

# Robert Gangi

## Oral History Interview with Robert Gangi

*Interviewed by Jeffrey A. Kroessler & Larry E. Sullivan  
on February 26, 2008*

*Interviewed by Jeffrey A. Kroessler  
on December 3, 2009*

## Justice in New York: An Oral History

### Preface

President Jeremy Travis initiated Justice in New York: An Oral History in 2006. Based in the Lloyd Sealy Library, the project was made possible through a generous grant from Jules B. Kroll, President of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice Foundation. The goal was to interview criminal justice leaders – district attorneys, police commissioners and members of the department, elected officials, defense attorneys, and advocates, individuals concerned with the workings of the system.

Each interview is recorded on cassette tapes and/or a digital recorder. The original is deposited in Special Collections in the library. Each transcript is bound and the volume is cataloged and placed on the shelves. A digital copy is available through the library's web site, as are selected audio clips from the interviews (<http://www.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/>).

Oral history is a problematic endeavor. The interview is only as good as the questions asked and the willingness of the interview subject to be open and honest. Some remain guarded, others become expansive. Sometimes memory fails, and details, names and dates are confused. Some individuals have their own set story, and an oral history will add little that is new or especially insightful. Other individuals use the interview as an opportunity to sum up a career; on occasion that means gliding over unpleasant or difficult details. Our purpose was to allow each individual to tell his or her story. In each case, the final transcript has been approved by the interview subject.

Even with those caveats, what emerges from these interviews is more than a collection of personal reminiscences. The interviews shed light on controversies and policy decisions of a particular historical moment. At times, the interviews verge on the philosophical, as with discussion of capital punishment, race relations, or the decriminalization of controlled substances. Always, the interviews contribute to our understanding of the many facets of the criminal justice system – law enforcement, prosecution, incarceration, prisoner re-entry, and electoral politics – and reveal how New York has changed over the decades, as have social and cultural attitudes.

Justice in New York: An Oral History stretches across more than half a century, from the 1950s to the 2010s. Those years saw an unprecedented rise in social unrest and violent crime in the city, and then an equally dramatic drop in crime and disorder. If the interviews have an overarching theme, it is how the city – the police, courts, elected officials, and advocates – addressed and, yes, overcame those challenges. These men and women were actors in that drama, and their narratives stand on their own. The truth or mendacity of the story is for the reader to assess.

Chief Librarian Larry E. Sullivan guided this project from the start and participated in several interviews. Interim Chief Librarian Bonnie Nelson oversaw the creation of a new website for Criminal Justice in New York, a portal for the oral histories, trial transcripts, images and documents from Special Collections, and other resources. Special Collections librarian Ellen Belcher, cataloging librarian Marlene Kandel, and emerging technologies librarian Robin Davis contributed to the success of this project.

Jeffrey A. Kroessler

2013

## Robert Gangi

### Chronology

- 1844 John W. Edmonds, president of the Board of Inspectors at Sing Sing Prison, founded the Correctional Association of New York; since 1846 the Association has presented an annual report on prison conditions to the New York State Assembly.
- 1973 The state legislature passed the Rockefeller Drug Laws, imposing mandatory sentences for the sale and possession of narcotics; by 1983 the prison population had grown from 12,000 to 29,000.
- 1979 The legislature modified the Rockefeller Drug Laws, doubling the weights that triggered a mandatory 15 to life sentence.
- 1981 New York voters turn down a \$500 million bond act for prison construction; Gangi a director of Voters Against the Prison Bond Issue.
- 1982 Became Executive Director of the Correctional Association.
- Dec. 2004 Governor Pataki signed legislation further modifying the Rockefeller Drug Laws, doubling the possession amount that would trigger a mandatory 8 to 20 sentence.
- 2005 The legislature passed additional modifications to the Rockefeller Drug Laws.
- Nov. 20, 2009 Announced he would step down as Executive Director effective October 1, 2010.
- April 2011 Founded the Police Reform Organizing Project
- 2012 Received the Elliott-Black Award of the American Ethical Union

## Robert Gangi

February 26, 2008

JK If you could just identify yourself.

Gangi Robert Gangi—the executive director of the Correctional Association of New York.

JK You've been here a long time?

Gangi It was twenty-six years just this past February 15<sup>th</sup>.

JK But you weren't here when the organization was founded in 1844?

Gangi I was not. There have been rumors to that effect and some people think that based on my physical appearance those rumors could actually be true but in fact no—just the last twenty-six years.

JK It's a testament to someone to stay in any position for twenty-six years, but you are in a position that compels you to fight for the same ground over and over and over again, and I'm wondering if it's beginning to feel like the western front in World War I where when you gain a couple of yards you feel like it's a victory worth ringing the bells for.

Gangi There is that aspect to the work, that anytime we get a win or a gain you feel like celebrating and the win or the gain could be something very small. One of the things we do is we go into the New York City court pens, particularly the pre-arraignment cells that hold people that are just arrested, and we've been able to improve the food that the prisoners get, the detainees get, while they're locked up, and in Brooklyn we were able to improve particularly the breakfast. The complaint we would get from the prisoners is we would get a box of cereal, which in itself was an advance because it used to be everybody got a bologna sandwich for every meal, and partly because of our advocacy the city changed and they would actually give breakfast food at breakfast time. But in Brooklyn, it was almost a comical version of a problem. They wouldn't give the detainees spoons; so they get the box of cereal, they get milk, but no spoons. So we would ask the detainees, "What did you get for breakfast?" and they would say, "We got the box of cereal with the milk but no spoons," and they would complain about it. So, we lobbied and lobbied and lobbied, and eventually the detainees were given a spoon at breakfast in the Brooklyn court pen. So sometimes the gain that we help achieve is that small, and sometimes it's much more significant. For example, we were instrumental in having legislation passed this year signed by Governor Spitzer that would severely restrict the housing of mentally ill people in punitive segregation units in state prison. That to us is a major victory, and it would have not happened without our prison monitoring work, the reports we did, the legislative advocacy we did, and the

coalition building we did. So, the range can be from very small wins that help in some way to improve the quality of life of people who were generally screwed over, like detainees in the Brooklyn court pens, to major victories that involve the criminal justice system making a significant step forward on an important issue.

But you touch on sort of a fundamental characteristic of this work. I've been here twenty-six years, which is obviously a long time, and you're not the first person to raise the issue of sort of how do you keep going, how do you perceive it as being a positive when with these issues you're going over the same ground, to use your metaphor, over and over and over again, and if you read about the founding of the organization you read that the issues we were dealing with then, the reason we were founded, are the same issues we're dealing with now, basic conditions of confinement and the social and economic conditions in the outside community that these prisoners encountered. And I would struggle with this. I'm going to end up telling you a little story. Each year we have a major fundraising event called our 1844 Dinner and I make a five to ten minute speech about why our work's important, give some content of the work, and I would be bothered by it because, again getting to your question, how do you justify being around for a hundred fifty years, a hundred and sixty years, doing the same thing over and over and over again, and apparently maybe making some progress here and there but not making sufficient progress because the problems still are deep seated and substantial and very real. After all this time shouldn't you have solved the problem? This sounds funny, but for me it was what truly happened. I heard a story about a speech that Vince Lombardi gave toward the end of his career and in the speech he said, "My team's never lost a game; on a couple instances the clock ran out." And one way to think about our work and continue the sports metaphor is in our game the clock never runs out. There's always going to be bad guys on the field and often they're going to have more resources than you and they're going to be bigger and stronger than you but it's your job to be out on the field and to continue to push back and to prevent bad things from happening and to score the occasional first down or touchdown. And that's your job and that's the way you should understand your job. When I talk to the staff people at the CA, I say that while we have some understanding that people get tired and frustrated, we're not understanding about burnout. You know, if you think you might have a burnout issue then don't come do this work. Because this is long, hard work and I still consider it a privilege to do it. And one of the aspects of it is that there will be frustration and disappointment, but another aspect of it is that it's important work and it's noble work and too few people get paid to do this work.

JK      You're really fighting on two fronts, if I understand the kind of work you're doing. Which is, you're fighting on the practical front in terms of improving actual conditions, improving the prospects for prisoners, the conditions they endure, the process they go through, and you're also fighting on a philosophical front. So you're fighting the practical issues of what's actually happening in prisons and you're trying to present arguments as to what we as a society should be doing in terms of correctional policy and practice. That must be a tension in your day to day operations.

Gangi      Right. Another way to think about this is, we like to think about ourselves, and it's a little highfalutin, JFK actually used this kind of language, that we're both

idealists and we're pragmatists. So we're idealists because we are dealing with deep philosophical issues, and we are representing the position that we should aspire to be a more just society, a better society, a society that's really committed to social and economic and racial justice, and our prison system is the heart of the beast, particularly in the way that it reflects, in our view, racial bias in our society. So that we raise those issues, and we site the famous Winston Churchill quote that the mood and temper of the public in regard to crime and the treatment of criminals is the most unfailing test of any civilization, and Dostoevsky's quote, the degree of civilization can be judged by entering its prisons. So that our work goes to these very fundamental questions about justice and equality and how we treat the undesirables and the outlaws in our midst and the kind of society we are. And it also goes to these very practical concerns: how do we not just speak in philosophical terms or idealistic terms but how do we effect things? How do we get things done? So we're combining our responsibility to raise the larger issues and the issues that would hopefully touch some people's consciences. And how do we do what we can to make sure that the detainees in Brooklyn get spoons at breakfast, or that mentally ill people in prison are treated more decently, more humanely than they have been treated? That so many of the kids, one of our projects is the Juvenile Justice Project, and before we started this project I didn't know this, the majority of kids who get detained in New York City are not charged with serious offenses; they're charged with misdemeanors or levels of offenses lower than that; it's just that the courts are not comfortable sending a kid back to a dysfunctional family or home and we don't have sufficient alternative programs that would be appropriate placements for the kids. So, the judges end up sending them to the city juvenile detention facilities that now cost over two hundred thousand dollars a year to house a kid. So, how do you press for more funding for alternative programs which is again a very pragmatic consideration? So I don't know if there's a tension there, but we are attentive to both responsibilities. We have the responsibility to talk about fundamental principles and first principles and to keep presenting them to the public and to the policy makers. And we have the responsibility to be effective in very pragmatic terms. And we attempt to do both.

JK But your line of work isn't especially popular among, let's say, most elected officials, among the general public, amongst funders. I mean, funders is a different issue. But you are advocating for what a lot of the public doesn't see that there's a problem. We've solved the problem; we have the prisons, we're done. And so you're in the position of speaking to a public that may not want to hear what you have to say.

Gangi Right. And some people think that I'm overly, optimistic may not be the right word, but overly positive about where public opinion come out on these issues. I think that with better and more foresighted and braver leadership the public would support a lot of the kinds of reforms that we advocate, even though there is some kind of common wisdom that well, just what you said, the public doesn't care about that, it's out of sight out of mind, you know, just round them up and lock them up someplace upstate. Like when we first started working on the mental health issue that I referred to earlier, we decided to focus on the mental health issue inside prison particularly as it applies to punitive segregation units or disciplinary housing; in New York State the units are called SHUs—Special Housing Units.

JK Or let alone the question of do the mentally ill belong in prison at all. Do you even get to address that issue while you're focusing on what happens when they're there?

Gangi We raise it, and I'll get to that. But when we first started working on the mentally ill in punitive segregation issue, we did it not out of a sense of pragmatism, but out of a sense that one of the reasons an organization like the Correctional Association is on the planet is to raise tough issues that nobody else is addressing. That's one of our jobs, so it's one of our jobs to take on "unpopular issues." That's the job of other organizations like the ACLU, the Center for Constitution Rights, certainly part of our job. And what we became aware of as we're working on this issue is that this issue actually would have a lot of political traction, because even though there's not a large immediate constituency for the mentally ill who are locked up, there's a lot of public sympathy for mentally ill people who are put in punitive segregation. When you describe that to most people in the public they would say, "No, there's something wrong with that." And it's not because they think doing it differently saves money or makes them safer, they react to it on the basis of considerations of common humanity. You know, it's tough enough being mentally ill, then you put a mentally ill person in punitive segregation where they're confined twenty-three to four hours a day for weeks, months or years at a time, most people would say that is wrong, that should not be a policy of New York State government. Therefore, we should come up with alternative responses to that issue, to mentally ill people who are imprisoned who get in trouble in prison. So we picked up on the fact that there was political viability to this issue, although it's not something you're able to go around and mobilize thousands of people to march on Albany. But you knew there was public sympathy. Politicians knew there was public sympathy, and what we did, along with some other people who worked on this issue, we got editorial boards from all over the state to raise the outcry and to support the bill that was eventually passed and signed by Spitzer. And I think the Abu Ghraib scandal also points to why, that there's, let me say this and then I'll say more about it, that the public does not approve of treating people brutally in prison. When the public saw those photographs, most people were upset and shocked and said, "That's not the America we believe in." So, in a way one way to think about our work, since we can't take cameras into the prisons, is we are society's camera and we report on what we see as dramatically and as effectively as possible for our reports. And we are also society's conscience because we hold up in effect through our words that picture and say, "This is wrong, this is inhumane." And in some cases we could also make the point this is doing nothing to make you safer, because the people we're talking about will eventually return to the community in worse shape and probably more crime prone than they would be if they were treated humanely and decently in prisons. It's not that there isn't a significant strain in society that has the out of sight out of mind attitude and worse about prisoners, but I think there's a competing strain that can be tapped into that would have concern about prisoners. Think about most Hollywood movies that are about prisons, who's usually the bad guy?

