

**Honored Guest Michelle Alexander,
author of The New Jim Crow
September 5, 2012**

**Restorative Justice on The Rise: An Ongoing Series
With host Molly Rowan Leach
Sponsored by The Peace Alliance**

[0:00:00]

Molly Rowan Leach: Hello everyone and welcome. This is Molly Rowan Leach, your host for Restorative Justice on the Rise. This audio archive that you'll be listening to features the extraordinary Michelle Alexander, author of The New Jim Crow. Please listen in to this telecouncil from September 5, 2012 and also check out DoPeace.US for the entire listing for this series and other audio archives ongoing.

Join us in the near future. This is a weekly series. We look forward to staying and touch with you and hearing about your work on the ground as the justice conversation continues to heighten in the United States and beyond. Thank you and enjoy.

Molly Rowan Leach: I am thrilled to announce the kickoff of the 2012-13 Restorative Justice on The Rise Telecouncil series. Wonderful to be with you all this morning. I know it's early for many of you. We do have a very special guest today and I just want to give you a little bit of background on where we've been up to now. As many of know, in the past year, we've had this telecouncil series as a platform for discussion around restorative justice as well as social healing in the United States and beyond. Recently, the Peace Alliance and I have partnered to bring this further out into the world as the council platform for truth, for dialogue, for connection and furthermore, for the building of a resource library and a connection point for people worldwide.

We know that in the United States restorative justice is moving quickly. There is so much happening on the ground in many cities all over the country. People are doing amazing work and the mission of this particular series is to bring us together to find out more about what people are doing. Working models are coming together and sharing those working models for providing a bridge between the existing system and a system that we know that could provide an incredible solution to today's existing prison industrial complex.

Today's guest is an incredible voice for justice and it's an extraordinary honor to be welcoming Michelle Alexander to join us here in just a moment. We're going to be introducing her. She's going to be sharing about *The New Jim Crow*, which just recently came out with a foreword from Cornell West. Before I go into a little bit more about Michelle, many of you probably know about her, but I'd like to just say a few words about the platform that we're in today.

This is a virtual room basically and if you have questions at particular points throughout the call, you'll want to press 1 on your telephone keypad, that's just pressing 1 on your phone at the times when we break in to live Q&A today. That will be about halfway through the call and then towards the end. This call will also be recorded and archived at the Peace Alliance Do Peace website. I just want to thank Matthew Albrecht and Heart Phoenix for being here with us today. Matthew is the executive director of the Peace Alliance. Heart Phoenix is the president of the board. She's also the co-founder of the River Phoenix Center for Peace Building. As many of you know, her son River Phoenix was a world famous actor who devoted this life to social justice and change.

So without further ado, we have a lot to cover today with Michelle Alexander as many of you already probably know much about her but I just would like to honor her by sharing her biographical sketch. She's a highly acclaimed civil rights lawyer, advocate, and legal scholar. As an associate professor of law at Stanford Law School, Michelle directed the civil rights clinic and pursued a research agenda focused on the intersection of race and criminal justice.

In 2005, Alexander won a Soros Justice Fellowship that supported the writing of *The New Jim Crow* and accepted a joint appointment at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at the Moritz College of Law at the Ohio State University where she currently serves as an associate professor of law.

Prior to joining academia, Alexander engaged in civil rights litigation in both the private and nonprofit sector ultimately serving as the director of the racial justice project for the ACLU Northern California where she helped to launch a national campaign against racial profiling.

[0:05:14]

Currently, she devotes much of her time to freelance writing, public speaking, supporting groups and organizations engaged in movement building to end mass incarceration and caring for her three young children. She's a graduate of the Stanford Law School and Vanderbilt University. She's clerked for Justice Henry A. Blackman on the US

Supreme Court and for Chief Judge Abner Mikva on the DC Circuit of the US Court of Appeals. She's been all over worldwide media and to me personally, I believe she's one of the most powerful voices in the world today for illuminating the predicaments of the prison industrial complex.

So Michelle, it's a great honor to welcome you here with us today, to this global telecouncil hosted by the Peace Alliance. Welcome and I just want to ask you if you might start out today's call by sharing a little bit of your life work and inspiration and perhaps some special motivation you've had for what you've brought forward in such a big way to this world.

Michelle Alexander: Well thank you. Thank you so much and I just want to share my appreciation for the very warm welcome and for the opportunity to participate in this dialogue. The work of this group and this network is so profoundly important and I'm just thrilled to have this opportunity to join the conversation with you.

I have been deeply interested in problems relating to our justice system for really as long as I can remember. I think, you know, one of my earliest memories as a young person is of watching a documentary. I think I was in maybe junior high school, I don't think I was still in elementary school at that time. Watching a documentary about one of the first women that was executed in the United States and in the documentary and I wish I knew the title of it. In the documentary, it talked about how there are all of these doubts about her innocence up to the time of her execution and that the courts would not hold her execution despite all of this evidence that turned up showing that she may well have been innocent and also despite the fact that the family of the victim did not want her to be killed and she was executed anyway. I remember, you know, as a young person just being so horrified that we as a nation would kill someone when we weren't even sure of their guilt and when the victim's family didn't even sincerely want to see her dead and had questions about her guilt.

