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We didn't set out to write a new mission statement. We *liked* our mission statement, clumsy and wordy as it was.

It was 2016 and we had been evolving quickly. As we set to writing a new strategic plan, our mission statement seemed to be serving its purpose just fine. We didn't realize how much we had outgrown it.

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We had opened Eastern State Penitentiary to the public in 1994 in a state of true ruin. In the year of the opening, the abandoned prison had no running water, no climate control anywhere on the property and virtually no electricity. A single telephone line ran behind a donated wooden desk, and the first time it rang it seemed like a minor miracle. We required every visitor to wear a hard hat and sign a waiver stating that risks—including death—were inherent to entering the building. We were open 110 days that first year with just over 10,000 visitors.

We eventually wrote a standard “kitchen sink” mission statement, listing historic preservation first, providing public access to the building second, telling the stories of men and women who lived and worked in the building third and, finally, “creating a neutral public forum where issues of contemporary corrections can be addressed.” The mission felt largely aspirational.

That “neutral public forum” proved to be the real challenge, although it wouldn't become completely unworkable for many years.

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Over time, we raised more than \$16 million in capital funding, addressing the most critical historic preservation and life-safety issues. We added visitor amenities. We expanded our hours to 361 days a year. Our annual historic site audience grew to more than a quarter of a million visitors, with an additional 100,000 visitors attending a Halloween fundraiser that provided the bulk of the organization's operating revenue. We researched forgotten stories and complex historical narratives, produced an audio tour, and developed a guided tour program rooted in dialogue. The first three elements of our mission required many years of focused work, of course, and will never be “complete.” But these elements didn't trigger institutional soul-searching.

To address the fourth element, the neutral public forum on contemporary issues, we partnered with artists. Beginning nearly at the start of public tours, in 1995, we commissioned site-specific art installations to encourage reflection on the history and contemporary legacy of Eastern State Penitentiary. To date there have been nearly 100 artist installations on the site.

Artist Virgil Marti created a memorial for Oscar Wilde, whose 1895 conviction for homosexuality, and incarceration in a prison modeled after Eastern State Penitentiary, outraged our visitors a century later and triggered inevitable comparisons to current policy debates. Nick Cassway's *Portraits of Inmates in the Death Row Population Sentenced as Juveniles* (2005) reflected on capital punishment. William Cromar's *GTMO* (2006) engaged our visitors in discussions about the rule of law and role of the courts in detention and incarceration, using the U.S. facility at Guantanamo Bay as a reference point. Michelle Handelman's "Beware the Lily Law" (2009) illuminated the plight of transgender individuals in the US prison system today. Jesse Krimes' *Apokaluptein16389067:II* presented a 39-panel mural the artist created on smuggled bedsheets during his incarceration in Federal prison.

But we, as an institution, were virtually silent on anything that happened after the last man was transferred out of Eastern State Penitentiary in 1971. We didn't address the war the drugs. We didn't discuss mandatory minimum sentences. We didn't draw our visitors' attention to the United States' truly historic expansion of its prison population, creating the highest rate of incarceration in the world, by far. We didn't illustrate that the shameful racial disparity in the prison population throughout Eastern State Penitentiary's history was actually growing *worse* in recent decades, in an era that many Americans were now beginning to call "mass incarceration."

Indeed, even as issues of criminal justice increasingly became seen as the civil rights issue of our times, our exhibits and tour content remained squarely trained on events at least 40 years in the past. We were, after all, a neutral public forum.

Things changed quickly. Creating an interpretive plan in 2010—our first—forced us to look more critically at our choices. How much did we know about our visitors' take on "neutrality," anyway? We finally began to ask them. We rewrote the conclusion of our audio tour, now addressing the changes to laws and enforcement that drove the massive growth of the prison population since 1970, and the fact that the United States alone has chosen this strategy.

In 2014 we built *The Big Graph*, a massive infographic sculpture that illustrates these patterns, and added the racial breakdown of the prison population over time. We feared that the statistics on the graph regarding race and the U.S. prison population could be used, by some visitors, to reinforce ugly and hateful stereotypes. We chose, therefore, to use the word "crisis" when discussing the racial disparities in our justice system on signage and in the main audio tour script that accompanies the graph.

What should our nation do to address this crisis?

We developed two "non-negotiables" to support our front line staff when interpreting prisons today—one, that the U.S. over-incarcerates its citizens, with no justifiable public safety results, and two, that the racial disparities in our system are unnatural and an indication of injustice.

