

jewel bush: How second chances for some benefit us all

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Robert Morris

Ameca Reali joins a small group at the corner of Orleans Avenue and North Galvez Street near the Lafitte Housing Development. Donning oversized shades, Reali recognizes that this particular day in September is a scorcher and immediately thanks the volunteers for braving the high temperatures, especially on a Friday afternoon.

After Reali leads a quick huddle, everyone takes off in separate directions to begin the task of distributing fliers for a unique community event she is organizing: an expungement fair.

In 2011, Reali and Adrienne K. Wheeler founded the [Justice and Accountability Center](#), hoping to uncover where the criminal justice system is not working and try to make it better for those already tangled in its web. Today, the bulk of the new organization's work is expungement.

Expungement is the process of having a conviction sealed or basically removed from your criminal record. Expungements are not to be confused with pardons. A pardon is essentially forgiveness whereas an expungement removes the conviction from your record like it never happened.

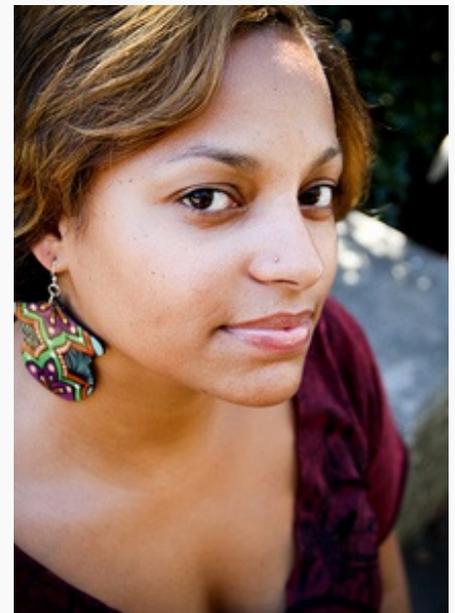
"An expungement can allow access to jobs and opportunity for thousands of Louisiana residents who face persistent unemployment and exclusion from social advancement after their encounter with the criminal justice system. Our goal at JAC is to get people out of the system and back to work," says Reali, a graduate of Loyola College of Law.

"Rich and affluent people get expungements all the time because they have the money and the resources to navigate the system."

Money and know-how are the biggest obstacles in the expungement process. There are fees to file the paperwork, attorney's fees and various other court fees that can vary from parish to parish. This mounting bill and the complexities of the procedure oftentimes make expungement out of reach for people. The whole process can be tremendous and discouraging for the working poor who are struggling financially or those just overall shell-shocked following a round in the legal rodeo.



Robert "Kool Black" Horton and Ameca Reali. (photo by jewel bush for UptownMessenger.com)



jewel bush

The expungement fair, Clean Jacket Day 2013, is scheduled from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, September 28 at Christian Unity Baptist Church located at 1700 Conti Street, New Orleans, 70114. There, free legal services will be provided to as many as 500 Louisiana residents who may qualify for expungement.

Fielding as many as 300 calls a day, the need for this work is clearly there. Managing the response for the expungement fair, modeled after a similar event held by a group of community activists back in 2008, has been a welcomed chore for JAC.

One in 86 adults are incarcerated or on probation or parole in Louisiana. The prison population in Louisiana is around 70 percent black. Meanwhile, [Census data shows](#) that only 48 percent of black men in New Orleans are employed — down from 63 percent in 1980.

“A large group of people in this city don’t know someone who has been arrested or don’t care, but they should. When we have members of our community who have once been incarcerated and are considered untouchable, we pay in many ways,” Reali explains. “If you keep people out of jobs, out of housing and disconnected from family and society, then there’s a cost for that. We will pay for social services providing those who can’t get work with food stamps and job placement for instance.”

Not above doing the legwork, which some would consider lowly, grunt work, Reali places flier after flier on doors in this 6th ward Treme neighborhood. When she’s able to catch someone outside or walking nearby, Reali takes the time to give a brief rundown of the event and to answer whatever cursory questions that may arise. Folks are in disbelief that something like this is happening and ask for another flier to pass the information along to a “friend.” Given the stigma attached to having a criminal record or being in the system, it is very well likely that the requested leaflet is actually for the person requesting it.

Leading up to the event, Reali and volunteers will be doing outreach, a strategy partly developed by Robert “Kool Black” Horton of Black Men United for Change and the People’s Institute, in Central City, the East and the Ninth Ward among other New Orleans neighborhoods.

“People who have been incarcerated want to work but they can’t find a job or if they do, that job’s not going to pay them enough,” Reali says. “They can go back out in the streets, but there are risks: going to jail or dying. If they don’t get what they need they are going to die anyway.”

Once upon a time, Reali was on the other side of the system as a scared sister working to help her mother navigate the criminal justice landmine when her teenage brother was arrested in her native, upstate New York, for a crime he didn’t commit. She saw how the experience impacted him and the entire family for that matter. Call it the goals of a naïve girl, but this incident shaped what is now the 30-year-old’s career, working to make sure what happened to her brother doesn’t happen to anyone else.

“We smothered my brother with love and unconditional support,” say Reali, who fought to have her brother’s record expunged. “My brother was in jail for 10 months, so imagine if you are in jail for three or four years and don’t have the support. People are isolated and Angola is so far.”

All Louisiana residents interested in attending Expungement Day 2013 must bring a copy of their record, expungement forms required by the Clerk of Court and a copy of the minutes or docket master. All documents must be retrieved prior to the event to facilitate attorney consultations. Individuals will be served on a first come, first served basis. For more information, call (504) 345-8911.

“JAC is not doing work that only a certain segment of the population should be concerned with,” Reali says. “This is really a community-wide health issue.”

CLEAN
YOUR
JACKET

EXPUNGEMENT DAY
Saturday, September 28, 2013
9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.
Christian Unity Baptist Church
1700 Conti Street, New Orleans, LA 70114
Free-Open to the Public

**WE WANT TO HELP YOU GET YOUR
JACKET (CRIMINAL RECORD) CLEAN!**

An arrest can stop you from getting a job, qualifying for public housing and government assistance, getting into school, or gaining parental control over your child.

www.jaclouisiana.org
Expungement Hotline | 504.345.8911

These documents are required—please bring them with you:

- A copy of your record (You can retrieve a copy of your record by calling for visiting the Clerk of Court in the Parish that you were arrested in).
- Ask the clerk for any expungement forms they require.
- A copy of the minutes or docket master.

By bringing these items with you will ensure that you are given the most accurate legal advice possible. (Take this flyer with you or print out a copy of it for the clerk's office).



Justice & Accountability
Center of Louisiana

***jewel bush**, a New Orleans native, is a writer whose work has appeared in *The (Houma) Courier*, *The Washington Post*, *The Times-Picayune*, *New Orleans Homes & Lifestyles Magazine*, and *El Tiempo*, a bilingual Spanish newspaper. In 2010, she founded *MelaNated Writers Collective*, a multi-genre group for writers of color in New Orleans dedicated to cultivating the literary, artistic and professional growth of emerging writers. She is currently communications coordinator for Service Employees International Union Local 21LA. Her three favorite books are *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *Are You There God? It's Me*, Margaret.*