

Photos from our year: Pardon Project Steering Committee April 2023 Report to the Phoebus Family



Krista Henry (center) – PPSC Assistant Secretary and Pardon Fellow, Centre County – at pardon event in State College PA held by State rep. Scott Conklin (furthest right) and Board of Pardons Secretary Celeste Trusty (second from right)



Pardon Fellow Kyle Duff with PA State Senator Camera Bartolotta at a Record Clearing Clinic held in Washington County



Photo of presenters at the Expungement and Pardon Clinic hosted by Berks Connections/Pretrial Services. Including PPSC Chair Akeem Sims (far left), State Senator Judy Schwank (Center) next to BOP Secretary Celeste Trusty, then District Attorney John Adams (third from right). The two women to the left (next to Akeem) are Magistrate District Justices.

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Akeem Sims (center, white shirt) – PPSC Chair – at press conference held in Harrisburg, PA called by Lt. Governor John Fetterman (at podium) and attended by BOP Secretary Trusty (far left)



PPSC then-Chair Rev. Dr. Michelle Simmons and PPSC Member Tarik Ryant speak at “Second Chances” press conference held by Governor Wolf in Philadelphia

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First-ever PPSC Leadership Retreat (August 2022) funded in part by Phoebus Fund – including Pardon Fellows from around the state::

Top left photo: Genevieve Longenecker (far left) (Lancaster County) and Krista Henry (Centre County), attending in person; and bottom photo (clockwise from right): Tom (Lackawanna County), Antonio Howard (Erie County) and Kyle Duff (Washington County), attending via zoom



Annual “The Rev Michelle Excellence in Advocacy” created in honor of outgoing PPSC Chair Rev. Dr. Michelle Simmons. And the first, presented to Wayne Jacobs, “Father of the Pardon Movement in PA”

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PPSC Leaders Shuja Moore, Antoinette Griffin and Vice Chair Evan Figueroa Vargas attend and present at a Mass Incarceration Symposium held at the Phila. School District Headquarters



This past year, we received two Awards: Best Reentry Organization of the Year from the Philadelphia Reentry Coalition – Award accepted by Evan Figueroa Vargas, PPSC Vice Chair; and Best Community Advocate of the Year from PA Legal Aid Network – Award accepted by Akeem Sims, PPSC Chair

And later this month (April 2023), PPSC Executive Committee member Shuja Moore will give the keynote address to Berks Connections/Pretrial Services in Reading, PA (see following pages)



Following pages: Column published in Pittsburgh Post-Gazette about Erie Pardon Fellow Antonio Howard



Jeffery Gerritt: In juvenile justice debate, remember Antonio Howard



JEFFERY GERRITT ✓
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
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MAR 19, 2023

12:55 AM

Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey, who's grappling with an increase in youth crime, and Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald, who's pushing an expansive juvenile detention center, should talk to Antonio Howard. In truth, most adults could benefit from his insights on young people in trouble, and the myriad of mistakes grown folks make with them.

Mr. Howard, an artist, writer, teacher and activist from Erie, is not a kid. He's 47. But in 1992, he received a mandatory life sentence for a crime he committed when he was 15.

He and two other teenagers robbed a cabdriver. One of the three — not Mr. Howard — fatally shot the driver. As a participant in the crime, Mr. Howard was convicted of murder under Pennsylvania's conspiracy statute.

His life had paralleled those of many young people in Pittsburgh, Detroit or Chicago, marked by poverty, abuse, chaos and neglect. Everything around him, even the streets he walked, told him he was nothing and would remain nothing. He didn't understand his past or expect a future.

"I was writing rap songs throughout my trial," he told me this week. "I had no concept of what was going on."

During the 1990s, Pennsylvania led the nation in juvenile lifers, with 500 people serving mandatory life sentences for crimes they committed when they were too young to legally smoke cigarettes. In 1992, Mr. Howard became one of them.

Change and affirmation

Entering the State Correctional Institution at Pittsburgh, Mr. Howard learned to protect himself from adult inmates and guards, who could abuse and dehumanize him at-will. "I was too busy fighting for my life to understand what a life sentence meant," he said.

A few months later, a nun gave him a book: "The autobiography of Malcolm X." Reading about Malcom's transformation in prison led him to books on

philosophy, psychology, history, Shakespeare and much more. He earned his GED, tutored inmates and trained as a paralegal.

In 1999, Mr. Howard began to paint. Self-taught, he eventually finished four murals at the State Correctional Institution at Huntingdon, one in the visiting room.

Painting gave him a way to express and affirm himself. “When I started to paint, people no longer called me the N-word or a piece of sh—,” he said. “I was the artist, the guy who could paint. It added a modicum of humanity to my name. I was doing my thing, creating something people could appreciate.”

In 2012, the U.S. Supreme Court finally ruled that mandatory life sentences for juveniles were unconstitutional. Most of Pennsylvania’s juvenile lifers were either re-sentenced or released. After serving nearly 27 years in prison, Mr. Howard was paroled in 2018.

A new life

After he went home, Erie Arts & Culture commissioned him to paint a 1,300-square-foot mural at Manus Sunoco, Erie’s only Black-owned gas station. Since then, Mr. Howard has done more than a dozen other murals, with grants and awards from Erie Arts and Culture and the Erie County Redevelopment Authority. His wife, Sarah Howard, teaches art at the Inner-City Neighborhood Art House.

Aside from painting and working as a paralegal, Mr. Howard is a public speaker who published two books: “When a child is worth more than the worst mistake he ever made,” and “A prisoner’s introduction to William Shakespeare.” He participates in community efforts to reduce gun violence, the Erie County Pardon Project, and Youth Leadership of Erie, which honored him for public service.

Pennsylvania is far better for having Antonino Howard in Erie, instead of a state prison, where he would cost taxpayers more than \$40,000 a year. But how many others like him have we destroyed, and who created a world where young people have to shoot someone to get respect or attention?

Listening to youth

Adult shot-callers should understand why kids don’t respect them, why they are wary of cops, and what pushes them into crime, drugs and gangs. If politicians and policy-makers want them to say no to negative activities, they need to provide positive alternatives and opportunities.

Locking up kids and throwing away the keys, or dismissing their voices, is the Pennsylvania way. It’s why the state led the nation in incarcerating children. It’s why the mayor won’t let young people and ex-offenders drive the city’s anti-violence initiative. It’s why the county executive wants to replace a shuttered 130-bed juvenile detention center.

That’s not to minimize youth crime. Bullets fired by kids are just as deadly as bullets fired by adults, even if a child’s more impulsive, unstable brain bears less responsibility. But whenever you want to give up on young people, or wonder why it matters, remember Antonio Howard.

Pulitzer Prize winner Jeffery Gerritt is the editorial page editor for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

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SAVE THE DATE

Wednesday, April 19

6:00 pm

Miller Center for the Arts

Pardon Me

A film by Shuja Moore



Be a part of the conversation! Join us for a private viewing of Pardon Me, a documentary directed/produced by Shuja Moore, the keynote speaker at BCPS's annual Life Improvement Awards Breakfast.



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