You know, I was so shaken by it. It really caused me to want to learn more about our justice system and how it operated and that interest continued when I was in college and sent me on to law school. As time went on, I became more and more interested in the intersection between racial injustice and criminal injustice in our society. By the time I graduated from law school, I was considering becoming a public defender and actually interned at the DC Public Defender Service and had just a phenomenal experience there. You know, public defenders are among the most heroic folks in my view.

But realized that I didn't know whether I could withstand being in such close proximity to so much suffering on a daily basis. I would go home at night having lost another case or hugged a client goodbye on their way to years or decades in prison and witnessing the scenes and the tears in the courtroom, and I thought I don't know that I can do this day in and day out. I want to change this system. I don't want to just help people one by one, although I saw the critical importance of those who are playing that role, the sheer necessity of that. I wanted to figure out how to change the system as a whole so that there would be less needless suffering, the system would be more fair.

[0:10:08]

Really, I took a meandering course. I worked as a civil rights lawyer for a small firm doing mainly employment discrimination work for a while. I dabbled in criminal justice reform work. But it wasn't until I got the ACLU and directed the racial justice project for the ACLU that I really had the opportunity to do what I had dreamed of when interning in that public defender office, which is begin to really think about what it would mean to change the system as a whole and what aspects of that system needed to change.

But it wasn't long into that work that I realized that even I, someone who cared a lot about racial injustice and thought that I knew a lot about our criminal justice system, that I was deeply misguided and in a lot of denial about the way in which our criminal justice system wasn't just in need of reform but had become the primary vehicle for creating and sustaining racial inequality in our time.

I really had grown up on the idea that our nation was evolving. We were making halted progress, halting progress towards the dream of racial equality, the promise land of color blindness. But I really believed that we were more or less on the right path. That if we kind of just kept trotting along and kept trying to equalize educational opportunities and hold on to affirmative action and do what we could to defend the powerless that found themselves in the clutches of the criminal justice that that would be enough. That that was what was required of us in this time.

But a series of experiences that I had while working at the ACLU and representing victims of racial profiling and police brutality and investigating patterns of drug law enforcement in poor communities of color and attempting to assist people who had been released from prison supposedly reenter into a society that had never shown much use for them in the first place. I had a series of experiences that began what I now often call my awakening. I began to awaken to the reality that our criminal justice system functions much more like a system of racial

control than a system of crime prevention or control. That's what brought me to where I am today and in writing the book and trying to work with others who aren't simply trying to reform the system but transform it. Dismantle it and build something anew.

Molly Rowan Leach: You really highlight something very important too with your own experience, which is the fact that it may be true, that we've been led on to believe something that's not really the case. That lip service perhaps is being paid to the best of all intentions probably within most of Americans' hearts around our true equality. But that there's something going on in the underbelly that like you in fact with *The New Jim Crow* are helping to eliminate. That there's actually a cultural lock in it that has happened and your experiences actually seem to be so powerfully outlined too in *The New Jim Crow*. I've been looking through it and feeling very inspired by what you bring forward here. So could you speak a little bit more to that? that piece of what are we looking at here as a collective culture around the truth of what's happening and what we've been told or what the hope movement, the things that has been represented to us that probably appeal again to our hearts and to our best of intentions that aren't actually true.

Michelle Alexander: Yes. Well, you know, I was watching the opening of the democratic convention last night and I was really struck by the narrative because of the stories that were told. You know, you had people of all races and ethnicities on the stage telling their stories of how America is the place. Where no matter how poor you are or how much you and your family struggle, America is the place where you can reach for your dreams and if you work hard, keep your nose to the grindstone, you can make it. That was the story that was told over and over again. Kind of the way in which the democratic narrative differs from the Republican narrative is that the Democrats say the American dream is real and you can make it but we need to help each other a little, not much, a little along the way. The Republican narrative is the American dream is real and you can get there on your own.

[0:15:45]

I think that what I've come to see and understand better in recent years is that the American dream is just not real for millions of Americans and its not a matter of not trying.

Molly Rowan Leach: Right.

Michelle Alexander: But it's actually a matter of being born into circumstances in which you are locked into what in my view is an inferior caste like status. You're born into a neighborhood, a community, in a ghettoized community and

where there are no grocery stores, where there are no schools that provide meaningful educational opportunities, where you are followed by this police, stopped for a search at very young ages. Your car is pulled over if you're lucky enough to have a car and you're old enough to drive searched for drugs. You're targeted at very young ages often before you're even old enough to vote. Swept in to our criminal justice system then branded a criminal or a felon and then stripped of the basic civil and human rights supposedly won in the civil rights movement like the right to vote, the right serve on juries, the right to be free of legal discrimination and employment, housing, access to education and public benefit.

