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Policy Issue Resources

12 New Orleans Neighbors on Ending Money Injustice

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Vera's New Orleans money injustice team and their colleagues at the New Orleans Safety and Freedom Fund and Stand with Dignity have been exploring ways to capture the stories of the amazing people the three organizations are privileged to work with. This photo essay, of 12 New Orleans neighbors, is one of those ways. Vera's Melody Chang offers this experience with one of the participants.

Barely before 9 a.m. I drove Mr. Christopher up Martin Luther King Drive, across Claiborne Avenue, to his house. I have 18 grandchildren. I've been singing since I was six, he had told me earlier in the morning. Gospel. We had a group called the Voices of Thunder. That was before Katrina. We used to go around to all the churches. Then I asked if he would sing to me. He readied his voice and began his song as I slowed at the red light. It had rained that morning when we took portraits of him in the French Quarter and the late June weather was balmy and overcast. I drove methodically, listening to his voice coat the inside of the car. Outside, to our right, pastel row houses packed the street. To our left, the neutral ground opposite the new housing projects showed residues of the robust social life that gather every late afternoon. It came up quick after Katrina but it really kinda brought the neighborhood up with it, he says about the housing projects.

When I met Mr. Christopher at a bus stop through a mutual friend and invited him to participate in this photo essay, he barely looked at me though his eyes shifted back and forth constantly. Later my friend told me that Mr. Christopher had done several years in an upstate prison and his eyes that scan the horizon was a vestige of his experience. I was living homeless in Baton Rouge after I got out of prison. A guy says to me, with a beautiful voice like yours? Don't you see all the entertainers down there making money? Look here and watch. Then he took me down by the quarter and put a box out with \$20 in it. Today Mr. Christopher sings in front of Caf Beignet on Royal Street.

Last year, a justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court invited him to sing at a wedding in the courthouse. We took his portrait outside and captured his experiences with money injustice in Orleans: all five convictions I have come from not being able to afford bond. Like the other New Orleans neighbors featured in this essay, Mr. Christopher's justice experience, case outcomes, and life afterwards has been harmfully impacted by the practices of money bail or fines and fees. With community organizer Roy Brumfield and photographer William Widmer, we visited the homes and workplaces of 12 New Orleanians to hear their experiences. Captured below are their voices and portraits, lessons they share from experiencing injustice at the hands of unfair money-based practices, and a sense of dignity and perseverance through.

The neighbors we talked to made real the harmful impacts of money injustice; they shared how these costs undermine people's ability to move beyond an arrest; that many costs are hidden and are more than they expect them to be; and that they hang over people and their families for years to come, deeply unsettling their lives.

"During my bond hearing a white male attorney was given a \$20 bond for beating his wife. Yet I, a single mother was made to pay 10% of \$2,500, which I later found out was more than that. I ended up paying nearly \$500. The courts fail to realize that locking us up causes job loss, which means we can't pay the fees. There has to be a better solution."

- Danira, Women With A Vision member, Gentilly

"I was in jail for six weeks until my mom got the money together to bond me out. After a few days, my friend let me know that they couldn't hold my job for me at the McDonalds. My mom got me out and I got inactive probation. But after that I had fines and fees. About \$700. Every two weeks I needed to show up and pay an installment. It wasn't much, maybe \$50 or \$60 but it was hard because I didn't have work. I was so relieved when I made the last payment and it was finally over, case closed."

- Tina, UPS loader, New Orleans East

Troy and Marlon spoke to how the amount they had to pay to get out of jail was well beyond their means. Michelle and Jacques shared how having to pay or stay in jail took away what they had worked hard for and left them unable to pay bills and otherwise simply get by. Gilda poignantly expressed the burden that money injustice imposes on everyone who cares about their neighbors and New Orleans communities.

"My bond was \$3,000. I work seven days a week - I don't have that kind of money."

- Marlon, auto mechanic, Broadmoor

"Down here in New Orleans, people ain't rich. Some of these things we can't afford. People are living check to check. Don't put us in a

hole we cant afford and then lock us up when we cant afford it."

- Troy, commercial driver, Seventh Ward

"Its a vicious cycle. Once you get started, its hard to stop. Once you pay the bondsman, you have to pay the court some fees. Then you have to pay the probation officer. Then you have to pawn the jewelry. Buy the food - or get donations, cook the food, sell the food. Sell it to the same people that helped you prepare and purchase, donate the food. You hold a raffle. And card games. Then you rent a bus to fundraise. Casino bus rides. Repay the people you borrowed from. Youre up all day. Youre up all night, on your feet cookin ... then youre stressed out.

It dont make sense. Youre paying for freedom. Who does that? I just dont understand it. Its like robbing Peter to pay Paul. You dont have a job, or your job is not paying you a decent wage, and then what little you have, you have to give it to buy your freedom. When someone gets arrested everyone in their family and inner circle gets arrested."

- Gilda, community liaison and volunteer, St. Roch/Central City

"Mentally, theyre threatening you. Calling the house to put you in jail. Youre scared and stressed out. Some people can go out of their character to do things."

- Jacques, intern at nonprofit law office, New Orleans East

"My husband and I caught charges together. I bonded out but my husband didnt. I had to use money for bills to bond out. Now bills were backing up and it had already been four months."

- Michelle, community member, Uptown

Our neighbors explained the stark realities they or their loved ones experienced under a system of money injustice: pleading guilty in order to get out of jail when they couldnt pay the price put on their freedom (whether they were guilty or not); the breakup of families and sometimes the homelessness that result; that it shapes lives in a hard and cruel way, especially young peoples lives.

"Youre sitting on the bus since four or five in the morning cramped up in shackles until two or three in the evening. And sometimes they dont even call your name. You finally say to your guy, 'see what plea you can get me.' All my convictions come from not being able to afford bond."

- Christopher, gospel singer in French Quarter, Hollygrove

"I was in on a \$2,500 bond I couldnt make. It really split my family apart. My baby momma took my daughter and went back to Gonzales to stay with her family. Now Im homeless staying at the Odyssey House. All I have when I walk out is the clothes on my back. I have a lot of guilt and shame from letting my family down. But if I could have been out of jail and still making money, I wouldnt have lost it all. A lot of people dont understand we have our own demons were dealing with and the system isnt helping."

- Joe, offshoreman, Hollygrove

"I spent the night in jail which Ive never been in jail a day in my life. But I copped out to the charge because I didnt have money for a lawyer. Now Im on probation for a whole year. And I was scared. I have to go see a case manager every week and take a drug test. Classes three times a week. It takes time out of work. Instead of working the whole day through. I still gotta pay \$200 for the program and on top of that I have court fees."

- Joey, cook, Gentilly

The dignity with which our neighbors embraced what they faced and shared their stories makes clear there is a better way, that when we lead with dignity we can have a system that supports people rather than tearing them down. Troy reminded us that people are people, always, not just criminals reduced to the crime they were arrested for. Kathy vouched for how people are capable of meeting their obligations, coming to court without having to pay money. And, Gilda told and shows every day through her work in community that eliminating fines and fees is necessary if we want stronger, healthier families and neighborhoods.

Photographs by **William Widmer**

Concept and production by **Melody Chang** and **Jon Wool**

Production assistance by **Roy Brumfield**

Web curation by **Michael Mehler** and **Hyperakt**

In partnership with the New Orleans Safety and Freedom Fund and Stand with Dignity