

# The New York Times

## PUBLIC LIVES

### Defending the Despised, and Loving to Do So

By LYNDA RICHARDSON

The night before the convicted child killer Joel B. Steinberg was hustled by parole officers into the Fortune Society's castlelike home for ex-offenders on a bluff overlooking the Hudson River in Harlem, the society's executive director, JoAnne Page, had a dream.

It was a bad dream, a real doozy.

"I had an image," Ms. Page recalls. "The image was of being on a surfboard, a very small person in an enormous ocean, and watching a swell on the horizon and knowing this wave was coming. I tried to get a good night's sleep. I knew this was going to hit."

Ms. Page manages a short laugh, marveling that reality turned out to be worse than the dream. Her job is providing a safe home with services to help people who have served their time for crimes - even those as despicable as Mr. Steinberg's - re-enter society. Mr. Steinberg, a former lawyer, spent 16 years in an upstate prison for fatally beating 6-year-old Lisa Steinberg, his illegally adopted daughter. He was released on June 30 after being denied parole five times.

"It's been a wild ride," a surprisingly chipper Ms. Page says inside the Fortune Academy, the building on Riverside Drive at 140th Street that her organization operates as temporary quarters for ex-offenders. On this afternoon, the organization's most notorious resident is behind the closed doors of the dining room, off limits to a reporter. Ms. Page, 50, sits in a nearby conference room. Dressed in black, with a fanny pack around her waist, she has a short, compact build and wiry gray hair that looks slightly electrified. She is relaxed and chatty, almost bouncy.

Ms. Page says she has never felt such an intense spotlight in the 15 years she has headed the prisoner advocacy group. On his first day of freedom, Mr. Steinberg was hounded by television news helicopters that hovered over the limousine carrying him from prison, and a crush of photographers and reporters swarmed around as the terrified-looking ex-convict ascended the stone

steps of the academy.

Ms. Page, who says parole officials asked her agency to take in Mr. Steinberg, strides over to a back window and crouches, peering at an adjacent apartment building. She points out a pair of feet, stealthily moving and partly concealed behind bushes in a courtyard. "See the white sneakers?" she asks; they belong, she says, to one of the photographers who have steadily trained their lenses on Mr. Steinberg's new home. A poster hangs outside another apartment building: "Baby's Killer Get Out."

The furor has made Ms. Page a ubiquitous presence on the news.

Not that she particularly minds. "This is a bizarre way to have this conversation about prisoner re-entry, and how it should be done right, but it's better than not having it at all," she says. "There's a lot of misinformation out there. I think the fears have been fanned by media attention.

"If you ask me if this is a horrific crime, yes. Does Joel Steinberg pose a risk? To the extent you can predict human behavior, no. A man in his 60's, with a domestic violence conviction from 17 years ago, poses very little risk of hurting a stranger."

Even so, some neighbors have made their protests known loud and clear: They want Mr. Steinberg gone. But he does not want to leave anytime soon, said James Edstrom, a spokesman for Mr. Steinberg's lawyer, Darnay Hoffman. "He's concerned for his safety," Mr. Edstrom said of Mr. Steinberg.

Ms. Page has no qualms about putting up Mr. Steinberg temporarily. A typical stay, she says, is two weeks to two months. "This is what we do," she says. "We bring people home safely. There's a point when the crime happened. The sentence was served, and the rehabilitation must begin. We look at a human being as much more than the worst they ever did."

There is a fierce passion to her words.

She explains that her father grew into a teenager in Dachau, the Nazi death camp, and that many relatives were killed in the Holocaust.

"What my family experience did was to make me want to be somebody who fights institutions that damage people and who makes the world a little safer," she says. "Prisons are savage institutions."

She says she often turns to her father for advice on how prisoners deal with rage and how prisons change people. "My father always said that if you hate, you become

like the people who hurt you," she says. "I think hate has a way of trans-

forming people, and so too does forgiveness and caring."

A Yale Law School graduate who once worked for the Legal Aid Society, she clearly likes a good fight. She keeps forcefully steering the conversation to the subject of the huge number of prisoners re-entering society each year, 630,000 nationwide, and the inevitably high rate of recidivism when communities offer little support. "The important things are being lost in all the drama," she says.

Ms. Page is one who actually fancies drama. As a high school senior, she would skip class to sit in on celebrated court trials. She grew up a rather smart-alecky kid in Oceanside, N.Y., a middle-class suburb on Long Island, encouraged by refugee parents - her father is a retired picture framer, her mother an artist - to question authority.

She concedes, happily that prisoner work has consumed much of her life. Single, with an apartment near Union Square, she describes herself as something of a loner, though she is close to family and a tight collection of friends.

"I feel really lucky," she says. "What I value and what feeds me emotionally and what I care about politically are wrapped up in the work I do."

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JOANNE PAGE