So many of the old forms of discrimination that we supposedly left behind during the Jim Crow era all right suddenly legal again once you've been branded a felon. That's why I say we haven't ended racial caste in America, we've merely redesigned it. Partly through intentionally divisive racial politics that have exploited our nation's racial divisions and anxieties for political gain. Manifesting to the get tough movement in the war and drugs, this system has been born.

But this system in my view is also born of our collective unconscious. We now say we're color blind. We now say that we care about people of all races and colors but buried deep in our collective unconscious are still these stereotypes and anxieties and fears and resentments that have been unresolved and which manifest themselves in harsh mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses, the tolerance of police tactics and practices that would never be permissible in middle class, white communities or on college campuses. All of this seems normal and rational not because we consciously hate black and brown people and want harm to come to them but because it seems natural that we be treating them that way even though it wouldn't be tolerated on the other side of town. The end result is the quintupling of our prison population in a short period time and this vast new racial under caste that is literally locked into a permanent second class status by law. You know, folks for whom this American dream that you see on television is just a distant fantasy.

Molly Rowan Leach: I really appreciate the way you highlight too and you bring important facts that probably most Americans who have not been affected by maybe a family member or a friend or somehow understand a little bit more about what goes on behind the curtain of the prison industrial complex and how people... For example you speak about there is really nothing that is provided as a bridge between someone who's released or paroled or who tapped out and comes out of the system. It's basically like

leaving someone on the curb but that's only the beginning as you highlight. You know, that there's a stigmatization that happens usually for life that involves everything that you've just covered with everything from job applications to housing to employment and so on and so forth. I find it very important that *The New Jim Crow* really brings these things to light because a lot of us really don't know what's going on behind the curtain as far as what is actually happening.

[0:20:23]

You know, I'd like to go back for a moment too to the framework that you set in the beginning of the book. You have something that really opened my eyes and I happen to have a family member who's incarcerated and so to me it was a bit of a surprise to learn as you introduced and kind of set the tone for *The New Jim Crow*. You speak about a movement in the '70s that was a movement to abolish prisons and you talk about how there was what seemed to be a collective understanding that prisons were actually reciprocating crime and that we're creating crime even. I wondered if you might speak a little bit about that.

Michelle Alexander: Yes. You know, it was fascinating to me too to learn that through my own work and research. That there was a time when it was kind of the mainstream consensus among criminologists that prisons caused more crime than they deterred and that prisons ought to fade away. That they had failed in their mission of making our society more safe and more secure. That they were not rehabilitative and that really the best way to turn a misguided young person who has made a few mistakes into a hardened and perhaps dangerous criminal is to send to prison. To lock them in a cage, treat them like an animal and surround them only by other people who are struggling in similar ways and who may be far worse off. You know, that an entirely different approach to punishment had to be devised because prisons were such an abysmal failure.

In fact, the national commission in studying the issue recommended that no more new prison be built and that existing institutions for juveniles be closed because they were such an abysmal failure. At that time, no one absolutely, absolutely no one and this was in the '70s, you know, no one could have imagined that within their lifetimes our prison population would quintuple, not double or triple but quintuple. That the quintupling of our prison population wouldn't be driven by crime or crime rates but it would be driven by this backlash against the civil rights movement and this get tough movement that was really more about playing to the fears and anxieties of poor, working class, whites in the wake of the civil rights movement. But that in fact is what happened.

Within a blink of an eye, we didn't end prisons. We created a prison state and a vast new penal system really unprecedented in world history.

Molly Rowan Leach: I'd like to just share it with everyone by the way welcome to those of you joining us a little late here. I'm interviewing Michelle Alexander, the author of *The New Jim Crow*. You can find out more about *The New Jim Crow* at the NewJimCrow.org. It's dot org right, Michelle?

Michelle Alexander: Yes.

Molly Rowan Leach: I just want to make sure.

Michelle Alexander: NewJimCrow.com. I'm sorry. It's dot com

Molly Rowan Leach: Excuse me NewJimCrow.com and she's also on Facebook as Michelle Alexander author. I highly encourage if you haven't been to her website to check it out and of course to buy the book. It's a New York Times best seller, has a new foreword by Cornell West.

So back to just wanting to share with everyone. From the book, you say the growing consensus among experts was perhaps best reflected by the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Roles, which issued a recommendation in 1973 that no new institutions for adults should be built and existing institutions for juveniles should be closed. This recommendation was based on their finding that the prison, the reformatory, and the jail have achieved only a shocking record of failure. There is overwhelming evidence that these institutions create crime rather than prevent it. Now that's on page 8.

[0:25:17]

You set the framework here in your introduction and what you're frameworking it feels to me is what leads us to now is perhaps not only the social control but also what's happening with the prison industrial complex as far as greed and how corporations like correctional corporations of America and the DO group. What's their role here and how does it play into the support of these social control movements that we're now waking up to collectively it seems?

Michelle Alexander: Yes. Well it is undeniable that a lot of money is being made off of mass incarceration today. You know, the private prison companies that are now listed on the New York Stock Exchange and they're doing quite well even during a time of economic recession and a whole host of other private interests that are less obvious. For example, phone companies that typically gouge prisoners and their families who are trying to remain connected and to speak to each other.