JK The screws.



Gangi           It's the correctional officers, yeah. Who's usually the sympathetic character? The prisoner. I mean, there are exceptions to that. It's the prisoners. So I think that there's been a failure of leadership on most of these issues, because most politicians, not all, most politicians will take sort of a less risky route when it comes to these issues, and some politicians will outright pander on these issues. But I don't think there's as much public hostility as the common wisdom suggests.

JK           As a historian I am always concerned with periodization, that is, when does one historical moment end and when does another one begin, and how do you characterize different moments. You came into this organization or become executive director of this organization, I don't know whether this is a fortunate thing or unfortunate, at the precise time that the public was embracing a more tough on crime attitude. That the elected officials, you had two very liberal governors to deal with, Hugh Carey and Mario Cuomo, and yet their attitude was tough on crime. And the period before that was, let's understand the criminal, let's understand the conditions that produce crime, let's try and ameliorate those conditions. And now you're running this organization and it's tough on crime, period, and the more we can lock up the better. Locking them up is the solution.

Gangi           Right.

JK           So, I'm just wondering if you wanted to comment from the perspective of your own career on that periodization.

Gangi           Well, from time to time I say that when I became director of the Correctional Association there were about twenty-one thousand people locked up. That was 1982. One of my jobs was to work on the reduction of the use of incarceration in New York State, and now there are over sixty-two thousand people locked up. Just think how much worse it would be if [laughs].

LS           Well, parenthetically, just to add to this, right around the same time in the '80's, the British Minister known as, he said in the '80's around the time you became director, "Prison works." And that's when they started the punitive movement in Britain.

Gangi           Right.

LS           The Minister of Justice came out or whatever they called him, the Home Minister, "Prison works."

Gangi           Right. Actually hadn't heard that. I think you're right in terms of the historical era, and broadly speaking we think about the bend in the road being taken in New York in 1973 when Rockefeller pushed through the drug laws. You guys probably all know these numbers: at that time there were twelve thousand five hundred people in state prison. There were about three hundred thousand people locked up in the state's prisons and jails and we had come out of one of those periods. I've taken a look, I'm less of an historian, but based on the information that I've read our previous peak incarceration rate was in 1939 which was obviously the depths of the Depression. It

dropped in World War II when some of the people who would have been locked up were fighting in World War II. It began to rise again in the late forties; flattened out in the early fifties during the Korean War, began to rise again in the fifties, then began to drop in the sixties when we had liberal social policies and the Vietnam War. And in 1973 Rockefeller pushed through the Rockefeller drug laws and that was really the granddaddy of the mandatory sentencing laws which triggered a movement to enact mandatory sentencing laws across the country. And the prison population in New York State began to creep up sort of very slowly in the seventies, but each year it went up till it was about twenty-one, twenty-two thousand in the early eighties, and then during the so-called war on crack it exploded in New York State. And then Cuomo built all those prisons. So the time when I came to the Correctional Association the pendulum had already begun to swing the other way, and while I was here it just swung even more wildly like and you would almost keep waiting for it to swing back and it just didn't. It just crashed through so like by '81-'82 when I came here we matched the incarceration rate of '39 and just kept going. So we've had this explosion in the use of prisons, and it was historically unprecedented not only in the United States but in the world. 25% of the world's prisoners are locked up in the United States. So it's really extraordinary. It's also extraordinary that nobody mentions this during the national political campaign. It's like this dark hole of an issue.

JK Can you imagine any candidate saying, "We have to implement prison reform so that we can bring greater services to the number of individuals who are locked up?"

Gangi I can imagine it being done. Yes I can, actually I can imagine it being done and being talked about in a way that I think could be politically acceptable. I was invited by the Community Service Society to the small group meeting, it was about eighty or a hundred people from the non-profit world. I met with Clinton and Obama, this was a long time ago, way before Iowa, and the topic was urban poverty, and I was able to ask both of them about imprisonment, the war on drugs, the large percentages of black people being locked up, and they both answered pretty well, including Clinton, which surprised me, and said things like, you know, we are locking up too many people of color for low level drug offenses and we should be using more alternatives to incarceration. And now obviously they are not making that part of their TV ads in Ohio, but it was a public meeting and so words could have been used against them and they expressed themselves. I think you can talk about these issues in ways that appeal to people's, again, sense of humanity and also in the ways that appeal to the underlying self-interest. I mean when I say to a group of people I'm making a presentation to, who would you rather encounter, a drug addict and offender comes out of prison after three years in Attica or a drug addict offender who comes out of a drug treatment program after being in a residential program for twelve or eighteen months? And they'll all say, well, I'd rather encounter the person who came through the drug treatment program. And then you point out it's cheaper, it's more benign, and research shows it's more effective in reducing the crime associated with the drug trade. So, I think politicians can talk about a lot of these issues without sacrificing their political viability, and needless to say rarely do they.

JK Well, that's the other part of the equation, that in private you can get this kind of sensible appreciation for the issue and an understanding. You get a private embrace of possible solutions, but in public it's very rare, courage for an elected official.

Gangi Right. Yeah, it is rare. I'll tell you another story that was very helpful to me. I got involved in these issues directly in 1981, the year before I took the job with the CA, when I ran an ad hoc coalition called The Voters Against The Prison Construction Bond. Carey had put on the ballot a bond issue that if the voters approved would have authorized the state to borrow up to five hundred million dollars to build prisons and jails. A group of people came together to oppose it. I was hired to be the director, and I was in a debate in a Democratic club with someone who supported the bond issue, I opposed it, and there were a number of eccentric people in the audience who asked kind of wacky questions. And there was one person who asked very thoughtful questions and was very articulate, and I wanted to check out who that was after the actual back and forth. So I went over to him and it turned out to be Mark Green, who had just run for Congress and lost. He said to me, and I really appreciated this, he said something along the lines of "Gangi, you're right on all these issues," he said, "and I agree with you on these issues, but you should know the impulse to grandstand on this issue for a politician is almost irresistible. The impulse to pound your fist on the table and say lock them up and send them off to some faraway place is almost irresistible." And that was very useful for me because Green seemed like a decent guy and a thoughtful guy and he was telling me, when you go to a politicians and elected officials it's going to be very difficult for them to publicly embrace your positions. And that helped me not be that self-righteous or holier than thou or just point a finger at you gutless politicians, although sometimes I'll slip into that mode of thinking. So I think, while there is real truth in what you're saying about the political mainstream ignoring these issues or worse, like supporting the get tough responses to these issues that aren't really effective and that have driven the prison expansion monster, I think there could be at least potentially better leadership, smarter leadership that could move things, begin to reverse the course we're on.

JK You mentioned that in '81 you took on helping fight back the bond issue.

Gangi Right. And we won to our surprise [laughs].

JK In doing preparation for this I found almost no information about you personally. I found your comments, I found statements by you, quotes from you, I found all sorts of references to your work.

Gangi Did you Google me?

JK Yeah, and I didn't find any of the standard biographies.

Gangi No kidding.

JK So, I'm wondering if you could just fill in the gaps and explain how does a young man decide to devote his life to prison reform.

Gangi I don't know, the young is a relative term. I just turned sixty-four. You should get, because she did a really good job, there has been some stuff written about me and the best piece I thought was the piece, remember when they used to do Public Lives every day, or almost every day in the *Times*? Jan Hoffman, I was in Public Lives, I'm sure I have a copy, it was May of '99, and she did a really nice job, I thought, to capture me and whatever qualities I bring to this work and some of my background. But just one little story and then I'll tell you more about myself, she spent a good amount of time with me, interviewing me, and I obviously did not know what she was going to write and she left a voice mail the night before the article was going to appear, and I couldn't reach her back because it was late at night when I got the voice mail: "Well the piece is coming out tomorrow; I hope you will still talk to me." And I said, "I'm damned." [Laughs]

JK I have reporters I don't talk to anymore.

Gangi And I thought she did a very fair job, and I really appreciated it. I think it's complicated why we make life choices and career choices, but the kind of things I talked to her about and the kind of ways I understand it is, I grew up a Catholic and one of the key things, I went to Catholic schools through high school.

JK In New York?

Gangi In New York, in Brooklyn. And one of the key things they teach you is to care about other people and that one of your responsibilities is to look out for other people. And also I'm Sicilian-American, Italian-American, and I grew up in a semi-Mafia culture because on my father's side we were Sicilian and one of the things they teach you, one of the values of that culture is you look out for other people. I mean with that culture it's particularly your people and that is one of your responsibilities, and although my parents would express what you would call racially biased views and thoughts they were very warm-hearted people, so anyone who came into our family orbit was treated in that sphere, treated generously, warmly, made to feel comfortable inside our house. So all that was very, you know, without my knowing it I think I was absorbing that. And while there were things about the Sicilian-American culture I grew up in that I did not like, there were things that I did like that were very comforting and that I sort of was drawn to. The other thing I think for me was that my old man had Multiple Sclerosis and he had it from the time I was a child. I don't remember him being able bodied. And I think, and this was completely unconscious, but I think part of what was operating for me was my sort of pain at my old man being sick and crippled and with MS. At least his case, he got worse and worse and it was pretty slow deterioration and I couldn't stop it, so I think part of my impulse to help people and make the world a better place is emotional or psychological compensation for the helplessness in the face of my father's condition. And then the last piece clearly was that I was a person who was politicized in the sixties, and I think the social and political analysis of the sixties is still basically spot on, that the injustice in our country, economic, social and racial, and that many people, particularly young people, were galvanized one way or another to work on behalf of a better world and more just world. So I think all those things came together to lead me into wanting to

do social worky kind of work. In the late sixties I had a social work job working with black and Latino kids on the West Side of Manhattan, and all of them, with some exceptions, were caught up in the criminal justice system. And I could see, they all dropped out of school at a relatively early age, their homes were, excuse me, fucked up, so they had unstable lives and most of them were going to die or spend a lot of time in prison and that was going to be set for them by the time they were in their early twenties. And they were almost all black, and there was something fundamentally unfair. I also got the sense that, because I spent a lot of time with them when I did street work, that despite their personal defects, the main one being inability to control their anger when something provoked them, they were decent people who could laugh, love, care about things, but life made it so for them that they would be reckless and impulsive, particularly when they got drunk or lost their temper, be willing to hurt people and they were going to end up badly.

JK But these were still city kids.

Gangi These are all city kids, right.

JK It seems as though you're able to, I don't know if the word is relate or communicate, but you weren't such an alien being even though you were white to their experience.

Gangi Right. Well, I was obviously white and I had had an almost totally white life experience through college.

JK Where was college?

Gangi Columbia. I've always lived in New York City. I grew up in Brooklyn, in Bensonhurst and Flatbush, went to college at Columbia and after Columbia then was on the West Side of Manhattan and the street work I did was the first real contact I had with black or Latino people.

JK Did you get a degree in social work or did you just get the job?

Gangi It's another sad story. I got a degree in English at Columbia. I went to social work school for a semester at Fordham. I graduated in I guess June of '65, went to the social work school for a semester at Fordham, got thrown out for hostility to authority.

LS There you go.

JK Well, there is a difference between Columbia and a Jesuit university, even though it was social work.

Gangi I know. And I had gone to Catholic schools. But I was not prepared for Fordham, and Fordham had not yet, my guess is Fordham now is completely loose as any

secular school but then it was still as you're suggesting very Catholic, very top down in terms of rules and regulations and very authoritarian and very unwelcoming of different kinds of behavior on the part of the student body or even questioning behavior on the part of the student body.

JK I spoke with former District Attorney Bill Murphy from Staten Island, and he went to Fordham and he was there in the mid-sixties and I said, "Fordham must have changed drastically from the time you started to when you're finishing." He said, "Yes, it did." And I said, "What accounted for it?" He said, "Vatican II." Right in the middle, he said at the moment of Vatican II it all changed, "practically the next day."

Gangi I love it. Well, I didn't experience that change, and I knew they were considering some kind of discipline of me and I went to the, but I couldn't get a final answer of what my status was and I went to the president of the school, who was a Jesuit and so I asked him what, where they were coming at regarding me and he said, "Well, Mr. Gangi we are advising you to leave." And I felt like saying, I didn't, well I appreciate the advice but I think I'll stay. They threw me out, and it was really difficult because I became 1-A.

JK 1-A.

Gangi And the only way I avoided the draft was because my father was sick and my mother appealed to them because I was needed to help take care of take care of my father, which was true. But from that social work experience I got the job that I mentioned on the West Side doing street work and I think the part that would serve me well was, again, the thing I said about my parents even though I was obviously working with black and Latino people, people different than people in my life experience. The socialization that I received from my parents that people were people really served me well. So I was comfortable with people who were different, who expressed themselves differently, who acted differently. The other thing that was very helpful to me was, I worked for the Church of St. Mathew and St. Timothy's, which was run at that time by a priest named James Guswaller. Guswaller was at that time a little bit of a well-known figure in the city and advocated for better housing for poor people and more services for poor people. What I really liked about him, whenever there was an occasion for me to bring one of the kids I worked with to him because they had got in trouble or because there was particular problem with their family, he always was able to put them immediately at ease, not treat them as if the pastor of this church and therefore expect certain signs of respect from you, he would treat them as equals, and I found it very appealing. I adopted that as much as possible, so I was able to get close to some of the kids I worked with. And for a number of them, I was there less than two years, even in that time their lives took a sharp turn for the worse. That was a shaping experience for me in terms of understanding the damage, and this was before the explosion in the use of prisons, the damage that prisons can do and the criminal justice system can do to people's lives.

