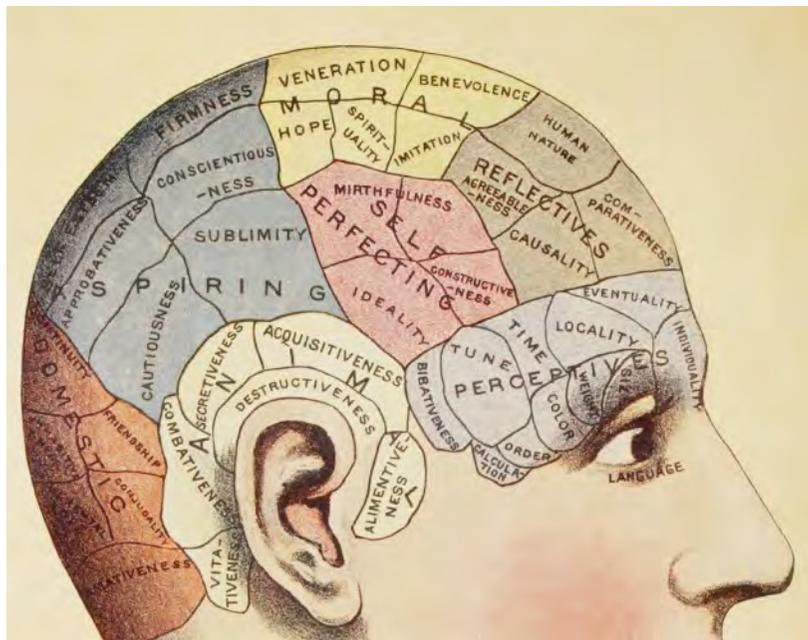


Justice For Convicts

After his mentally-ill son was unfairly convicted of arson, Francis Greenburger vowed to open a therapeutic centre to prove there is an alternative to the punitive prison system in the US.

by Tara Loader Wilkinson



Francis Greenburger's son Morgan was first diagnosed with a mental illness at the age of four, but he never received appropriate treatment. So when he was convicted of arson as a teenager, Greenburger vowed to create an alternative to the system.

"Mental illness is not something that has a beginning and an end. With more complex situations like my son's, it's a life journey," explains Greenburger, who is a real-estate investor and founder of Time Equities. "For Morgan, it was hard to know what helped and what didn't, as he was given various labels, ranging from Oppositional Defiant Disorder, which turned into Pervasive Development Disorder, and was finally diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum."

The situation came to a head when Morgan was 19 — he was on his way home and became paranoid that a drug dealer was following him. Over the phone, Greenburger tried to persuade him to wait for his live-in helper but, terrified, Morgan called the

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police. When the police ignored him, Morgan gathered whatever papers he could find in his apartment, put them on the hob and set them alight. He believed by calling the Fire Department to douse the flames, they would protect him. Instead, he was arrested for arson and handed a five-year prison sentence.

Greenburger appealed to the district attorney to place his son in a secure treatment centre as opposed to prison, as he knew how detrimental the criminal justice system could be. The attorney agreed to do so, but the problem was one that didn't exist.

"Right now if the district attorney and the judge believe that if somebody is mentally ill and is in any way a danger to society, they send that person to prison, even if they realise that it is not the appropriate resolution. And, in fact, they make their condition worse, which is often the case," says Greenburger. "Their standards are very conservative, so if they have any doubt, they send the person to prison. That's why we have over a million mentally-ill prisoners in the US today."

Undeterred, Greenburger set out to build a therapeutic treatment centre. Tabled to open in Spring 2018, The Greenburger Center for Social and Criminal Justice has just begun construction. Located in "a nice part of the Bronx", it will be a 16-bed facility, housing 10 men and six women. The German model of prison is the inspiration, says Greenburger, which allows for a semi-normal life, with a proper bed, desk and light, cooking facilities and the ability to interact with other inmates. "It will have a feeling of normality," says Greenburger. What really sets it apart from traditional US prisons is that it will offer inmates group therapy and treatment while keeping them on lockdown. If the model is successful, the plan is to scale it up and launch it elsewhere in the US, says Greenburger. It has created strategic partnerships with mental health facilities to develop programmes to run. He admits that government buy-in has been minimal so far, and will likely remain so until it is a proven success.

"The Greenburger Center is a pilot to try to find a middle ground between community-based facilities and prison," explains Greenburger. "We believe that with the therapeutic approach, as opposed to the punitive one that our prison system provides, people will leave better than when they came in, as opposed to worse, which is the case now."

Greenburger's campaign comes at a time when tension over heavy-handed US law enforcement is running high. The recent shootings of a number of mentally-ill black people by police officers has drawn protests in the street and widespread calls for governmental reform.

Historically speaking, it is one of the worst times to be mentally ill in the US. In 1955, approximately 560,000 mentally-ill patients were in public psychiatric hospitals. Today, only 35,000 psychiatric beds exist, for a US population that has doubled since 1955. Indeed, people with mental illness are 10 times more likely to be in jail than in a psychiatric ward in the US. It is a huge drain on the economy — an incarcerated person costs an annual average of US\$168,000, a cost that soars if the person is mentally ill. But the US justice system suffers from a lack of alternatives. While the US has 5 percent of the world's population, it has a quarter of the world's prisoners — incarcerating a greater percentage of its population than any other country on Earth.

The Greenburger Center is adding its voice to calls for change. More than a rehabilitation complex, it is a platform that advocates for much-needed reforms. "Laws need to protect society, not penalise mental illness or poverty," says Greenburger. "Judges must have the option to do justice, while giving an alternative to incarceration."

While it will be too late for his son Morgan, who is still serving his sentence, Greenburger hopes his centre will inspire others, paving a more hopeful future for the mentally ill and their families. ◇