Molly Rowan Leach: Right.

Michelle Alexander: You know, children who are trying to remain in connection with their parents, their loved ones behind bars. Phone companies are profiting by gouging them, charging them exorbitant rates to place calls. You have private healthcare providers, secure extremely lucrative contracts to provide typically abysmal healthcare to people behind bars. Taser gun manufacturers, you have construction companies that have done extremely well building prisons and specializing and outfitting them with high tech prisons with technology and equipment. I mean the list just goes on and on.

Prison guard unions particularly in places like California that are deeply invested in the building and maintenance of prisons and these folks lobby not just for higher wages or better working conditions but also harsh mandatory minimums and three strikes laws, you know, those laws represent job security. So there are a whole host of interest that now benefit from mass incarceration and there's actually a great book that I highly recommend called *Prison Profiteers: Who Makes Money off of Mass Incarceration* that really outlines how people are making money off of the system.

But I think it's critically important for folks to keep in mind that this system of mass incarceration wasn't born of a profit motive. That's not its origin. You know, the profiteering makes it more difficult to dismantle. It makes it more entrenched. But it wasn't born of a profit motive. It was born of a deliberate effort by politicians to launch a get tough movement that would exploit or nation's racial divisions for political gain.

I mean numerous historians and political scientists have now documented that the war on drugs and the get tough movement was part of a grand republican party strategy known as the southern strategy of using racially coded get tough rhetoric on issues of crime and welfare to appeal to poor and working class whites particularly in the south who are anxious about, resentful of, fearful of many of the gains of African Americans in the civil rights movement. Holsters and political strategists found that get tough rhetoric on these issues of crime and welfare just be enormously successful in persuading poor and working class whites to defect from the democratic new deal coalition and join the republican party in droves. In the words of H.R. Haldiman, Pres. Richard Nixon's former chief of staff, he described a strategy as "the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to device a system that recognizes this without appearing to."

You know, soon the success of these strategies, of this get tough rhetoric was so amazing to the political observers that democrats could not resist the temptation to jump on the bandwagon. Democrats began adopting this get tough rhetoric on issues of crime and welfare in order to prove they could be even tougher on them than the republican counterparts and try to win back those so-called white swing voters, the folks who had defected from the democratic party in the wake of the civil rights movement. So it was Pres. Bill Clinton who escalated the drug war far beyond what Regan and his predecessors had done. It was Pres. Bill Clinton who championed the laws banning drug offenders and people with criminal records from public housing, banning drug offenders even from food stamps following their release from federal prison, banning drug offenders even from federal financial aid for schooling upon their completion of their sentence.

[0:30:45]

You know, to a large extent, it was a democratic administration desperate to win back those white swing voters that had defected from the democratic party that is responsible for the creation of this system that now operates to lock people into a permanent second class.

Molly Rowan Leach: I just want to take a moment, I know I welcomed you and honored you and your work earlier but I am just in awe of your mind and of how you bring through all these facts. I mean you just are a brilliant voice for this very important subject and I just want thank you so much for being with us. Since we're at the top of the hour, I'd like to invite people who are live with us again just being an international telecouncil we have callers from all over the world today. I invite you to press 1 on your keypad if you'd like to make a comment or ask Michelle a question. You can do that now. We'll take a couple of questions and then I'll go ahead and move back into a little dialogue with Michelle with the remainder of today's time together. We close at the bottom of the hour meaning we close it at the 30-minute mark.

So I'd also like to just say a very warm welcome. We have someone on the call today with us who was instrumental in putting together the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights and also her partner who she works with on Growing a Global Heart, that's Belvie Rooks and Dedan Gills. Belvie is a dear friend and colleague of mine and I just want to welcome you Belvie live on to the call and honor your work with Ella Baker and with Growing a Global Heart if you'd like to make a comment or ask a question. Welcome.

Belvie:

Thank you, Molly. Actually when you met me, I was board chair of the Ella Baker Center and a member of the board and joined actually at Van Jones' request as a board person to help move the organization toward a greater focus on sustainability and green jobs. But the organization and the incredible work done predated my board and involvement. I want to say just thank you so much for your work, Michelle. Just the deepest respect and I am always really so happy about the way in which you frame the kind of historical context and way in which race is used to both demonize and divide. I am particularly always appreciative of the way in which you talk about how some of the most draconian policies as it relates to criminal and decline and welfare came about under a democratic administration and Bill Clinton. Particularly because it was at that point that I became a registered independent because of the draconian nature of some of those policies.

I just really wanted to ask you particularly in the context of what's currently in the country, how do you see us taking a more independent stand around these issues and what would that look like independent of the two political parties?.

Michelle Alexander:

Well that's an excellent question and thank you so much. Thank you both for your kind words, words of support. I think that is really the key question for us as advocates is how do we carve out an independent moral voice of authority given this two-party system that really does not place the interest of poor people generally and poor folks of color particularly anywhere on their agenda. How do we carve out space for that conversation and develop a really credible, independent, powerful voice.