Were we still a neutral public forum? Not all of our interpretive staff felt so. Although most embraced the new direction, two out of twelve eventually left. To our surprise and relief, however, in summative evaluation, the vast majority of visitors reported that the graph, even with its word “crisis,” felt “neutral.”

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But things got more complex. As we built a companion exhibit to the graph, the goal of neutrality became unworkable. The new exhibit, with its intentionally balanced-sounding title *Prisons Today: Questions in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, forced us to be honest about what our board and staff had come to see as a basic truth: there are too many Americans in prison. The exhibit was going to illustrate the very weak link between rates of incarceration and violent crime rates. It was going to highlight states such as New York, New Jersey, California and Texas that were already lowering their prison populations and their violent crime rates, simultaneously. And the exhibit was going to illustrate how a refusal to look beyond emotion, to evidence, had doomed a generation of lawmakers to making very poor decisions for public policy.

Were we really going to say, “on the one hand... but on the other” about the war on drugs and mandatory minimum sentences?” Increasingly, that felt patronizing. An honest look at our programming over the previous 20 years led to the uncomfortable conclusion that in most cases our version of “neutrality” had taken the form of silence.

At a critical, but unanimous, meeting of the board of directors in December of 2016, we decided to drop the pretense, on this one specific point, of neutrality. The exhibit would open with the statement, “Mass Incarceration Isn’t Working.”

We were evolving in other ways too. We began to quietly hire formerly incarcerated individuals to put a human face on mass incarceration policies. Our new guides can describe their personal experiences to visitors when the subject came up. Preparing for that program brought many of us into prisons to seek input. One advisor, a reentry specialist who had himself been incarcerated in state prison, joined our board of directors.

Our nation incarcerates 2.2 million people, and yet there is no National Prison Museum. By the fall of 2016, already a year into writing a new strategic plan, and with our mass incarceration exhibit garnering attention from policymakers and museum professionals, we realized that we were the closest thing our nation has.

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In 2015 a committee of board and staff members, the Strategic Planning Committee selected with outside contractor to assist us in writing a new strategic plan. It became clear almost immediately that our mission statement was out of date. Once we really looked it, it was clear she was right. We were already pursuing a far more ambitious vision than our current mission outlined. And the word “neutral” jumped off the page.

The committee started with a strategic vision statement. This 12-page document went through multiple overhauls during the course of a year, with extensive input from front line staff, administrative staff, board members, colleagues from partner organizations and other stakeholders. This document eventually served as the framework for a new, single-sentence mission statement, a single sentence vision statement, and a ten-point statement of organizational values.

Civil rights attorney and founder of the Legacy Museum Bryan Stevenson says of social justice work, “Proximity is important.” Our network of advisors, including formerly and currently incarcerated people, policy experts, lawmakers, victim advocates and re-entry professionals, and our time spent visiting prisons and community advocacy organizations, have inspired the growth that has led to our new mission and vision.

Neither a social service agency nor an advocacy organization, we find now that we are the stewards of a unique platform to reach an audience that is largely disengaged from deep conversations about criminal justice, race, poverty, and our ever-evolving prison system.

We welcome this challenge.

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Mission

Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site interprets the legacy of American criminal justice reform, from the nation’s founding through to the present day, within the long-abandoned cellblocks of the nation’s most historic prison.

Vision

Eastern State Penitentiary’s innovative preservation, interpretation, and public programs will move visitors to engage in dialogue and deepen the national conversation about criminal justice.

Values

Eastern State Penitentiary has built a strong culture of beliefs and practices that inform all of our decisions and actions. The core values are grouped according to content and practice, but were not prioritized. ESPHS believes that each of these values is critical to the organization’s success.

What we do:

- Stewardship of Eastern State Penitentiary as a stabilized ruin of international significance and our collections
- Interpretation of the stories of the people who were imprisoned and who worked at Eastern State, and the artifacts that tell their stories
- Leveraging the power of history and historic places to inform current-day issues
- Exploration of contemporary criminal justice issues with honesty and respect for multiple Perspectives

How we do it:

- Visitor-centric approach

- Organization-wide commitment to equity, diversity, accessibility, and inclusion
- Partnerships that enrich and complicate the dialogue catalyzed by our work
- Commitment to environment sustainability and long-term, thoughtful preservation
- An innovative and entrepreneurial culture
- A sustainable business mode