I mean, we know for a fact, you know, from on just huge amounts of evidence that people change over time. Exactly. And that I'm always hopeful that more and more people get commutations as it becomes apparent that they're, you know, they've done what's necessary to come home.

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Kaitlin Owens

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Yeah. And I hope that governors also take the lead on that too, you know, just because it's not just the president who can do it. It's governors as well in the state. So I hope that they take the lead on it as well.

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Joshua B. Hoe

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Absolutely. I always asked the same last question. What questions should I have asked but didn't What did I miss?

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Kaitlin Owens

24:00

Oh, man, What state are you going to work in neck? And ACU? We are a very small team of four on the criminal justice side, and so we are all hands on deck. I use my interns all the time. And I'm sure they hate me at the end of the internship, but we are working in a number of store but they have a lot of experience. They do. Yes, they do. They can never say they don't. But we are working in you know, a number of states right now, but one state I'm really looking forward to working in in Michigan, actually. So I've heard of some. Yeah, you know, you may know something about it. But yeah, thank you so much. We will be running into each other. Definitely

back in my home state. Now that I'm here in DC for this. It's David's home state too, so I'm sure he's gonna take the lead on it.

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Joshua B. Hoe

24:51

Absolutely. Well, thanks so much for doing this. I really appreciate you taking the time in the middle of this crazy, like 20,000 people or something, anything to talk about.

Kaitlin Owens

thank you so much for having me.

Joshua B. Hoe

Well, thank you again. Bye bye.

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Joshua B. Hoe

25:08

And now my take. I want to take this opportunity to thank Robert Alvarez for helping the podcast as a volunteer over the last few years. Robert contacted me out of the blue close to two years ago because he was looking for a new challenge, and one to help out on a podcast that he liked about criminal justice reform. One of my favorite memories of Robert will always be when he decided to join me in New York City last year for the Smart on Crime innovations conference hosted by the Center for American Progress. Anyway, Robert was responsible for our current website for our Patreon page, and for the look and design of our newsletter. He interviewed me for one of our Patreon series decarceration nation on Patreon, he created our current logo, and he was really always helpful whenever I needed help. Unfortunately, Robert is leaving to present to a passion project of his own, and we will miss him dearly. His cheerful, unhelpful personality will be missed, as well. his talent for web design will really, really miss him a great deal. I want to wish him great luck in all his future endeavors, including, of course his pending wedding. Robert, thanks again, for all the help, we will really miss you.

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