[0:35:54]

My own view and I know many may disagree and my views are always in a state of evolution so I'm eager to have dialogue about this. But my own view is that our greatest hope lies outside of the two-party system and working with the democratic party. That's not to say that we don't try to influence those in positions of power in either party. Of course, we must. But rather than viewing as a primary strategy, trying to build relationships with existing political officials and kind of learn how to work the system so to speak that we really have to organize in a way that will challenge both parties and the political system as it exists rather than simply trying to get better at working within it.

That means organizing at a grassroots level. Organizing faith communities, organizing formerly incarcerated people, organizing the families of those directly impacted who have loved behind bars, supporting the efforts of prisoners to organize themselves. As we've seen

in recent years, prisoners have been organizing hunger strikes and holding consciousness raising efforts behind bars and really doing a lot of important work behind bars that scarcely gets noticed by anyone on the outside. Finding ways to support that work, supporting the work of young people and allies so that a growing network emerges of folks that are not tied to any political party but are speaking in an organized clear fashion. You know, demanding an end to the system of mass incarceration, calling for an end to the war and drugs, calling for an end to our overly punitive approach to dealing with problems associated with poverty or drug addiction, etc. But also with a clear voice articulating what we're for.

That in my view means shifting away from a civil rights framework towards a human rights framework. Adopting not just the language of human rights but helping to educate folks that you really do have a right to work, you really do have a right to quality education no matter who you are or what you have done. That's a basic human right that must be honored and we can organize in our individual communities and then connect with each other on a national level in a way that will pose a challenge to the democratic and republican parties, a challenge that they can't ignore.

One of my concerns is that right now there doesn't seem to exist a national network of organizations that is well coordinated enough. I don't want to even say well-funded because I've grown tired of begging foundations for the funding necessary to do this work and want us to find ways to do it with or without the funding. But to develop a national network of people at a grassroots level that share information, ideas, coordinate strategies in a way that some kind of collective power can emerge on a national level and not just at a local level. But it does I think have to begin local and the move to reach a more national level. I hope that helps to answer your question.

Belvie: Thank you so much.

Molly Rowan Leach: Thank you so much, Belvie, for your question and I love how Michelle you're outlining something that seems to be a common theme. I have the honor this summer to host the Justice Series during what was called the Summer of Peace and had a conversation with Arun Gandhi, Gandhi's grandson and Dominic Barter of Restorative Circles and quite a few other people who are really on the ground doing incredible work like **[0:40:21]** **[Indiscernible]** Perry in Los Angeles. One of the common themes just that is recurring is that on the ground, grassroots work that we're doing. I completely agree with you that a national network connecting us I think it's birthing right now actually. I'm going to be bold and just say that.

[0:40:44]

Michelle Alexander: Good.

Molly Rowan Leach: [Laughs] I think that that's also a part of what the vision of the Peace Alliance has in stores that we would like to help be a part of that creation. So anyway Belvie, thank you so much.

Michelle Alexander: I do think that's so critically important because there's so many wonderful people doing amazing work.

Molly Rowan Leach: Right.

Michelle Alexander: But not necessarily connected to or feeling part of a larger movement and finding a way to connect all of those bright lights I think will be really useful.

Molly Rowan Leach: Right and you outline on your website actually, you've got some great resources there at the NewJimCrow.com and you speak to a lot of powerful works happening. So again, I encourage people to visit the NewJimCrow.com. I'd like to take another question or comment from our council Dick. Welcome, you're live.

Dick: Hi. Am I online?

Molly Rowan Leach: You're live. We can hear you. Welcome.

Dick: Okay. Michelle, I don't know if you remember me but I was a close friend of your father's for many, many years.

Michelle Alexander: What is your name?

Dick: From back in **[0:42:01] [Indiscernible]**. Dick Leary.

Michelle Alexander: Oh, Dick, yes. I do remember you. Yes, very good to hear your voice.

Dick: Wonderful. I just want to make a comment that how proud I know your father would be at the work that you do and that the discussions we had when we were able to be together carried on to the work that you have taken on and are so instrumental in helping. So I'd love to be able to get in touch with your mom and I just want to say how proud I am too of what you're doing and what you've accomplished in your life.

Michelle Alexander: Well thank you so, so much, Dick. As you know, my father passed away quite a long time ago but it was definitely his determination to get to the truth of the matter about all things that really helped to inspire me on this path. So it's so good to hear your voice and connect with you. Happy to give you my mom's info and I know she'd love to talk with you.

Dick: Thank you.

Molly Rowan Leach: I'm happy to connect you as well since I have your contact information. So we'll do that offline.

Dick: Wonderful.

Molly Rowan Leach: You know, there's a beautiful just very short but such a deeply heartfelt piece about your father in your introduction and acknowledgements that is. Really the spirit of those who inspire us, we carry with us and we thank the people who have come before us whether it's our parents or those who have done this work. You speak to that in the closing of the book very powerfully and quoting something from let's see, what is the author's name again, Michelle?

