

BRETT COLLINS

The spokesperson for Justice Action, Brett Collins, knows the issues that prisoners across Australia face intimately – he was one. Brett served 10 years of a 17-year sentence for armed robbery, and was released in 1980.

“Actually, when I was released the federal government decided I was not an asset to Australia, and they tried to deport me when I was working at the half-way house,” the Kiwi native said. “I am now an Australian citizen, but it was a two-and-a-half year battle to remain here.”

Justice Action has been around in one form or another since the 1970s, and was a marriage of the Prisoner’s Action Group, the Australian Prisoners Union and Breakout. Established in 1984, Breakout was a printing company formed to maintain the half-way house, which had lost government funding. It continues today solely in order to fund Justice Action.

Justice Action is constantly working on a number of campaigns, including lobbying for support for those in prisons with mental illness, campaigning to re-instate all-day visits to Emu Plains Women’s Prison for children whose mothers are in jail, as well as to keep the ACT jail-free.

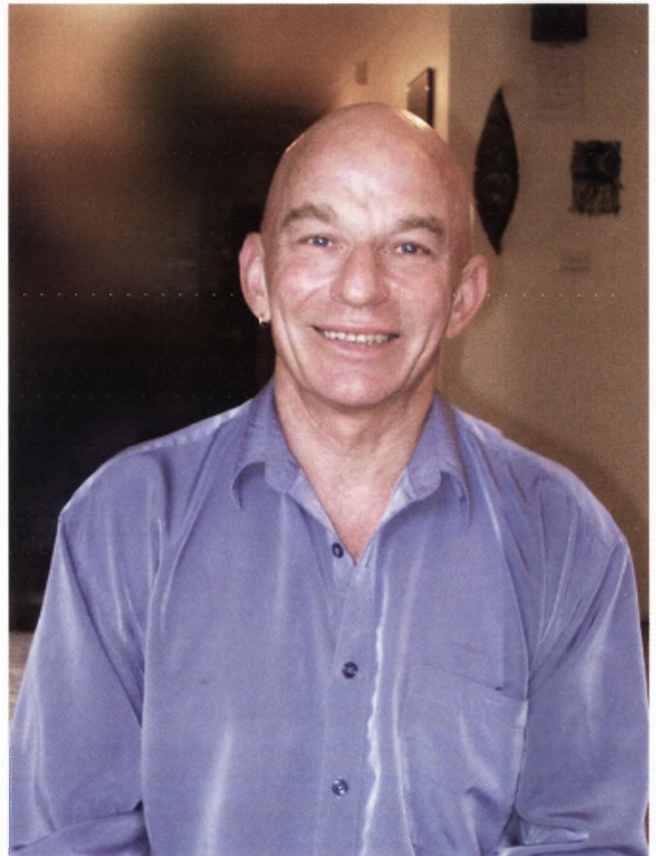
Justice Action has also established a course, accredited by TAFE NSW, to provide volunteer mentors with the tools they need to assist prisoners, including those who need help with drugs and alcohol.

“We have 23 certificated JA mentors working in the community, a service that is actually offered to the courts instead of sending someone to jail,” Collins said. “This welfare-based mentoring project is largely focused around providing a social response to a social problem, as an alternative to imprisonment.

“We use mentors with experience of the criminal justice system to work with people who are still embroiled in the criminal justice system. It is a community response to caring for our people.”

Justice Action is linked to international programs and, in 2006, hosted the 11th International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA) in Hobart. A strong national support network helps to distribute its publications, including 46 issues of a magazine, *Framed*, and more recently, *JUST US*, which is distributed to all prisoners in Australia and in New Zealand.

Justice Action continues to campaign around a number of issues in the prison system, including deaths in custody, hepatitis C in prisons, the fight for David Hicks and defending prisoners’ voting rights.



“In 2004, prisoners serving more than three years lost the right to vote,” Mr Collins said. “Then last year the government barred all prisoners from voting.”

Although Collins has not been in prison himself for over 25 years, he still sees himself as being a part of the criminal justice system.

“The truth of it is that people in my community who are in prison are good people,” Collins said. “They are people I am proud to know, and they are my best friends. They are people whom I trust intimately, and who trust me intimately.” ■

For more information on Justice Action go to
<http://justiceaction.org.au/>