JK Even then young people were so at risk to go into the criminal justice system.

Gangi            For these kids there was nothing else for them. They had dropped out of school, I mean it's a little bit of a crude kind of statement, an overstatement, but essentially there was no social institution that was going to deal helpfully with them. The only social institution that was going to deal with them were the cops, the courts and prison; that's what was going to happen. And you could virtually predict it. The only way some of them would get through is by some deus ex machina coming down and pulling them out of it or just some kind of luck. Most of the black kids in particular I worked with didn't have, I can't think of one who "survived" and by the time I left or when I would hear about them afterwards some had been killed or had died of they didn't know what or were doing long terms in prison. So that was a shaping experience for me particularly in terms of the work that I came to do here which was later, it was 1982.

JK            Between working with the kids on the streets.

Gangi            So, presumably when you Googled me I guess you didn't find Hoffman's piece.

JK            No. It was really quite startling. But in '81 you're involved in beating down the prison bond act, and there's like a ten year missing piece there, between working on the streets.

Gangi            What happened, I had a checkered career. I wanted to be a social worker, and I still wanted to get back to social work school, so I left doing the street work for a more social worky kind of job for a foster care agency that was called The Brooklyn Home For Children even though it was located in Forest Hills.

LS            All on the same side of the river, right?

Gangi            But I got fired from that job for basically insubordination.

LS            Beginning to see a pattern here.

Gangi            I remember, there were a couple things that happened. There was no question that I was kind of a renegade in terms of not doing things by the book, but the two things that stood out were, one is, the Brooklyn Home For Children was both a group home, so there were groups of kids who were living there, and then also we handled individual kids who were in foster families. So we as case workers would have kids who were both in the group home and in the foster families, and shortly after I got there I learned that one of, I was in an office with another social worker and one of her kids was a girl who had gotten beaten in the group home. Actually, the head of the group home had hit her with a cane or a stick and there were a couple stitches in her head. I still remember, her name was Sylvia Green. Everybody knew that this happened, and I was like well, we know that this happened and we know that so and so hit her with his cane. And although in my interactions with him he seemed like a decent enough guy. You can't have that happen to a child that's supposedly in your custody. But nobody would, nobody

reported it, nobody did anything. So I took it upon myself to try to get some attention to it. I made some calls to the press and didn't get anywhere. I remember one reporter being sympathetic and saying it's got to be worse than that for us to want to cover it, it's got to be like pools of blood on the floor. And I reported it to the agency that was then called the Bureau of Child Welfare, I don't know what the equivalent would be now, and eventually BCW came to investigate and so the thing blew up and the guy was fired or had to leave. But then they hated me; the institution hated me. But I was getting along well enough and then one of the kids I worked with, his first name was David, he lived in the group home, he was a decent kid but he would act out and they were going to bring him to Family Court and say we can no longer handle him, and I knew that meant that he was going to go to Spofford because that was the only alternative and I was calling other places, do you have a place for him, but nobody had a place for him. And I would not contenance us in effect sending him to jail. I couldn't support that. So I went to the court and I said I disagree with the institution's decision and that I think we can still work with him, he's not a violence prone blah—blah—blah—blah. And that what's going to happen to him, if you support their decision not to keep him at Brooklyn Home For Children he's going to end up in jail and that's an inappropriate place for him. And I remember the judge was very sympathetic to me and said to my superiors, I hope you don't hold this against Mr. Gangi, but the judge went with their recommendation and then they fired me and actually, I haven't quite put these together myself, I went to the head of the agency, it was similar to the conversation with the dean at Fordham, but my question to him, I knew that I was fired, the question was who fired me, because I couldn't get clarity. I don't even know why I cared. And I loved his answer. I guess both these answers are classic with the one that said we advise you to leave, and this guy's answer and I remember his name, his name was Dr. Hawthorne, Hawthorne's answer was, "Mr. Gangi, you fired yourself." Presumably by my anti-authoritarian bent. I remember having dinner with a friend, right around that time when I had kicked out of social work school, held a job for less than two years then got a social work job and got fired, and Myron said, he's still a friend of mine, Myron said, "Boy, you have some resume."

And then from there, I had been involved with Robert Kennedy's campaign basically doing scut work, you know, stuffing envelopes. It was after he was killed, a group of higher level Kennedy people got together and said, you know, let's start an organization that carries on RFK's ideals, and they formed something called New York Action Corps. And I became a part of it, and there were people who were going to do political work sort of representing the spirit of RFK and I guess they got involved in some campaigns, and there was a much smaller group that was going to do community based work in the spirit of Robert Kennedy, and there were just a few of us who wanted to that. So I became a leader of that, got hooked up with a community daycare program that was about to lose its government money to help that program fight to maintain its money and through that became an organizer for the community daycare movement in New York City and did that for a couple years. Got involved in a lot of very dramatic political stuff because those were the days of doing sit-ins and taking over government offices, stopping traffic on the Triborough Bridge, getting beat up by police, a whole range of experiences that I had.

JK      This is in the early 1970's?



Gangi            This is late sixties, early seventies. And I'll tell you another story. Not that you're interested in these stories, but this is one of my favorites. I had an older brother who was not politically sympathetic to my work, more cut out of a classic Italian-American, Sicilian-American mode. This was in '73, we stopped traffic on the Triborough Bridge demonstrating because they were going to de-fund some community daycare programs. And I had locked arm with a woman in front of a car, the car was one of our cars that just somebody parked it and got out. Those were the days, right? Nobody would even think of doing something like this now. So, a cop came over to me and in a nasty way said, "Is that your car?" And I said, "No." And then he grabbed my arm and he threw me, and I instinctively swung back at him, not thinking.

Side 2

Gangi            Somebody gave me a picture of it. One cop took a swing at me with a billy club, and he just missed my head, And I don't know if it was just, you know, I was lucky or the other cop saw that this cop had kind of flipped and they threw me down to avoid my getting, my head getting really banged hard. So, I got locked up; I spent about twelve hours in the precinct and in the court pens, that we eventually now work on, and got back home and my brother called. And he didn't even ask how I was. He had seen this on one of the local TV news stations, right? And he had seen what this cop did, that he almost took off my head.

JK            He saw you? On TV.

Gangi            He saw me, right.

JK            About to be clubbed.

Gangi            Right, exactly. And he said to me, "Robbie, do you know what position you put me in? Because if that cop had hurt you, I would have had to get him." That's a true story. And it went back to the Mafia thing, you know, like that cop had really clubbed me Freddie would have felt that he would have to take him out. "You know what position you put me in?" So, I did that work until, that kind of work, I mean that was obviously a dramatic moment, most of it was not that kind of thing, and in 1974 I got a job with a foundation that was then, it's not around anymore, it was called the John A. Whitney Foundation, it was money from the Whitney family, Jock Whitney was the main guy and it was his money.

LS            Frank Streeter, you remember Frank Streeter?

Gangi            Yes,

LS            Streeter was on the board.

Gangi            Really?

LS Yeah, until he died, about two years ago, three years ago he died. I knew Frank. I was at the New York Historical Society when I came to New York and Frank was treasurer like his father, Thomas Streeter, and I've known Frank for years. I remember picking him up on that corner office.

Gangi Yeah, exactly.

LS Rockefeller Center. Frank was a wonderful man.

Gangi Yeah. He must have been very old when he died; do you know?

LS Eighties, mid to late eighties. He had a big office and books there. Nobody knew how great his books were. He made millions and millions of dollars. Travel books. He always kept it kind of quiet, he was a great collector but he never told anyone what great books he had until Christie's put some of them up to auction. Frank collected that.

Gangi Well, Streeter, I thought of him as a nice man, a good man and politically we came at these things much differently.

LS Oh yeah. He was a very traditional.

Gangi Yeah, very traditional guy, exactly.

LS Very upset when his granddaughter didn't go to Harvard. You know how he used to talk? "I can't imagine she didn't go to Harvard."

JK But still concerned about the same issues.

Gangi Well, no, I mean, my judgment about Streeter, and you know him better obviously, he sat at the right hand of Jock Whitney, and Jock Whitney, was more generally of the liberal Republican tradition, but I didn't think Frank was, but Frank was a money guy. I felt it was a little more he was going along with this as part of his service to Jock Whitney. But no, I didn't feel any heartfelt concern for poor people. So, the guy who ran the Whitney Foundation was a guy named Arch Gilles, who was very close to Jock Whitney, and Arch was looking for somebody with my background because usually people who do foundation work don't come out of a background of community work, they come more out of public interest work or academia, so I kind of lucked out. Because the foundation job, that's a cool job.

LS Giving money away.

Gangi Exactly. People return your phone calls. That job was very important to me because it enabled me to do good work because we gave money to things that I thought people were doing good work and working on social justice issues and community development issues and it taught me more about the political world; it taught

me about foundations and how they operate. And it taught me how to work with a board of directors, how to work with people who came out of different worlds.

LS That was a different world.

Gangi It was a very different world, and Arch was very helpful in explaining to me even when I know I'm right there's a certain way I have to express it and there's a certain deference I need to pay to the board of directors. So it helped me become more sort of socialized to how to operate in the world that up until then I had very little contact with. And luckily the board members, well, the Whitney family and the board members were sort of for the most part more highfalutin people than I was and come out of another world. They were all basically good people, and so although I think that sometimes I might put them off by my mannerisms or the way I express myself, for the most part they welcomed me in because I would do good work, I was an energetic advocate, and I could help the foundation do good work. I worked there until '80. Then Arch was moved out of the foundation for I think getting overly involved in political work, and I was his guy, so I was then also moved out. So I was fired. But less so then for anything I did or didn't do then. I was Arch's guy and they were bringing in new leadership.

JK Well, that's progress.

Gangi Yeah, that's right. And from there I did consulting work and worked with mainly community based organizations on helping them develop advocacy campaigns and help them write fundraising proposals because I had the foundation background. Then I got involved with the New York State Council of Churches and their criminal justice and prison work and then as part of that work, that eventually segued into the Voters Against the Prison Construction Bond Issue which was 1981. And then after that campaign which ended in November '81 obviously, I got the job here in February of '82, and so I've been here since that time. And an interesting story about the bond issue is that I never thought that we had any chance to win.

JK I was surprised it lost also. I mean it was of that moment, that period in New York history, everyone is sick of crime, and this was the perfect solution.

Gangi Right.

JK And you had the liberal governor pushing it.

Gangi Right. And the lieutenant governor. I debated Cuomo a couple of times, he was lieutenant governor at the time. But I think we did a very good job, and we quickly framed the issue as you don't need more prisons because they cost too much money and it won't stop the overcrowding problem because the more you build prisons the more you fill prisons. They cost too much money and there are better ways of dealing with the crime problem than prisons. And it worked, I mean we also had other things that played for us, but it worked. I developed, occasionally people will still repeat this back to me that they saw this somewhere, I came up with the expression, see if I can get it right now,

I haven't used it in a long time: "Building more prisons in response to the crime problem is like trying to solve an epidemic by building more graveyards." So I think some of that played well and some of that worked. The other thing we had going for us is that upstate didn't want to vote for a bond issue. But I thought we were going to lose, and I didn't think we had any chance. And I said to myself and to the people I was working with, we are going to take great pains to be honest and truthful whenever we're dealing with the press, except when they ask us if we think we have a chance to win. We're going to say yes even though we don't think we have a good chance to win because we're just going through the motions. And if you read about it then you realized that when they first counted the vote we lost, but in New York State, and I didn't know this at the time, every election undergoes a recount automatically, and in this one it was literally the closest, in the end we ended up winning by twelve thousand or thirteen thousand votes. It was the closest election in the history of the state because millions and millions of people voted and the difference was twelve or thirteen thousand votes and what made us feel good, only temporarily, is we assumed since it was so close that we were instrumental in making the difference. If it had lost or won by a wide margin we would have figured, well we did a good job but wouldn't have made a difference. But here since it was so close we felt that we were instrumental in making it come out what we thought was the right way. But then as you probably know Carey just put the money in the budget. So they didn't borrow to do it. They just, it was in the tax levy funds part of the budget. And then Cuomo put it in the budget. I mean Cuomo went through the financing mechanism by, in our view, perverting the purposes of the Urban Development Corporation. One of the things that Cuomo did in his first term was submit to the legislature authorization for using UDC's financing authority to construct prisons. And the legislature approved it and a lot of the bonds that were floated by the state to finance prison construction came through UDC. And I would tell the story back then, somebody gave me this, I think it was Wayne Barrett, when UDC was passed under Rockefeller and the story goes, and this is the story I've used, is that when the legislature was resisting Rockefeller's proposal for UDC, it was '68, Martin Luther King had been killed and Nelson Rockefeller marched for him in Atlanta, the memorial march, and he called up the legislative leaders and he said, "You have to pass this bill; this is a memorial for Dr. King because it's going to provide housing for poor people." That was the story, that was Wayne's story. And then fifteen years later Cuomo pushes through the legislature authorization for UDC financing to support the construction of prisons, which is of course housing for poor people of an all together different kind than originally intended. And I would tell that story, and it gets to your point, maybe your first questions, how the politics have shifted. I mean from 1968 the politics was, let's provide UDC, let's provide housing for poor people, let's integrate poor people and people of color into the economic mainstream of society, to 1983 which is, let's build more prisons upstate and that's where we're going to send poor people. And there was a very short period of time. And Cuomo of course was considered as liberal as Nelson Rockefeller, if not more so. But as you know, Cuomo was the biggest prison builder in the history of New York State.