Michelle Alexander: James Baldwin?

Molly Rowan Leach: Yes, the James Baldwin piece. So we'll –

Dick: Yes.

Molly Rowan Leach: -- we'll get to that here shortly but I'd like to take one more question. Dick, it's wonderful to have you with us today. Let's see here. Go ahead councilwoman Lisa Robins, spider woman. Welcome.

Lisa: Thank you. Hi everyone. Good morning. Can you all hear me?

Molly Rowan Leach: You're live go ahead. You're live go ahead and welcome.

Lisa: Good morning, welcome, thank you. I just first of all would like to say Ms. Alexander, thank you so much for eloquently speaking to my heart and I'm sorry it's a little bit emotional for me. I didn't even think I would cry. I am someone who was put in this system at the age of 12 and I am now 47 and all of this, what you're speaking of rings to true as to the scarring of the people that are placed into this system. I just recently have broken free of all this systemic failings that have followed me all of my life. No matter how hard I tried, it seemed that I couldn't get away from it.

[0:45:45]

A lot of people wonder what's going on in our world and a lot of that has to do with just as you're speaking of, people are brought into a world without choice into this system, the caste system that you're speaking of. It seems that only the elite have opportunities and so many people will struggle with a feeling of inferiority and crushed dreams that they're never even allowed to start dreaming or working toward and so they become sick, they become mentally ill and seek relief in ways that some do not understand.

I just think that what you're doing and where you're coming from is being led in a divine way, and it feels good to know that there are people out here who are looking beyond our labels that have been placed on us as people of color or as ex-offenders or menaces in society. I think it is when our own brothers and sisters start standing up for us and believing in us rather than promoting additional victimization by the systems that are created to in fact correct or rehabilitate us as the words that are used when you're placed in those systems.

I think when people start showing compassion and it is happening I do agree, that I think things are taking a different course. I really thank you for the way in which you have formatted it today so that I understand that it is about politics. I never really understood that until I just listened to you and it makes perfect sense. It's actually become like you said a lucrative business and it's unfortunate that so many people are being affected not just the offenders but their families and the little children that are involved when their parents are gone. It perpetuates that cycle. I'm just very humbled to have been invited to this forum and --

Molly Rowan Leach: Thank you so much for being with us councilwoman.

Lisa: Yes.

Michelle Alexander: Thank you for sharing your experience. You know, I have to say I think I'm so grateful that you were willing to share on a personal level and share your emotion as well because you're absolutely right that there is so much emotional harm and suffering needless, just needless emotional harm that has been done by this system. As much as we advocates, like myself want to talk about changing policy and repealing our drug laws or this or that, that on a very human level there's a lot of healing that has to be done. I think that you're absolutely right that people who may not have been scarred by the system have been lucky to escape its grasp.

Lisa: Yeah.

Michelle Alexander: Have to be willing to stand up and stand with those who have and to say I'm going to stand with you and unfortunately the nature of this system is to make people feel ashamed--

Lisa: Yes.

Michelle Alexander: --of their past and feel as though they have to hide or deny it or escape it in some way. For those who have not been caught by the system to want to distance themselves from those who have. You know, that I think is an essential challenge for our movement building which is how can we heal these divisions within our own communities, our own families so that we can stand with those who have suffered in this system. Stand with them and support them in meaningful ways.

[0:50:50]

While you were speaking, I was reminded of this quote by Howard Thurman who's an African-American Christian mystique who died many years ago, but he was a powerful voice during the civil rights movement. I have this quote right here with me which I just love and which I think speaks to exactly what you shared. He said, "There are few things more devastating than to have it burned into you that you do not count and that no provisions are made for the literal protection of your person. In this world, the socially disadvantaged is constantly given a negative answer to the most important personal questions upon which mental health depends -- who am I, what am I, what is to become of me. Above all else in our society the disinherited is made to feel that they have not stake in the social order. They must be made to feel that they are alien, that it is a great boon to be allowed to remain alive not be exterminated."

Molly Rowan Leach: Wow.

Michelle Alexander: I think for so many people who have been trapped and labeled and branded and shamed, you know, they have it burned into them that they do not count and that no provisions have been made for them. So thank you for sharing on the way that you did.

Lisa: Thank you very much. Would it be at all possible also to be connected with you at a later time?

Michelle Alexander: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Lisa: Thank you.

Michelle Alexander: Yeah. I'd love to do that.

Molly Rowan Leach: That's interesting because I was just thinking that too that there are so many aspects of this council given the linear timing that we have together, which is almost running out here that maybe someday you might consider coming back with us again, Michelle.

Michelle Alexander: I would love to.

Molly Rowan Leach: Or at least staying in touch with us and one of the things that I'd like to propose too is that the conversation and questions might continue because there's so many people that have raised their hands today and I know that I'm not going to be able to get to all of you. I apologize for that. But do hold your question and bring it to the forum at Do Peace, which is the Peace Alliance's social network where the Restorative Justice on the Rise Series is posted. You just go to DoPeace.us and then click on the restorative justice tab.

