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Prison Reform Advocate Jean Basinger Receives 2015 ACLU of Iowa Louise Noun Award

A pen pal correspondence sparked a lifetime of advocacy for those behind bars.

Des Moines, Iowa -- Jean Basinger, a long-time advocate of prison reform, has been named the 2015 recipient of the American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa Louise Noun Award.

Basinger, of Des Moines, has been a leader in Friends of Iowa Women Prisoners and in Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants (CURE).

In 1991, she helped form the Justice Reform Consortium, 17 organizations working for reform through legislation – which has worked with the ACLU on changing laws on sentencing juveniles to life without the possibility of parole.

She was chair of the Restorative Justice Taskforce of the Iowa Board of Church and Society. She's also served for 20 years on the board of Hansen House of Hospitality for Men, which assists those leaving prison

Honoring A Noted Civil Libertarian

The Louise Noun Award is given annually by the ACLU of Iowa to honor people who have contributed significantly to the defense of civil liberties. It is named after the former, highly influential ACLU of Iowa board president and community leader.

Basinger will formally receive the award October 2 at the ACLU of Iowa annual event at the World Food Prize building in Des Moines.

Jeremy Rosen, ACLU of Iowa executive director, said, "Louise Noun was a remarkable civil libertarian with a long history of defending our most basic freedoms. This award is given to those who follow in her footsteps and make significant contributions fighting for the constitutional rights of everyone – no matter what their status in our society. Jean Basinger's extensive work defending the rights of prisoners and those in our criminal justice system certainly makes her a worthy recipient."

Erica Johnson, ACLU of Iowa advocacy director who has worked for years with Basinger, said, "One of Jean's great strengths is how she personally connects to those who are not being treated fairly by the system. She meets with prisoners and talks with them to ask 'What are you struggling with? How can we help?'"

A History Grounded in Helping

Ever since she was just a few years old, growing up in Goldfield, Iowa, Jean Basinger knew she had a strong desire to help others. She gravitated naturally into a career in medicine, first getting a nursing degree and then another in health science.

In 1955, she married William Basinger, with whom she would become a true partner in social justice advocacy.

In the '60s, the Basingers, accompanied by their children, served as missionaries in Japan and then South Korea, where she was a public health nurse in the Seoul slums. They also worked with human rights and democracy activists in South Korea, then run by a dictator.

International Defenders of Freedom

The family even hid South Korean activists in their home for safety. At one point, William and others were interrogated for 10 hours following a demonstration after the government "executed eight innocent men, accusing them of being communist spies. Their only real crime was being poor and defenseless," Basinger recalls.

When the couple returned to the U.S. in 1980, Basinger began to work to help the impoverished and the defenseless in her home country. This led to her work with those in Iowa's jails and prisons.

She volunteered to become a pen pal for those in jail, and it became a window into their world. She saw the excessive use of solitary confinement, the lack of mental health services, the high cost for prisoners making phone calls, and the harsh restrictions on visits from loved ones. "It is a system built on punishment rather than rehabilitation," Basinger says.

She's worked to provide Christmas gifts for women prisoners to give to their children. She's sewed costumes for the women's prison drama project.

"How I wish you could have seen the way their faces glowed when they put on elaborate costumes that transformed them for the roles they were playing," she said. "For a few hours, they were transported out of prison and came to realize that they have creative gifts to share. I find that very rewarding."

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The ACLU of Iowa is a private, non-partisan organization that fights to advance civil liberties for all. It is the state affiliate of the national American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU prides itself in upholding everyone's civil liberties, no matter who they are or what they believe. We work to assure the rights of all Iowans – from atheists to devout Christians, from labor unions to businesspeople and more – to make sure the constitutional rights of all are preserved. For more information, please go to www.alcu-ia.org

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