JK      We looked at it from the perspective of the City University and the State University as he's building more prisons than educational institutions, and that was a clear budgetary decision.

Gangi            Yeah. It was a clear budgetary decision. I think in part it was as a way of protecting his right flank against his vulnerability because he opposed the death penalty, so he could say see I built more prisons than anybody else. By the end of his administration, I don't know if it would still be true if you count what the Pataki administration built, but by the end of his administration he had built not only more prisons than any previous administration but more prisons than all previous administrations combined. It was really an extraordinary explosion in prison building. And as you probably know, in New York State the prison population, after he was governor, 1999 peaked at like seventy-one thousand and change and since then has declined, so we now have less than sixty-three thousand people in state prison, which is still far more than I think would appropriately, you know, by any criteria of justice or public safety, should be there. But still it's a drop of nine or ten thousand prisoners and we're relatively unique in the country in the drop in the state prison population. And also the city jail population has declined significantly too.

LS            But the prison building boom was all across the country.

Gangi            And in most places continuing. In New York State there's an exception. As you probably know, Governor Spitzer's proposed closing four prisons and also six juvenile facilities, which is a significant. We're not happy about the prisons he's picked to close but it's significant that he is taking a step to reduce the structural capacity of the system.

JK            And at this point those prisons are not being fought over for, we need this in the war on crime, but these provide jobs in a depressed area.

Gangi            Economic development, right.

JK            And, I was surprised at this, that the prisoners are used for public works.

Gangi            In some places that's right.

JK            In upstate New York, cleaning brush and snow removal and things like that.

Gangi            Particularly because the four prisons they've chosen to close, three of them are camps where there are work crews, where the guys go out as part of the community work crew supervised by a correction officer doing public works. And at Hudson which is a medium security facility there are community work crew contingents from Hudson that go out into the community and perform public services. So the communities are losing that contribution from the prisons, and there would be obviously fewer jobs available and less money coming into those communities. And that's what the fight's about. The fight is not about whether we need these prisons to lock up more people, just exactly what you said, and that's a perversion. What's happened is, and this isn't an original thought, we have, America and New York, although New York is on the downturn, has binged on prisons in the last thirty-five years, starting really with the

Rockefeller drug laws in '73. It's become a monster and it's created this enormous bureaucratic infrastructure and this enormous inertia and this enormous economic dependency on the part of not only upstate communities that need the jobs but, I don't have the numbers off the tip of my tongue, but the increase in the number of prosecutors in New York City, I think the offices have tripled, quadrupled, quintupled in the last thirty, thirty-five years.

LS One of the vested interests in the war on drugs.

Gangi Right. I mean, we go into New York City court pens as I mentioned on a regular basis. There literally will be days, we go into Brooklyn, Bronx or Manhattan, that you don't see the face of one white person who's been locked up. Cell after cell are black or brown people. And there's this whole apparatus, there's the cops who lock them up, there's the agency whose name slips my mind now that does the interviews of people who provide information to the judge, there's Legal Aid Society, there's the DA's, there are the court officers, there are the correction officers, the cops. The jobs of hundreds of thousands of people depend on this apparatus. And there's a fundamental immoral aspect to it because most of the people we're locking up, not all, are not dangerous people, are not predatory people, they're fucked up people, they're homeless people, they're jobless people. They don't have a place in our economy because our economy has changed from a manually based economy to a service based, all the clichés.

JK Mentally ill also.

Gangi Yeah, large numbers of mentally ill. There are eighty-four hundred mentally ill people. This is by the state's own count. Out of that sixty-two thousand and change, eighty-four hundred are the mental health caseload in New York State prisons. That's double the number of people in the state mental hospitals.

JK We closed state mental hospitals all the time that we were building prisons and even tried to turn some of those into prisons.

Gangi But the public, for the most part the public's not aware of that, and when you tell most people they'll say, well that's a bad policy, who's that helping? We're spending hundreds of thousands, or hundreds of millions of dollars to lock up those eighty-four hundred people in state prison when they're mentally ill and a large part of the reason they end up in prison is because of mandatory sentencing laws. Even if the judge sees that this person has significant mental health problems, he or she has to send that person to prison because they come under a mandatory sentencing law. And for a lot of the mentally ill people it is the drug laws. So one of the reasons we go after the Rockefeller drug laws, we have a Drop The Rock campaign aimed at the repeal of the drug laws, is to reverse the way prisons are used to lock up particularly vulnerable people like the mentally ill, like poor people of color.

LS What about the other side of the question, sentencing. Because I remember in my experience in Maryland penitentiaries.

JK As the librarian.

LS Yeah.

JK Okay, just wanted to establish what side you were on on this.

LS Well, I don't know if they ever knew what side I was on, especially with the correctional officers, but this was, it's still there in downtown Baltimore, the oldest operating penitentiary in the United States. I don't know where they moved it to but they closed down Jessup overnight. But this was maximum security and it was still 90% black then, this was in the seventies. But most of them, they never got paroled, by the way, maybe one person, because they're all in for life or maybe minimum fifty years. I had seventeen people on my staff and I think in the seventeen years actually the lightest sentence was six consecutive for murder—

Gangi So, a lot of long-termers, right?

LS They were all long-termers, and they got to go down to medium, but they found out when they looked at all these people in the Maryland penitentiary, the Maryland correctional system, that a life sentence was an average of ten, eleven years. And I said, hey, wait a minute, this person committed rape, violent rape, murder. One guy had three murders, he was out in ten years, and the public starts to catch on because of the parole system. Now of course you've got rid of parole. Which also helped, I mean the drug laws were of course all mandatory, but when people start to understand how long murderers, real murderers, not the ones you're talking about but the ones who are actually, kill the wives or are contract killers or they're biker killers, and you have even some, they call them the alley murderers, they would call 911 to get a cop, they'd get a cop car in the alley and ambush them. The cop killers would never get out, like twenty years later I went to Jessup, the same guy was there he said, "How you doing, Doc?" So, you have that part of the equation too.

Gangi Absolutely.

LS Public opinion. Which is why a politician, you mentioned earlier they'll never run on a ticket saying let's be soft on crime.

Gangi Right, but clearly the public was upset and maybe legitimately upset about some of those kind of things. And in New York State, as you probably know the parole release rates for people convicted of violent offenses went into a nose dive under Pataki. I think it went down to 3%, something like that. But what politician's going to take that on? Because you could be immediately slapped and say well you support violent criminals and what we know is a lot of those guys, after they've done their twelve, fifteen, twenty years, they're no longer a violence problem.

LS Of course not.

Gangi           And the research mainly shows that they're the safest risk for release.

LS       That's a double bind.

Gangi           Right, it's very hard to make those arguments.

LS       But even back in my day, forty years old, when you were forty years old you were an old man in prison in those days, and now you've got these gerontology prisons because they're keeping them in really for life, for forty years, and are we equipped to handle that? I mean the health care. Actually they probably could get better health care than out on the street. I mean some of them.

Gangi           Some, it depends. The prison health care in New York State is a real mix. There are some prisons where it's mainly the quality of the care health care providers so it's mainly the staff.

LS       It's contracted.

Gangi           Well, no, in New York City they were contracting. In New York State it's all Department of Correctional Services personnel, and some prisons provide decent health care, good health care. In some prisons it's woefully inadequate and the problem of course is prisoners in those situations have little recourse. I mean, who's going to advocate for them if some doctor either can't speak English well or just doesn't know his or her stuff; those prisoners are in a bad situation, so it really does vary. One of the things we're lobbying for now is outside monitoring of the delivery of medical services inside state prisons because, little known piece of information, here's another proposal I think if the public was engaged would probably support, the medical care that's delivered in the New York State prison system is the only medical care delivered in the state that does not have to be accredited and monitored by an outside agency, because there's an exception built into state law. So the only folks who monitor the delivery of health care in local prisons is the Department of Correctional Services. We want the Department of Health to be required to visit regularly to monitor and issue reports on the health care services inside the prisons. For example, to point out why this is a very serious issue, there are about five thousand HIV positive people locked up in New York State prisons, which makes the New York State prisons, put it this way, which makes the HIV caseload in New York State prisons the highest caseload of any institution for HIV in the world. Five thousand people are HIV positive. Now, some of the prisoners are getting good care. I mean the state and the Department of Correctional Services has made a good faith effort to step up the quality of care, to provide the most recent therapies, make them available to prisoners. And they've spent hundreds of millions of dollars a year on it and still at some prisons the care falls far below what the community standard is and it should be monitored. Again, I think that's a winnable issue. I think you could make the case to the public that the care should be monitored if only because virtually all those prisoners are returning to the community and it's in the larger public interest that they're getting good



care and that they know how to continue to get good care when they return to the community. So these are very important issues.

JK We've got about ten minutes before you want to turn it off and that's clearly not enough time to go into the whole Rockefeller drug laws, Hugh Carey, Mario Cuomo, Ed Koch. I mean you've got several individuals who you have disagreed with on criminal justice issues with over the years. But in these last minutes before we wrap it up, what issue have you been grappling with that you think is the most intractable? In terms of one that you know is so crucial to your work and the one that even you can't see has a readily graspable solution? I mean when I looked at your legislative agenda in your newsletter, that is a very impressive approach to a whole range of issues and some of them it would seem it should be obvious on the face of it, like why are we prosecuting fifteen year olds for prostitution, and going after them specifically? I was very impressed that your legislative agenda is so thoughtful.

Gangi Right. Thank you. This isn't your question, we have very impressive and talented and thoughtful staff. We're just, we're really fortunate. Virtually everyone on our staff and certainly all the project directors, our Prison Visiting Project, our Juvenile Justice Project and our Women in Prison Project, all terrific. I mean really special. I've been in the non-profit world for many years and I think this is a great congregation of people. Our development staff, a woman named Marcia McClendon, she's also terrific. They are mainly responsible for developing our legislative agenda, and if you read it, like obviously you did, you see how we combine dealing with what we consider to be fundamental issues but presenting them in these very reasonable terms so that they're winnable. I think every item on our legislative agenda is winnable, whether we'll win them soon is another question, but I think they're all winnable. This isn't your question, but that issue, the Safe Harbor Act issue, is particularly galling, because you have the situation where girls under the age of seventeen, boys too, but it's mainly girls, are involved in the sex trade. In virtually every case it's because they've been physically or sexually abused and they're homeless or they wouldn't be engaged in that activity. And we prosecute them as criminals instead of treating them as victims, which is what they really are. And when we went to the state legislature to get their support, there was some receptivity, but the Assembly leadership gave us a hard way to go because they did not want to be identified as soft on crime. Apparently talking about twelve year old girls and we still have not won this issue, and you read it so you know what we want is to prohibit the prosecution and incarceration of kids under the age of seventeen for acts of prostitution and provide them with housing and counseling and the kind of things that they need to turn their lives around.

JK I saw the op-ed column in the *Times*.

Gangi Bob Herbert picked it up, exactly. That's part of our work, to go at people like Herbert. And we had success; it took us a long time, but we had success with him.

LS That's almost a no-brainer too, you know.

Gangi           It just seems like a total no-brainer, yeah. We had wonderful editorial board support in the *Times* on it, and we're still working that issue. But to get to your question, the legislative agenda, I think all those issues are winnable so I don't think and of those issues are intractable. I think repealing the Rockefeller drug laws is winnable, although that's obviously been a very long, long campaign, and we're not, it's not a piece of low hanging fruit yet. But maybe the most, I don't know if I would call it intractable, but the most difficult issue is what we have talked about is how the sort of a prison monster grew up in our midst as a result of government policy and practice and what it would take to turn that around and somehow or another either accommodate or beat back all the constituencies that have become even not necessarily deliberately interested in maintaining that prison monster infrastructure. That to me would be a very heavy lift, to go back to a more balanced, less focused on incarceration approach to criminal justice after the last thirty-five years I think would be difficult to achieve. Having said that, it is essentially, the fundamental policy goal of the Correctional Association is to achieve that kind of change. Because if you look at our literature you'll see one of the major, obviously there's our campaign aimed at repealing the drug laws and reducing the use of prison. One of the main purposes of our Juvenile Justice Project is to reduce the use of incarceration for young people and to divert more young people to community-based alternative programs. Women in Prison Project, same thing. We incarcerate far too many women; the vast majority of women locked up in New York State prison have histories of physical or sexual abuse; they've been victims all their lives. So that is a principle, if not the main, certainly a principle for us at our work is to, I'm going to sound sort of corny, but it's to slay the prison monster.