Before going back around to open up the call the a few more questions Michelle, I'd like to ask you your thoughts given that we're moving into the direction of talking about where we are now and maybe what we might do moving forward. What are your thoughts on this grassroots movement that is rising of restorative justice and is it going to go deep enough do you think or is it a pipedream? Is it something that might answer to that need of the division between people who are castigated from society because of this system and because of shame? Or will it provide part of all of the solution perhaps of our deep need to be heard, our deep need to be seen, our deep need to dialogue about the wounds that we have been passed down, that we've co-created together?

Michelle Alexander: Yes. Well it is definitely not a pipedream and I'm so encouraged by the movement that is growing around restorative justice, transformative justice. I'm very encouraged by it. I think that one of the reasons why it's such a crucial part of the work to end mass incarceration and to break this cycle of caste like systems in America is because it helps to provide an answer to well if we don't have prisons, if prisons aren't the answer then what, what are we going to do about these people or that harm or this tragedy.

[0:55:29]

You know, I think that there is kind of real harm that has to be acknowledged and addressed. People do violate each other's rights, commit real crimes against each other that cause pain and suffering in our communities. You take a city like Chicago for example which has been ground zero in the drug war. I mean if there was ever a case study of all that is wrong with the drug war and how it is far more likely to create

crime and violence by incarcerating huge segments of community, Chicago is it. In Chicago, nearly 80% of working age African-American men now have criminal records. In the state of Illinois, about 90% of all drug offenders sent to prison have been African-American even though they're not any more likely to use or sell drugs. You have entire neighborhoods that have been laid waste by mass incarceration the drug war and violence is spiraling out of control in many of these communities. People say well what do we do about people who are causing harm in our communities. If prison isn't the answer then what?

Restorative justice I think begins to point the way towards how we might be able to deal with crime and harm that is caused between members of a community, within communities, without resorting to putting people in a cage. That I think is absolutely necessary. When people talk about a world without prisons, you know, the most common response with people just kind of scoff or laugh, a world without prisons well what are you going to do about people who rob or who steal or who murder or who do this or that. There are answers to these questions that I think people in the restorative justice movement were working towards transformative justice are providing and will continue to develop. Those answers will continue to evolve as the movement grows and builds and is challenged to respond to these difficult questions.

So far from being a pipedream, I view it as absolutely essential to the work of ending mass incarceration and the building of a more compassionate and just society.

Molly Rowan Leach: One of the things that has inspired me along those lines is you're probably familiar, Michelle, with the interrupters.

Michelle Alexander: Yeah.

Molly Rowan Leach: Up in Chicago and the film that basically follows the lives of a few of the interrupters, one of them Emina and really the courage of going into the neighborhoods and really digging **[0:58:18] [Audio Glitch]**

Michelle Alexander: Are you there? Hello? Hello? Hello?

Molly Rowan Leach: Michelle, are you still with me?

Michelle Alexander: Now, I am. I'm sorry.

Molly Rowan Leach: Yeah. We had a brief technical pause there. I was just wanting to share with everyone the interrupters, the film and be sure to check that out. Michelle, are you okay with one more question from the council today?

Michelle Alexander: Sure.

Molly Rowan Leach: I know we're getting close to closing but we had such an outpouring of enthusiasm here, I'd like to field one more. Amy welcome. You're live.

Amy: Hi. Thank you for your work, Michelle. I have been reading a lot of materials on restorative justice and most of it has been by white academics and a lot of the framing of even the problems that restorative justice, like they'll say crime is caused by disconnection. When I started reading your work I thought oh my gosh, it's not disconnection. It's policies.

Michelle Alexander: Yes.

Molly Rowan Leach: There's a lot more to it than disconnection. I guess in relation to what you're saying of creating a grassroots movement so let's not reform let's transform right. Let's create another model which is going to require, I think you're right, it's going to require people working together. So I guess some of my question is about leadership and language. I'm thinking about spider woman, I'm thinking about how do we create a movement where our leaders are not just academics. I don't have anything against academics, I'm a PhD myself but, I feel some concern that it's a very...

[1:00:18]

You know, and I'm white too and so it's like how do we create this movement where we come, where we intentionally build leadership and we build language, which is more connected to the people who are actually experiencing the system. How do we create a grassroots- how do we get from where we are now which is very academically led restorative justice movement or is that happening? Is there an intentional creation of a diverse leadership and a diverse type of language around restorative justice?

Michelle Alexander: Well, you know, I am not as involved in the restorative justice movement as I could be. So I have done a lot of reading and attended gatherings and consulted with folks who really are working on building the restorative justice movement and establishing restorative justice programs in their communities, but that has not been the focus of my work. So kind of asking the question, how does that particular aspect of the work reach a broader population, I'm probably not the best person to answer that question.

But I do know that even within kind of the academic community, there is a little bit of a split between those who think of themselves as kind of firmly in the restorative justice camp and those who kind of view themselves as more interested in transformative justice. Transformative justice as I understand it is defined as having the same goals as restorative justice to a large extent but also looking more broadly at transforming communities, transforming our society and viewing conflict as less a dispute between individuals and kind of more a reflection of the structure of a community or a society as a whole.

