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Windows on the World

“American’s Prisons: Justice for Whom?”

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On September 30, Windows on the World welcomed to its stage Jodina Hicks, Eastern alum and executive director of Urban Promise. Her presentation, "American Prisons: Justice for Whom?" focused on the shortcomings of America's prison systems, particularly as they relate to urban youth.

Located in Camden, New Jersey, Urban Promise is an outreach organization that is designed to supply children and teenagers with academic skills that will help them throughout their lives.

Hicks began by telling the crowd about the early years of her involvement with Urban Promise, dating back to her freshman year at Eastern. To illustrate her experience during this time, she described six children that she met through the organization.

All six children that Hicks mentioned were born to heroin-addicted mothers. They all suffered domestic abuse without any police intervention. One, a 14-year-old, had resorted to selling drugs to support his family. All six children had at some point been in prison.

Hicks confessed that on weekends she would sometimes bring a child back to Eastern because, as she said, "we



Jessica DeLong/The Waltonian
Jodina Hicks, Eastern alum and executive

didn't like to leave them behind."

director of Urban Promise speaks at
Windows on the World.

Hicks presented mind-blowing statistics about children in Camden, stating that 45% of the city lives in poverty and 70% of children end up dropping out of school.

"In Camden, the drug trade became the job market," Hicks said.

Turning her attention to the prison system, Hicks then noted that there are 2.3 million people in prison today, a number that has quadrupled since 1980. Half of these are incarcerated for nonviolent crimes.

The reason for the surge in the prison population, Hicks explained, is that the nation's laws have changed. Today, there are fewer community service options for those who are convicted. Meanwhile, the amount of jobs within the prison system has increased.

The prison system is becoming a job market, Hicks argued. On average, the United States spends 69 million dollars every year on its prison systems. Despite all of the money that the nation dishes out, the prison system shows little results. The rate of recidivism, or repeat offense, is alarmingly high. Most prisoners appear once again behind bars within three years of their release.

In the prisons themselves, living arrangements are poor. Inmates are locked up 23 hours out of the day and given food that is almost inedible. Few prisons have education systems or drug treatment programs. This makes it even harder for prisoners to find legal work once they are released, so many turn once again to the drug trade.

Hicks is part of a movement to address these issues. In addition to Urban Promise, she is working with communities and churches to promote laws that would establish college-level education systems in prisons. The results of such programs have already been proven: 50% of those who have participated in mentoring and education programs while in prison have met with success upon their release.

Hicks said that "making a difference is not as hard as it sounds." For those who want to see a change in legislation, she suggests getting into contact with local elected officials. Organizing, writing letters and joining groups are all ways to help bring justice to the prison system.

"We can find policies that help people improve their lives," Hicks said. "It all starts somewhere."