JK           That's not corny.

Gangi           And so I guess the way I would sum it up is that I think the issues we're dealing with are politically very difficult and it's going to be hard and may take a long time to move them in a more rational, humane, moral and sane way and we've made some progress. I mean, even to have the city jail population go from over twenty-two thousand to now about fourteen thousand and the state prison population to go from over seventy-one thousand to now under sixty-three thousand represents real progress. Now, that's by no means all the result of our work; a lot of factors have gone into that, including the whole way New York City deploys its police forces, that started under Giuliani and Bratton. But I think our work, along with a lot of our allies, and particularly with all the editorial board support we got, have enabled the politicians. For example, on the state prison population, that drop in the prison population is almost totally due to the drop in the number of drug offenders who are locked up. Used to be over twenty-one thousand, now it's a little over thirteen thousand; thirteen thousand's still far too many in our view and I think our banging away at the drug laws as irrational and unnecessary has enabled the policy makers to create more backdoor release mechanisms so people get out sooner than they ordinarily would and has influenced prosecutors as a way of maintaining the control they have under the Rockefeller drug laws to indict and prosecute fewer people for drug felonies because they want to show. See, we can divert people. You don't need to repeal the Rockefeller drug laws to divert people, we are already diverting people on our own. And I think in part that's due to the political climate that we, working with a

lot of other people, have helped to create. So that represents a kind of success for us in terms of that fundamental issue of the use of incarceration, which I guess goes back to one of your early questions. Some of my work is focused on conditions of confinement and what kind of re-entry programs are available to people, and some of our work focuses on the use of prisons as a fundamental question and that now we lock up far too many people, far too many poor people of color, and we need to move away from that approach to our social problems to a more balanced and thoughtful approach that helps address people's problems in the communities where they live rather than lock them up for their problems.

JK      Thanks very much. I have to ask, is this a prop, having Victor Hugo's *Les Miz* right here in plain view?

Gangi      Someone gave it to me who touched my life and I've never read it and it obviously relates to our work.

JK      I would think.

Gangi      I just keep it there. We just moved from our old offices, it was in my old office and it's kind of a prop I guess that I want to keep.

End

Robert Gangi  
December 3, 2009

JK It's the same trajectory as we were on before, and that is to understand your thinking about being in the position that you held for nearly thirty years and your perspective on the issues that you've engaged in. Is that your funding stream, the nickels in the bottles?

Gangi It's become found art. I just started putting things there. I'm a fan of ginger ale, as you can tell, although I mix it up with other things. And then, it just started to happen. Then, of course, people started to comment on it. Then I being idiosyncratically stubborn rather than remove it, just continue to embellish it, I guess. I wanted to make sure, because I don't know if you're on a regular e-mail with us. I got word about my plans to step down from the CA. You did get that – good.

JK That's my first question, and that is, you've announced that ten months or eleven months from now you're going to be stepping down.

Gangi Actually, ten months. October 1<sup>st</sup>.

JK My question is, why is this the moment that you think is appropriate to be stepping down?

Gangi I think maybe two main factors. One is that the organization is in, I hesitate to say, very good shape, but given the significant financial downturn and how much more difficult it is for non-profits to raise money, we've manage well financially, which is a key responsibility of mine. We finished our last fiscal year, which was June 30, in the black. We're doing well so far this fiscal year, although there's obviously seven months to go. So, I felt good about that part of things. It looked like the organization, that I was going to be able to leave now, and the organization was going to be fiscally solvent, if not, even a little bit better than fiscally solvent. We have very good staff people in every important position, except one. I had to let go of our Juvenile Justice Project director because, I didn't have to, I decided to, because I didn't think she was up to the level of doing advocacy and organizing the way it would be important and useful to do for that project. Filling that position is critical, with a talented and energetic advocate, organized kind of person. Once we do that, we'll have very good people in every key position. The Board is solid and I think committed to maintaining the mission and vision of the organization that we all developed together over the last twenty to twenty-five years. So, I felt it was a good time to go in the sense of the organization being in sort of good to very good shape. I've been here, by the time I leave, it will be almost thirty years. I don't want to and I'm not planning to retire. I hope that whatever I do next would be less demanding of my time so that I would have some time for other things. I am hoping that my oldest son, who just got married, will have a child, so, my wife and I will have grandchildren to spend time with. And I also want to, there are a couple issues that we have not been able to get to at the Correctional Association, partly because of resources

and partly because of what our mission is, and those issues relate primarily to police policy and practice. I talked a little bit about it in the first set of interviews. We became aware, the obvious point, that police arrest policies are a fundamental aspect of what drives criminal justice policy. Who is, in effect, brought into the funnel and eventually indicted, prosecuted and incarcerated.

JK I noticed that during most of your career, the public issue was prisons and conditions in prisons, and now, the public issue is precisely what you're saying, police practices. No one is talking about prison conditions necessarily, but everyone is concerned about the current police policy.

Gangi Right. And we at the C.A., our mandate focuses on prison and prison-related issues. So, for us to focus on police issues would be a major shift, and I'm not sure if our Board would support that shift. My plan, and I'm not sure I'm going to be able to pull together the people and the resources for it, because it is difficult to start a new enterprise, and a new organization, but what I'd like to do is, if I can bring together the people and the funding for it, is to start a small policy center that focuses on a number of issues, again, that we haven't gotten to here. I'm going to be sixty-six when I step down. I'm not planning to work for many more years after that, so I'd like to be able to, in the years that I will continue to work, to begin to raise some of these issues, and it does relate to police policy and practice. And one of the reasons, if not, in some ways, the principle reason, we have such disparity in regard to the racial composition of our prison population, is because of who the police arrest. And in New York City, they arrest virtually only people of color. We see that first-hand when we go into the court pens, and I talked about that in the first part of the interview. When we go to the Bronx, which we're going to in a couple of weeks, we go to Brooklyn and Manhattan, there'll be days we see only black and brown faces inside of the cells. And that's not just an accident, that's a function of policy and practice. And it is, more people are talking about it, but it's still an issue that most mainstream politicians are reluctant to raise because it challenges the practices of what is a sacrosanct agency in New York, and that's the police department. Ray Kelly, who I don't know well at all, and who is probably a good guy, he's an iconic figure, and if you're going to challenge police arrest policies, you're challenging Ray Kelly, and there are very few people who, outside of the Charles Barrons of the world, who is considered a marginal political figure, there is nobody in the political arena who challenges those policies, and in my view an independent policy center can. There's another issue I'd like to engage in, which may seem incongruous, but it is using the arts. There are many, many politically concerned artists of different kinds in the metropolitan area, using the arts to advance issues relating to social justice, racial justice, and human rights. And so, I'd love to use the opportunity of an independent policy center to work on that issue. That was my thinking, and if left to my own devices, I wouldn't have given ten or eleven months' notice, but the Board wanted that amount of time to conduct a search. And it turned out that I think it was the right decision. A number of people have said that, in response to the letter when I sent it out, that they thought that was a thoughtful way of handling the transition, especially considering that I've been here for so long. It's a big change for the organization, and to have as much time as possible for the transition period makes sense.

JK      You're kind of an unusual individual these days. Well, let me rephrase that. When you took this position, it was not unusual for an individual, a young man, young woman, to dedicate an entire lifetime to an organization, to a cause. And I can't imagine the Correctional Association finding someone who would remain so dedicated to the same cause and the same organization for such a long period of time. I mean, there are many organizations at this stage that have a director who is leaving, who has been there such a long time, but I can't imagine them anticipating, "Well, we need another Bob who will stay for twenty-five or thirty years."

Gangi      Yes, yes. Well, that sounds right, but I don't think the organization does need someone who is going to stay as long as I stayed here. When I came to the organization, it had fallen on very lean times. It was me and an office manager.

JK      When was that?

Gangi      February of 1982. The organization no longer was really active in the policy arena in a meaningful way, and it was very low on resources. And one of the reasons that I was attractive to Board was clearly because I had fundraising experience, because I had worked in the foundation world and I still knew people in the foundation world. And that did turn out to be helpful, because some of the people I knew in the foundation world were receptive to hearing from us. They weren't going to hand over the money because I got in touch with them, but they said, "All right, send us a proposal." So, it got us in the door, and we were able to put together some good proposals. I had the help of some very talented staff and consultants at that time, and we began to raise money and build an organization. So, obviously, who comes in as my successor is going to come into an organization already with fifteen to twenty staff people, a budget over two million dollars, a very active place in the arena. I don't know if it was even required that I stay as long as I did, and part of the reason I did is because, one is, I really always continued to care deeply about the issues. One of the advantages and probably sort of people on the outside wouldn't think of it this way, they would think of focusing on prison issues as limiting your contact with key issues, and I think of it really differently. Particularly given the way we've used prisons over the last thirty or thirty-five years, virtually every important domestic issue relates to prison policy. Homelessness, unemployment, drug abuse and drug addiction, HIV, mental health issues, all come into play as you're dealing with criminal justice and prison related issues. That was one of the things. Women's issues, issues relating to youth. A key focus of our Juvenile Justice Project focuses on the problems that confront LGBT young people when they're locked up in juvenile facilities. We're dealing with issues relating to, not necessarily promoting gay rights exactly, but protecting the highly vulnerable population of people who identify themselves as LGBT while they're locked up. And one of the ways we're able to raise money is not because we went to people or foundations concerned about our prison issues, but we went to people concerned about women's issues, health issues, mental health issues, issues relating to youth. A lot of our funding for our Juvenile Justice Project comes from foundations that are concerned about LGBT issues, not necessarily juvenile justice issues, but they understand that probably the most vulnerable segment of the LGBT population

are young, homeless people who get locked up. One of the things that's been exciting about this work is that ability to confront the worst aspects of our social policy and practice through this job. And then the other thing is, and it sounds like a time-worn cliché, I've worked with a lot of really wonderful people, who are very politically concerned and committed and good-natured. It's just been the thing I think I'll probably miss most. I'll miss not being a part of the action, I'm sure, and the other thing I'll miss is working with the kind of people I've been lucky enough to work with. Michael Smith is the former Director of the Vera Institute, who I consider, along with Ira Glasser, sort of the two most, the two smartest people I've met in my work over the last thirty years in the non-profit world, the public interest world, though Michael left Vera and he went to become a law professor at the University of Wisconsin. I was talking on the phone with him, this was a number of years ago, I was teasing him about what a relatively undemanding position he has, going from someone who ran Vera and managing lots and lots of people, and having to deal with funding issues and budget issues, and now you're a law professor. I said, "I bet you're really enjoying this time in your life." And he said, "No, no, no. I really miss my job with Vera." I said, "What do you miss?" He said, "No one comes into my office anymore saying, 'I got this idea to change the world.'" It's really one of the great aspects of my job. I'm the Director, so they have to come to me if they get a good idea, and because we have really smart, energetic people on staff, and also working as interns, they come up with ideas and exciting ways to go at our issues or raise new issues that I wouldn't have thought of. The LGBT issue, for example, was not part of my consciousness until the Director of our Juvenile Justice Project, former director, came and said there are a lot of young people in the juvenile facilities who are LGBT because they have serious problems with their families. They often get thrown out of their homes, they become homeless, they get involved with the sex trade or they're just homeless. The cops pick them up. Boom! They're not criminals, but they get locked up.

JK Yes. But if the cops pick them up, they're criminals.

Gangi Yes, yes. And another issue that I would like to deal with, I found this to be a shocking thing. In addition to the LGBT issue or the Juvenile Justice Project, we dealt with the issue of sexual exploitation of kids. I think I talked about that.

JK We did talk about that briefly.

Gangi Yes. The Safe Harbor Act, which passed. The situation is, boys and girls, mainly girls, very young, apparently, as young as twelve, involved in the sex trade, and as young as twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, will get picked up by the cops and prosecuted as criminals. And they're not, obviously, criminals.

JK It's child abuse.

Gangi Yes. One of the things we've been hearing is some of the cops were forcing the girls to have sex. I was very angry about this, and I called some press people and said, "Look, here's a possible story. Maybe we could even get some girls who went through it to talk to you about it." The attitude, and this really surprised me, the attitude

was, “Well, everybody knows that, that vice squad cops have sex with prostitutes.” I mean, it’s just like common knowledge! In fact, there was somebody interviewed on Jon Stewart a couple weeks ago, who wrote some book about statistics and said that vice squad cops have sex with prostitutes more times than they arrest them. I think the vice squad cops in Chicago. I’m not sure about that, but something like that. But when I said to the press was, “I’m not talking about grown women. I’m talking about twelve and thirteen-year-old girls.” They still were not.

JK But they’re prostitutes.

Gangi Yes. So, that’s an issue, and also, we have stories, it’s all anecdotal, from the LGBT young people we work with about how the cops abused them. That’s completely unacceptable behavior, and it’s not an issue that gets raised in the mainstream arena, and it should. That’s another thing that I would like to perhaps focus on, if I’m able to start the policy center. You know, the purpose of organizations like the Correctional Association, ACLU and this policy center if we start it, is in part, not only, but in part, to raise difficult issues because that mainstream organizations and individuals may not be able to raise because of the consequences that they would suffer. But that’s our job. We’re even expected to do that, and there are some people in the society who are supportive of that because they think that’s an important role for us to play. That’s part of what we’ve done at the C.A., and that’s one of the things I’d like to do as I step down.