So transformative justice is kind of really looking at kind of both, resolving a dispute between individuals, resolving conflict and harm that has been caused between individuals and also looking to transform kind of the structure of community so that those types of conflicts or harm do not emerge as frequently or in the same way.

So I may not be describing this accurately again so that's not the work that I'm most steeped in so I apologize if I'm getting it wrong in some way.

Amy:

No.

Michelle Alexander: But I think that there's lessons from kind of both framings that are very important and that can be applied at a grassroots level. In my own work, you know, I have to say that I have been so encouraged to see people at a grassroots level formerly incarcerated folks, people behind bars really taking up my book and the works I've shared and using it in their own ways, finding ways to make it work in their work. I think that a lot more can be done to bridge the gaping hole between the vast gulf between academics and those folks who are kind of living this stuff in the real world than has been done. A big part of it is actually just going and meeting with folks and being willing to work with them. Not simply teach them but work with them in a meaningful way and ask how can I support you in the work that you are doing as opposed to simply asking how can you help me with the work that I am trying to do.

I hope that as the movement grows with the restorative justice movement and the movement and mass incarceration that people who are academics as well as people who are artists as well as people who are policy advocates, people who are grassroots organizers all find their role and their voice in the movement and see each other as partners. That those who are most impacted really are given the space to provide real leadership.

Amy: Great. Thank you so much.

Michelle Alexander: Thank you.

Molly Rowan Leach: Michelle, thank you so much for and I think that that really actually sums up the power of what's emerging right under our noses, right now in our times. That we're recognizing that we each have a role to play in this movement and it is very promising to look out there. I was just at a restorative justice summit in Denver here in Colorado and we have a lot happening than our working model happening even with communities bridging with police departments and with the system itself. The River Phoenix Center for Peace building with Heart Phoenix, again the board president of the Peace Alliance, they have something of a very deep working model in the juvenile system.

[1:05:48]

So there are so many places that and then a lot of people that are on this call today are doing incredible work on the ground. Interestingly, the next couple of people that this series is going to be talking with are academics including Mikhail Lyubansky from the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign and a couple of others. Tomorrow, we'll be talking with Michael Nagler from the Metta Center for nonviolence who also was a professor at UC Berkeley Peace Studies. So there's something in it for everyone and I love again, Michelle, how you were speaking to the importance of bringing a national network together. I feel like that's in the works.

So obviously, we're running a little bit over time here. I just want to acknowledge again the importance of your work, Michelle, and your heart.

Michelle Alexander: Thank you.

Molly Rowan Leach: And I would like to encourage everyone if you haven't already, go pick up a copy of The New Jim Crow. It's available on Amazon and you can also buy it through the website, which is the NewJimCrow.com. There's also a tab called take action and just in closing Michelle, could you say just a little bit more about the take action tab and also the study guides?

Michelle Alexander: Well, you know, the take action tab is actually a work in progress.

Molly Rowan Leach: Okay.

Michelle Alexander: I'm hoping to develop much more in terms of support and resources for people who want to take action. I get really a high volume of emails from people who say I want to get involved I don't even know where to begin in my community. I live in Wyoming, I live in New Mexico, I live in New York, or Detroit or wherever, how do I get started, how do I get involved. Ideally, there would be some kind of national network that would exist where people could just email the national network and the national network would say here's how you can get involved in your local community. But that doesn't exist yet and for so many people they don't really know how to get involved.

So what is listed there are a number of organizations and groups that are doing amazing work that are kind of a starting place for people to begin thinking about how they might be able to get involved in their local community or places that they can reach out to, to get ideas, advice, thoughts about how to connect to the movement.

I also encourage people to think about holding study groups, study circles about mass incarceration and the harm caused. Study guides from my book that are based around my book have been created by []Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference which comes from kind of a black Christian perspective as well as there's study guides that have been created by the Campaign to end New Jim Crow, a grassroots organization in New York and some others. So if you're interested in study guides, the Unitarian Universalist have created a study guide based on the book. There's a number of different versions of study guides that are available as a way of getting people to at least sit down and have conversation about these issues before deciding how best to take action or where they might fit in.

Molly Rowan Leach: Just in closing on behalf of the Peace Alliance, again this is board member Molly Rowan Leach, your host with a heartfelt thanks to all of you coming in from around the world today to share with Michelle Alexander, author of The New Jim Crow. Please join me tomorrow as we host Michael Nagler of the Metta Center for Nonviolence. That's at 5:00 p.m. Pacific. Again 5:00 p.m. Pacific tomorrow with Michael Nagler from the Metta Center for Nonviolence. Thank you so much everyone.

Michelle Alexander: Thank you so, so much. I really enjoyed having the conversation.

Molly Rowan Leach: Wonderful. Thank you, Michelle.

[1:10:00] End of Interview

Reprint and inclusion of excerpts from this material upon permission.