JK Thirty years is a lifetime to look back on, and I’m just wondering if you can reflect for a moment on how you see either the ground has shifted from the time you stepped in to the time you’re stepping down, or how the public consciousness on these issues has changed. What do you see as the biggest difference in the context of corrections and the criminal justice system, from 1982 to now?

Gangi Yes, I really do think there’s been a shift. One of the things that I talked about last time was my sort of inveterately positive spin, or optimistic look on things, and that I thought there could be a lot more public support for our issues than most people would think that there could be. But there was a failure of leadership on the part of most politicians. I think the ground has shifted, the landscape has shifted, I think it’s in part by the recent economic downturn and fiscal crisis, for sure. And I also think that we haven’t, in New York, as you know, the prison population has been declining. Yes, I think there’s been a shift. I think we’ve been taught recently, it’s driven by the fiscal crisis, and particularly in New York State, where you have empty juvenile facilities and empty prison beds, it becomes harder and harder to justify keeping those facilities open or those beds open, when you’re facing deficits of many billions of dollars. Also, I think that, I don’t know if the pendulum has swung almost as far as it can in one direction, in terms of the continuing support for imprisonment policies, but I think we’ve reached the kind of critical mass, certainly in New York. The population has declined in New York by the twelve thousand prisoners in ten years, and nobody has suffered from the political consequences of that. Nobody is claiming anybody is soft on crime. Even the passage of the Rockefeller drug laws, the D.A.’s tried it. I’m trying to think if I can get a consistent metaphor going here. I can’t. Anyway, they trotted out that argument, but the hound



wouldn't run, you know. It just didn't take. It doesn't take much convincing, or you don't have to be all that persuasive to effectively make the argument that drug treatment for a lot of people who were sent to prison for drug-related problems is going to be not only cheaper but more effective in reducing crime than locking up otherwise harmless drug offenders for two or three years, in maximum security prisons. I think although it hasn't taken complete hold of the country's consciousness, there's more and more embarrassment about the stark racial disparity that characterizes our criminal justice system, both the juvenile facilities and the adult facilities. Harder and harder to justify, twenty-five percent of the world's prisoners are locked up in correctional facilities in the United States. All the billions of dollars we spend. I think we've reached a point where we can have more success moving these issues in a more progressive direction. And I think admittedly, the other factor is, given the significant drop in the incidence of crime, there's less worry and fear of crime, which then, I think, for some people at least, will enable them to think more thoughtfully, more open-mindedly, about what are more appropriate and effective responses to some of the social issues and economic issues that drive criminal behavior, when they're less in the grip of a fear of crime and are more open to have sympathy for the populations who suffer from the disadvantages of substandard housing, lousy schools, poor health care, and the lack of job opportunities.

JK      It sounds as though I don't have to ask you what side of the debate you are on when it comes to the root causes versus personal responsibility approach to criminal justice.

Gangi      I think everyone is responsible, and I think you have to hold people responsible. And at the same time, I think we know that if you come from a dysfunctional family, if you go to a crappy school, if you're not treated respectfully by most institutions in society, there's a greater chance that you're going to engage in anti-social or criminal behavior. It doesn't mean that we don't hold that individual responsible for his or her acts. I think we should, in part because I think that's a better way to rehabilitate that person. And the practice of holding people responsible for their acts doesn't mean that we put a lot of people in prison. I think there are other ways to respond to anti-social acts and criminal acts short of prison. At the same time, I think there are social and economic factors that make it more likely that out of a group of people who are affected by those social and economic problems, there are going to be more people engaged in street crime. So, I think it's striking a balance, and it's also being very pragmatic. I think, in my judgment anyway, it doesn't take a whole lot of common sense, and most of the research backs us up, if people come from stable homes, go to decent schools, grow up in decent housing, they're much less likely to engage in anti-social behavior than people who come from dysfunctional homes, have abusive life experience, and go to schools where they're not sufficiently cared for or educated. It's understanding and addressing the social and economic factors that do drive criminal behavior, and, at the same time, hold the people that we find to be criminals responsible for their acts. And hopefully do it in a way that not only helps them repay society, but also helps them deal with whatever the issues were and the motivations were, that caused them to commit crimes.

JK I don't think anyone would say that race is the variable that compels people to criminal behavior. But, at the same time, no one would question that it makes sense for the police department to allocate more resources in South Jamaica than in Forest Hills Gardens.

Gangi Yes.

JK And there's a racial dimension to those two communities. So, it is, in part, what you say about, you know, they have the good schools, the intact families and social network and all, but you still have to police on the basis of where the crime is.

Gangi Yes. I think this gets at the nub of the debate. But I think that point of view, and that is certainly what the cops will say: "The reason we police those areas is that's where the crime is." It's the flip of Willie Sutton's response to why he robbed banks, "That's where the money is." In my judgment, that analysis or that argument will take you just so far. When you see the results of that policy, and what the result of that policy is that you're virtually, it's not an exaggeration to say, you're virtually arresting only people of color. When you know, and we do know, that most of the people you're arresting have not been even charged with serious crimes. I mean, most of the people that are arrested, and we know because we go through the court pens and we will occasionally check, they're arrested for begging on the subway, selling umbrellas on the street, drinking a beer late at night on their stoop, hanging out in a hallway where there's drug activity going on, some of whom might be involved in the drug activity, some of whom are not. And we, in effect, reinforce the criminalization and the marginalization of that population, rather than take steps to integrate that population into our society. The main response is, I'm over-stating this a little bit, is a law enforcement response, rather than recognizing, alright, if there is a concentration of crime in South Jamaica, what else should we be doing? Other than locking up a lot of other people, some of whom, many of whom, will end up in state prisons. And, therefore, we have further fragmented that society or that community, and therefore, in all likelihood, in some cases, we contributed to the inevitability that some of those people will now become life-long criminals. What else can we do to intervene that's going to be more humane and more effective, and ultimately less expensive than a law enforcement response and a police response? Jeremy Travis, who I have a lot of admiration for, gave a speech to the New York City Bar Association where he raised these issues of the racial disparity, and he essentially made the point that you can no longer justify the police response on the basis of crime rates and recidivist rates. There are other important social factors and cultural factors that have to be used to assess whether this is an effective policy. And if we're becoming a society where the criminal justice system, again, I'm over-stating this, where virtually the only people you arrest and lock up are people of color, there's a serious problem. And one of the ways in my judgment, and I don't know if Jeremy would state this this boldly, one of the ways you address an understanding of that problem is by taking a very hard look at police policy and practice and begin to reorient the way you use your law enforcement resources to one that helps strengthen communities and stabilize communities, rather than sort of goes into communities almost as an occupying force and creates this unfortunate hostility between the community and the police force. So, that's some of my initial

thinking the question you raised. If, again, I'm successful with the Policy Center and the focus on arrest policy and practice, I want to bring it to our work and the reports that we eventually do as people who know more about these issues than I do, who have done more studying of it, and I know there are people who are on, for lack of a better term, the more progressive side of this issue, who have suggestions for how police can operate in ways loosely under the heading of something called community policing, in ways that actually work with the communities, support the community, concentrate less on arrests, and more on intervention, support, collaboration.

JK As a historian, if I could ask for some historical perspective on this. You took this position at one of the worst moments in New York City, New York State, and that is that the crime rate was, in fact, quite high.

Gangi Right.

JK From the 1960s on, by any measure, society seemed to be pulling itself apart and the controls that had been in place seemed to be no longer in effect. So, you're advocating for prison reform at precisely the moment that crime is going up. To say it's a rear-guard action, kind of glorifies what you've had to do. Just to state the facts, during those years, the prison population went from what, twelve thousand to seventy-two thousand?

Gangi Yes. Twelve thousand five hundred to seventy-three. I came here in 1982, and it was about twenty-one thousand. It peaked at seventy-one thousand six hundred in 1999 and eventually started to decline. As you know, the prison population, well, maybe you don't accept this analysis, so I shouldn't say 'as you know,' the prison population, if you chart the crime rate and the incarceration rate, they just don't jive, because the incarceration rate was rising all during that time, and the crime rate was going up until the mid-90s, also. And then the crime rate started to drop, incarceration rate continued to go up, and then the incarceration rate started to go down as the crime rate was going down. So, you could almost make the case, since the crime rate has dropped precipitously over the last ten years or longer, with the incarceration rate, that locking up fewer people is the better way of doing it.

JK It's not going to take you far.

Gangi No, right. The point is that I don't think you can correlate incarceration rates or crime rates. I think there are many other factors. I wouldn't say that police practice and prison practice is not related to the crime rate, and I think there are many other factors that help explain why there has been this extraordinary drop in crime in New York City, I guess, starting in the mid-1990s.

JK Well, the police and Ray Kelly and Bill Bratton and all say it's the broken windows theory, community policing and everything, and more effective policing, but it's taken place everywhere in the country.

Gangi Yes, right. And the Ray Kelly representation of why the crime rate has dropped is pretty broadly accepted. I would think Giuliani is still, although I think much less now than he was even a few years ago, he's still a somewhat revered figure because he's giving credit for making New York livable and helping solve the crime problem, in addition to his performance following the World Trade Center attacks. And that belief is one of the reasons why challenging police policy and practice is so politically difficult, because it would seem as if you're challenging the very agency that brought New York City back to life, or returned it to its old glory days. I think, and I think there are a number of other people who think the cause and effect there is much more complicated. Police policy and practice had something to do with the drop in the crime rate, but there were a lot of other factors that contributed to it, and they're not given sufficient recognition and acknowledgement. And even if you give the cops a lot of credit for it, it still doesn't excuse the kind of behavior that you and I just spoke about, in regard to the treatment of girls in the sex trade and in regard to treatment of LGBT young people and, probably, older people. And also, it still doesn't, shouldn't, stop one, and hopefully, eventually, the society as a whole, from calling into question arrest policies that focus almost entirely on communities of color. So, I hope to be able to again, in the future, go at that issue.

JK Mario Cuomo.

Gangi [laughs]

JK Mario Cuomo, the liberal voice of a moment in American history, built more prisons, incarcerated more individuals than any Governor in New York State or national history, I can imagine.

Gangi Yes. Probably not national, because, as you know, California and Texas.

JK Yes, I'm sorry. They're the big-leagues.

Gangi They've got a hundred and seventy thousand people locked up! It just shocks the conscience. In any case, certainly in the history of New York, Cuomo was the big prison builder, there's no question about it.

JK But what struck me was, it was an extraordinarily public debate over the issue of prison and prison conditions, prison building. It was a debate in the newspapers, among the elected officials in the Legislature, and I don't hear any of that debate today.

Gangi Yes.

JK That's one issue. And the other is, you were always that voice in the middle of that debate, no matter how small the issue or how big the issue. Your voice was consistently heard, all during that time.

Gangi           Right, right. Well, that was the time of this massive expansion in the number of prisons and the number of people locked up in New York State. A statistic I'd like to highlight as being probably the most perverse statistic that relates to the prison expansion policy in New York State, is from 1817 to 1981, in that period of one hundred sixty-four years, New York opened thirty-three prisons. From 1982 to 2000, during most of that time Mario Cuomo was Governor, New York opened thirty-eight prisons. So, in an eighteen-year period, the state opened more prisons that it had opened in the previous one hundred and sixty-four years. And every one of those thirty-eight prisons was located in an upstate, white, rural community represented by a Republican State Senator. And Mario Cuomo was responsible, not solely responsible, because the Legislature obviously approved of those prisons, approved of the siting of those prisons, both the Assembly and the Senate, the Assembly controlled by the Democrats and the Senate controlled by the Republicans during those years. And while there was a very active public debate over the wisdom and the practical effect of those policies and practices, there was never, ever a sufficiently strong blow back to those policies that gave anyone, including us, the sense that we could stop it or turn around. That debate has come to a full stop in New York because we have not opened a new prison, or even, no, Governor, Pataki, at a certain point in his ten years, started proposing new prisons, and obviously, in fact, Spitzer and Patterson have opposed closing prisons. The debate now has shifted to whether we should be, we actually did close twenty-two hundred and fifty prison spaces, coming out of the budget negotiations that got resolved this past April. The first time, in memory, obviously, that we actually shut down prison spaces. And we, the Correctional Association, in our Drop the Rock campaign, have come out of the progress that we, along with the work of a lot of other people, made when the drug law reforms were signed, to get behind in a full bore way, a campaign to promote the downsizing of our prison system. Promote policies and practices that would continue the decline in the prison population and promote the continuing closing of prisons. There are still, even after the closing of the twenty-two hundred fifty beds, there are by the state's own count over five thousand empty prison beds in the system. And we think, repeating something I said earlier, it's harder and harder to justify spending the millions of dollars to keep those beds open when your state's in a dire fiscal crisis. We think the public is going to be more and more accepting of closing those prison beds because I think the public, to the extent that the public even follows this question or debate now, I don't think they're convinced that putting more people in those prison beds is something you need to do to make them safer. And I think the public is more open to believing that rehabilitation programs, drug treatment programs, are as effective, if not more effective, in turning people's lives around than locking them up. So, probably the most serious, the most substantive new program direction that we're taking at the Correctional Association, in addition to the focus on the LGBT issues relating to young people, is the downsizing campaign. We're struggling to come up with a name for it. Reduce the Use, People Before Prisons. But it's an extension and an expansion of our Drop the Rock work. And we think we have some chance of success at promoting successfully, effectively, the continuing closing down of prison beds. Beginning to sort of, to get a little poetic about it, particularly with all this fascination in our culture with vampires, putting a stake in the heart of the prison monster, by shutting down the prison facilities.

JK One thing I noticed during the Cuomo/Koch years was that you and your organization were consistently voicing alternatives. Alternatives to incarceration, alternatives to prison construction, alternatives all along the way. And it didn't seem that you made much headway during those years.

Gangi Right. But I think that more resources were put into alternative programs during those years, and I like to think we deserve a little to some of the credit for those decisions on the part of government. But the allocations of those resources paled when compared to the allocation of resources for more jails and more prisons, so that, we might have had some success in convincing the powers to be that maybe we should set aside relatively small sums of money for diversion programs, but we did not have any success for a long period of time, in stopping the prison expansion, the drive toward building more and more prisons and putting more and more people in prison. Cuomo was a very interesting figure for a lot of reasons, but when he campaigned for his second and his third term, he proudly promoted in his campaign literature and his T.V. ads that he built a lot of prisons. We always assumed he was doing that in part to protect his right flank because he was such a vocal opponent of the death penalty, that I think he and his political advisors made the assessment that that was a political liability. So, one of the ways he can make up for that is by promoting the expansion of the prison system. But we know, I haven't heard about this recently, that in at least a couple of speeches after he was Governor, he would appear to be almost apologetic for that record being part of his legacy. And that that was definitely something he didn't want etched on his tombstone, that 'I built more prisons....'

JK Political calculation.

Gangi Right. And Koch, obviously, was a very aggressive law and order Mayor.

JK But the City was, in 1974-1975, out of control in a lot of ways.

Gangi Yes. He was Mayor, I'm trying to remember now.

JK He came in in 1977.

Gangi Right. He was Mayor until 1989.

JK Really, when you go through what kind of crime was happening, and that the fear was palpable.

Gangi Oh, right. There's no question about that.

JK A lot of the people who were being arrested and locked up, we were very happy that they were being arrested and locked up.

Gangi Yes, but what's the saying, a conservative is a liberal who gets mugged and a liberal is a conservative who gets arrested.

JK I've never heard the second part of that one!

Gangi There's some truth in that. I've talked to some people who, for some reason or another, got picked up by cops, treated badly, and it opens a window for them.

JK Yes. Everyone's treated badly, apparently.

Gangi A lot of people are. And it's unfortunate. A lot of cops are very rude and disrespectful in how they treat people. It's, in my judgment, completely not necessary. You can be strong and forceful and carry out those, including arresting people, in a way that's civil and respectful.

JK It does seem more and more that they are, I hate to use the words "occupying force" because that comes out of the 1970s black liberation rhetoric, but it doesn't seem like a lot of them see themselves as citizens who happen to be wearing a uniform for this shift.

Gangi Oh, there's no question. You walk around here and you see the cops standing around in different places, and they look completely out of place. Or they look scared. 'Scared' may be too strong a word, but just uncertain, and you don't feel like, as you're suggesting, that they're part of the scenery, they're part of the community, they're there to help everyone who is walking past them feel better and safer. Some people who walk past them, you just know for sure, feel actually more scared having them present on the streets. I think this is a story I didn't tell during the first interview, but it really made a very strong impression on me. We were engaged in one of our advocacy days with our juvenile justice project, advocating for some of the same issues that I spoke to you about, diversion, closing of facilities, the Safe Harbor Act, and one of the legislators brought up the issue of gangs, are gangs much of an issue in your community. And one of the kids said, "Yes, there's a gang in my community, and the colors they wear are blue." The kid was not just making a rhetorical point. That's how he felt about the police. I think, to use a corny political cliché, we can do better than that.

Side 2

JK The character of Mario Cuomo and the character of Ed Koch. How do you see their personalities or their, for want of a better word, character, playing into the public debates over criminal justice during those years?

Gangi Ha! They did the same; they were peers.

JK At this moment, you're trying to deal with an exploding state prison population, and a city jail population that's growing. Most of the people are just arrested and held because they can't make bail.

Gangi Right.

JK But you've got the explosions on Riker's Island, you've got the jail barges, you've got Ed Koch trying to arrest everyone in sight.

Gangi It was Koch and Ben Ward who started TNT squads going into certain communities, arresting a lot of people. I met and spent a little bit of time with each man, but I don't know either of them well.

JK But they were adversaries, in a way.

Gangi Right. My assessment would be, but it's really from a distance, that for Cuomo, my judgment is that if he had his druthers and he felt that he had a clear political path, he would not have concentrated so much on building prisons, and he would have concentrated more on building communities. I mean, one speech he gave, sometimes he would sort of more, you know, walk down the liberal path, was, 'you know what the best anti-crime program is? Jobs.' So, in my judgment, Cuomo's support of the imprisonment policies of the state while he was Governor, was more a political tactic. For him, it was more a cold, political calculation about what Mario Cuomo needed to do to be politically successful and to continue to be re-elected, and to advance his political career. It wasn't out of a heart-felt belief that the best thing for society, and the best thing in terms of fighting crime, was to lock up this many people as got locked up under his stewardship. But he probably convinced himself that the best thing for society was that he continue to be Governor, and that's one of the prices that we would all have to pay. With Koch, I had more of a sense of, he's obviously a very smart man, but in some ways, his thinking about these kind of issues was more simplistic, less nuanced, and more believed in a deep way, that the best way to deal with these problems was to strike hard and deep at the core of these communities to break the back of crime. So, he was being more true to himself when he pursued these policies than Cuomo was when he pursued these policies. And again, that's not based on any hard knowledge or deep knowledge that I have about either person.

JK It's one thing to go after crime in communities and create a safe environment, which is a fundamental responsibility of the state, and it's one of the things that citizens expect and demand. The rush to arrest so many people, to bring order to the city, resulted in bringing the city's jail population, jails to the bursting point. And most of the people were in there because they couldn't make fifteen hundred dollars' bail.

Gangi Or less.

JK Or less. Five hundred dollars' bail. And neither they nor their family, or anyone, could raise five hundred dollars. You have people waiting a year and longer. So, the pressure builds within the jails because of the policies that are out there on the streets.

Gangi That's right. The other startling statistics I've got written down, Marty Horn, the previous jail commissioner, gave me these statistics shortly before he left office. Twenty-five percent of the city's jail population are released in three days. Fifty



percent are released in a week. Sixty-five percent are released in two weeks. So, the question is, what useful purpose, in terms of public safety, are we serving by locking up and re-locking up in New York City's jails over a hundred thousand people a year. The vast majority of them are out within two weeks. We're not making any judgment that they're a danger to public safety. We're releasing them within three days, a week or two weeks. So, why are we locking up? Why do we have this churning of our criminal justice system? And it goes back to arrest policy and practice, because obviously, it's based on arrest policy and practice that brings all of those people into the system. I think it does raise a very serious question, and I mentioned this in our first interview. In addition to creating this prison monster, in terms of all the facilities that are located upstate, and how those communities upstate have become dependent financially on and economically on those prisons. But, in terms of the apparatus that we've created in a place like New York City, the D.A.'s, the defense attorneys, the judges, the court officers, the correction officers who watch over the pre-arraignment court pens. There are literally hundreds of thousands of jobs dependent on the way we now operate our criminal justice system. And virtually all of the people in New York City coming through to this system, again, are poor people of color. I'm repeating what I said before. You sit in a pre-arraignment court or an arraignment court, and you watch, everybody who comes through is a person of color, and virtually everybody else in the court room, other than their family members, are white people. I mean, there are obviously some exceptions. But the court officers, the cops, the correction officers, the judges, the prosecutors and the defense attorneys are all white. And it's virtually an apartheid system, and in my judgment, the center can't hold if we pursue the administration of justice in a way that's marked by such a stark racial bias. But at the same time, it gets back to the issue you raised. If that's where the crime is, isn't that sufficient justification for sending the cops there? And I guess what you could say, if that's where the social disorder is, if that's where the social dysfunction is, shouldn't we be using other methods more effectively, in addition to a police presence, to deal with the social dysfunction and the social disorder, in terms of better housing, more health care, better schools, that are actually more effective in dealing with the deep seated issues and problems, than arresting and locking up a lot of people, which, in some ways, is not an effective way to intervene in the cycle of dysfunction. It almost reinforces the cycle of dysfunction. That's the profound question, and it would require a significant, almost wrenching shift, in the way we do business overall in our society, in our city, and the way we administer justice in our city. I think it's one we can manage and tolerate, and it could win more and more popular support. But it would also be a heavy lift.

JK      One thing I've noticed in speaking with some of the District Attorneys, their offices are remarkably different than they were twenty-five or thirty years ago. They have abused women bureaus, they have immigrant victimization bureaus, they have child advocacy, all of these social services. There's almost an admission that the problems they're dealing with are not exclusively criminal justice issues, but they're social issues.

Gangi              Yes.

JK      Are you going to take credit for that?

Gangi [laughs] Well, you know, it's both a plus and a problem. It's a plus that I think more and more D.A.'s recognize that they can no longer just engage in pure law enforcement. Certainly Cy Vance and Richard Aborn, when they were running for District Attorney in Manhattan, put a great deal of emphasis, and so did, actually, Leslie Crocker Snyder, the third candidate, on the need to have a much sort of broader view of what their responsibilities were than Morgenthau's approach represented. And in some ways that's a good thing, but the danger in, I don't know if we talked about this as sort of a fundamental problem with the way the criminal justice system expanded over the last thirty-five years. The first person who spoke to me about this was Michael Smith, who I talked to you about earlier, the Director of the Vera Institute. Over time, we have looked to the criminal justice system to address and resolve problems that it wasn't designed to address and resolve. The administration of justice is supposed to come into play, conceptually speaking anyway, as a response or reaction to crime and anti-social activity, and not as a response that's designed to solve the social and economic problems that are driving criminal activity. But we more and more use it as a way of dealing with even truancy and even so-called safety in the public schools. We use the police department.

JK Over the weekend, I saw a nine-month pregnant lawyer was arrested and her child taken because she left it in the car for an hour while she went shopping. I was like, why is this an arrestable issue since it's obviously not child neglect.

Gangi Right.

JK But it immediately criminalizes the interaction with the police.

Gangi Right. And so, more and more our social policy, and I think Giuliani and Pataki, I wouldn't put it all on people like that, but they in particular represented the sort of approach to dealing with our social problems was by expanding the authority of the law enforcement apparatus, whether it's the D.A.'s office or it's the police department. And, at the same time, I think things like drug courts and mental health courts are progressive developments within the criminal justice system. What would be even more preferable is that we were dealing with the mental health problems and the drug abuse related problems that those courts end up dealing with through other community-based structures that represented a more early intervention in those problems than things like the mental health courts and the drug courts represented, because they'll come into play pretty late in the life trajectory of the people who come before them, and it would be better to have things in place and structures in place and services in place that intervene earlier in a person's life to help them and their families deal with the mental health issues or the drug abuse issues. So, it's similar to the aspects of the health care debate. More emphasis on prevention approaches than approaches that represent a response to a problem that has been present in a community or an individual for a long period of time. And, in a way, when we promote appeal of the drug laws and more treatment and more diversion, that's the vision that we're promoting.

JK What has been the most intractable issue that you have had to contend with over the past thirty years? The one that has just been impossible to make headway on?

Gangi           It's interesting because we've made headway on a lot of the issues that we've been banging away at for a long time. The significant reform of the Rockefeller drug wars, and as you know, we've worked on that issue, virtually since Day One that I got here. Another issue that we've worked on a long time, and it was very difficult to move, and I mentioned it in the first interview, was the need to have some outside oversight of the delivery of medical service inside our state prisons. Up until Paterson signed the Department of Health Oversight Bill a couple months ago, there was no outside agency that had any monitoring rule of the delivery of healthcare inside our prisons. And the prison system was the only exception to the rule, that every health care service, every medical clinic in the state, had to meet criteria and community-based standard established by the Department of Health, with the exception of prisoners. And so, our ability, it wasn't just us, there were a lot of people who worked on that issue, including some enlightened legislators, promoted that issue. So, all the key issues that we have been working on for years since I've been here, we have seen some movement on it. And I don't think that's me just looking at things, sort of through brightly tinted, rose-colored glasses. Mandatory sentencing laws, the closing of prisons and juvenile facilities, more resources put into diversion program and treatment programs. Better treatment of people who are mentally ill. Even the passage of the Safe Harbor Act represents at least the belief on the part of the state in the principle that young boys and girls involved in the sex trade shouldn't be treated as criminals, but more as victims. We've even had some progress on the LGBT key issue, because the Office of Children and Family Services has promulgated guidelines that are supposed to be put into practice by the state's juvenile facilities that protect the rights and promote the well-being of the LGBT young people who are locked up in those facilities. So, the intractable issue and this, I express this at the risk of just having repeated myself a number of times during our conversation, is the issues that relate to police policy and practice. It's difficult for us at the C.A. to call them intractable because, other than the kind of conversation that you and I are having, and that I've had occasionally with people over the last couple of years, we have not engaged this as an issue. I mean, we have not developed legislation; we have not developed any proposals that we have organized around and promoted to address the problem, other than we talk about it from time to time in semi-public forums. I guess that's my most thoughtful response.

Gangi           And what would you say is your proudest achievement or the one in the W column that you feel most gratified about?

Gangi           Other than the Yankees winning the World Series again this year?

JK           Oh, that just puts the world back on an even keel.

Gangi           For me, as an impassioned Yankee fan, I was very reassured. People who are not Yankee fans forget that Yankees go through long stretches of lack of success. There was almost a twenty-year period, between 1978 and 1996, when they did not win a World Series. Don Mattingly got into a playoff only in his last year of being on the Yankees. We didn't even make the playoffs. Anyway, I think the thing that I'm most

proud of, actually, goes less to any single issue and more to helping to build the Correctional Association into a force to be reckoned with, to have a 'you're going to hear from us' kind of presence in the policy-making arena. And to have done that with a lot of people, funding sources, other kinds of supporters, the Board, the very talented and wonderful staff that I talked about. That's the thing that, yes, I think I am the most proud of.

JK The Correctional Association itself?

Gangi Yes. I mean, obviously, not separate and apart from the issues where we've had success because that's what I like to think is part of the reason that we've had success. And again, it's working with a lot of other interested people and allies to move issues, is that we've become an organization of some substance and credibility in the field. And when I got here, we were at a very low part in our very long history, and included in what I'm saying about the Correctional Association is that other element that I mentioned when I was telling the story about my conversation with Michael Smith, that there are people in here who believe that we come together here to do great things, and we come together to do important things, and that virtually everybody here has something to say about what we do, so that we keep alive the vitality and the strength of the place, and that I, again, have worked with a lot of people to build that culture and that presence.

JK The one issue that I would like you to address is the question of literacy. That is, whether you've seen literacy, I don't mean college degrees or even high school degrees, but just basic literacy as an issue for the population in jails, and whether that's been on your radar screen at all.

Gangi It really hasn't. I mean, certainly educational levels has been. And I guess you're raising something related to that, but different.

JK Oh, everyone who teaches college knows that just because someone's graduated high school doesn't mean they're fully literate. And so, when the judges determine that you dropped out in the tenth grade, you must be literate, and they're not.

Gangi Well, to me, I haven't thought about it in those terms of strictly speaking literacy. When I think about it, and I think it's related to the question you're raising, we have a large population in a place like New York City, that doesn't have the level of literacy and the level of educational attainment that qualifies them for most of the jobs that are available and produced by the economy of New York City. Right now, I don't need to tell you or anybody else, you could have not only a college degree and a graduate degree and still not be able to find a job in New York City. It's really striking, apart from your question, because I, over the years, have worked with young people who I come to think of as very talented and have a lot to offer, and try to help to find them jobs, and there's a number of people that I think are really very talented, and they've been looking for jobs for many months and have not found them. But getting back to what might be more ordinary economic times, there are hundreds of thousands of people in New York City, most of them people of color, most of them poor, who don't have the level of

literacy or educational attainment that's going to qualify for them for the jobs offered by the city's economy. There's a huge disconnect reflected by that reality and one of the reasons why, in my judgment, our society has tolerated, if not supported, the huge expansion and the use of prisons, is because the shifts in the economy have created, in effect, or led to, us having living in a midst, or in the midst of our society, a very large economically disenfranchised population who for whom our economy no longer has any need. So then, we end up, I don't know how you want to leave them up to their own devices until they get in trouble, we then arrest them, lock them up and don't think very much about them until they're going to come back to the community. And we have not seriously addressed that problem, other than by hugely expanding our criminal justice prison and our prison apparatus, but we have not initiated probably what we should in our society. This is the long answer to your question, some kind of urban policy that gets to what the heart of the problem is, developing ways when you no longer have that disconnect, when you're promoting economic development in our inner cities that matches the educational levels of the people who live in those communities. I think that is a very, very difficult problem, which is one of the reasons probably why our mainstream politicians have ignored it. What's his name, the academic out of Chicago, Wilson.

JK Julius Wilson?

Gangi I think in some of his writings, he's tried to address this problem, and I don't know if he's made proposals that are pragmatic, whether he's talking about public works or other kinds of ways of addressing this problem. It obviously goes to the literacy issue because if people coming out of our school system can't adequately read, then they can't qualify for most of the jobs that our economy is developing. It's very different than the way it used to be. One of the examples I use when I talk about this issue is, I'm from an Italian-American background. My father and virtually all of his brothers dropped out of school after the eighth grade and they could still, as they got older, find jobs that if they were willing to work hard or relatively hard, that would pay them a livable wage, because the economy needed people with little or no skills and had places for them. That's no longer true. And what we've taken to do, this is speaking in very broad, crude terms, is, since our economy doesn't have a place for them, and they've become, in effect, disenfranchised, and if they don't become basketball players or hip hop performers, they end up getting in trouble, arrested, or they, in other ways, become wards of the state through some of the programs that provide services for people, mental health programs and other kinds of programs, drug treatment programs. In my judgment, we haven't taken that problem on directly. It's one of the things that you hope that Obama and his people begin turning their attention to, if and when they ever get through the Afghanistan issues and health care issues. But the job issue is connected to, that's not the only aspect of the unemployment problem, but one of the major aspects of the unemployment problem is the unemployability of so many of the people who end up being caught up in the clutches of our criminal justice system.

JK And so many of them are male. One of the things that CUNY has tried to put together is a black male initiative, which was sued on the basis of discriminatory practice and empowering men, the urban male initiative they changed it to. One of the things that

disturbs me is the culture of the Department of Corrections itself, that there's something within the jails that is a disruptive culture. Two examples, one was the guards on Rikers, who had set-up some kids to beat up other kids to maintain order, which resulted in the death of one kid. And the other is, increasingly prison guards are women, black women guarding black men.

Gangi            Not so much in the state, but certainly in the city, absolutely true.

JK            It's a very topsy-turvy situation that I don't see as having any positive outcome.

Gangi            Yes. I don't know if I would agree on your second point. On your first point, it was a very serious problem and I feel, I don't feel responsible for it, but I feel that perhaps we at C.A. could have done more about it. We were aware of the problem for a number of years, I think a lot of people were, because we work with young people, and they were coming out of Rikers saying, when we sat down and spoke with them, fairly consistently they were saying, the adolescent facility is a rough place, you've got to get with the program, or, if you don't get with the program, you'll get beaten up or you'll be deprived of food and other kinds of so-called privileges and it's enforced by the toughest kids in the block or in the housing area. And the correctional officers are a part of it or encourage it. And we weren't able, we took some steps, but they were insufficient to get to the Commissioner and people below the Commissioner level to raise the problem with them and to push hard for some better way of handling the difficulties in those housing areas. I'm sure what happened to the boy who got killed, virtually sure, that there was no intention to kill him. The intention was, "You were challenging our authority and not 'getting with the program,' we're going to beat you up as a lesson." And the poor boy died. The problem then came to light in this very dramatic way. I know that before [Martin] Horn left, he was taking some steps to directly deal with it and to create a better environment in those facilities, so there was less abusive practice and a less might-makes-right culture in those units, and I can't say for sure how successful with it they were. But it's one of the key problems that Dora Schriro has to deal with. It's also, how do I put this, not to in any way, really, I don't mean to not hold the Department responsible for maintaining more humane and safe conditions for the people who get sent to it. But you, in effect, support a system and accept a system where you're going to have fifteen teenage boys locked-up in a dormitory, and many of the boys who, for better or for worse, have problems with impulse control. And you put two correction officers in there who are going to feel inevitably in some cases, scared, overwhelmed. There's a very good chance bad things are going to come out of there. And if you're in effect operating a criminal justice system that results in those numbers and those realities, then you've got to put the resources in place that provides more programming. There's very little programming that goes on for the teenage boys. You've got to provide for better training and you've got to provide for more correctional officers and probably more social work type people, to make sure that that environment is more likely to be a safe and humane environment. I don't think you can hold just the corrections people responsible. You've got to look at the broader picture. And we know enough about prisons and jails, this is just true, that unless you take very dramatic steps to have oversight, to have sufficient programs and resources, with a very, very strong staff, a

disciplined staff, there will be abuses. The worst kind of example of what happens when things break down.

JK      So, it sounds like your work is not quite done. And you've got ten more months.

Gangi      Yeah, right. Well, the other story I told, sorry for being such an inveterate story teller, but the other story I told in the other interview was a story about, in our game the clock never runs out. And that's one of the things I talk to our staff about. Don't come here thinking you're going to complete the job, don't come here thinking we're going to tolerate, run out, or 'gee, I need a break and I need to take two months off because this work is so hard and discouraging.' If that's the effect that you think is going to happen, then don't work here. Work somewhere else. This really is a lifetime commitment, to make the world a better place, to work for the better treatment and the more just treatment of people who work live under margins of society. It's always been a problem in the United States, and I think in these economic times, and given, for whatever reasons, the racial disparities in our society, it continues to be a very significant problem. It's interesting, I'm sort of thinking out loud now, I do believe we've made a lot of racial progress in the United States over the last forty or fifty years. But not in our criminal justice system. I think our criminal justice system, when it comes to racial issues, has stepped backwards. The racism is more corrosive and more destructive than it was forty or fifty years ago.

JK      In that arena?

Gangi      Yes, in that arena, exactly.

JK      And that's perhaps the intractable problem.

Gangi      Yes. Did you see the Glenn Lowry piece, the Op Ed piece that he wrote? It was right around the time of that whole issue in Cambridge with Gates and the Cambridge police officer? He wrote an excellent Op Ed. It was interesting because I've talked to a number of people out of how many people who did not see it, who I thought would have seen it. It was in the *Sunday Times*. Basically, he scolded Obama and Gates for making such a fuss over this incident. He said the real problem when it comes to race and criminal justice is the mass imprisonment of black men. He put it out there, I thought, very forcefully, very dramatically, and very convincingly. In fact, Dolores Jones Brown and I have been working on getting Lowry to come to John Jay, probably some time in March, to talk about the issues.

JK      John Jay does a lot of interesting things.

Gangi      Yes. I'm impressed with John Jay.

JK      Jeremy has done some interesting things.

Gangi      Yes. I probably told you last time, my son teaches there.

JK And we ordered his book!

Gangi You did. This is my book.

JK We might have ordered that one, too!

Gangi Okay. It's interesting, I haven't done it recently, but every once in a while I go to the Amazon web page for my book, just to check out where it is. It's like a million something on the list. But the last time I looked it said that, "People who buy this book, *Johnny Once*, also buy this book," and it's *Bang, Bang* by my son.

JK I guess you have a big family.

Gangi Exactly right. I self-published, but he's the real deal. His book was published, he's got another one that his agent is marketing, he's writing another one. He likes John Jay. He likes John Jay a lot. He's having a hard time. He doesn't have a doctorate and he's having a hard time taking the next step.

JK It is hard. That's the meal ticket.

Gangi Having the doctorate, is that right? He's thinking about getting it. He's not old, certainly, but he's thirty-two. Do you have a doctorate?

JK Yes.

Gangi It's a commitment of time and money, right?

JK Right. It's not glamorous at all.

Gangi And the other person who I've met recently who I like a lot is Baz Dreisinger. Theo introduced me to her, and she is obviously in the English Department, but she's very interested in these issues – prison-related issues and culture and hip hop in particular and its relationship to prison issues, which is an interest of mine.

JK Well, you're welcome to come to John Jay at any time. Any last thoughts before we click off? Anything you're hopeful about? Having ended on the story of the brutality that still is endemic of Rikers Island, anything that you're hopeful about?

Gangi Well, we talked about it. I am at the same time believing, one point I've made, in our game, the clock never runs out. That injustices and sometimes really heinous injustices will continue to take place as part of our so-called system of justice, but as part of other aspects of our society, that there are some encouraging signs coming forward in New York and in America about more concern, more consideration for the rights of people, and specifically, human rights generally. I do believe that the election of Obama, even though I think he's right now being caught in a very significant political



crossfire, is a positive thing. I think that the changes and the shifts we've seen in New York on criminal justice policy and prison related policy are positive things. I think some of the things happening in California are potentially positive, in part, I mean, they're responding to the breakdown in state government and the serious financial problems there. They might reverse some of their imprisonment trends there. And I think there's more awareness, although it's not infiltrated into the consciousness of the majority of the public, but more awareness that the mass incarceration experiment has been a failure by almost any criteria you would apply to it, and it's more and more coming to a time for us to reconsider those policies and practices and to try other approaches. It's going to be very interesting to see politically whether Obama and his people take on that issue. Right now, obviously, if it's even on their minds it's in the deepest recesses of the corner of their political brains. But I'm hopeful that over the next several years, that they focus more and more, I guess, on an urban agenda, and as part of their urban agenda, they deal with issues relating to the administration of justice and the use of prisons.

JK      Well, let's hope his right flank doesn't need that much protection. Thanks, Bob.

Gangi              Yes, thank you.

End

Robert Gangi  
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