

 Trinidad Express Newspapers

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Weekly Magazine

*Venita takes on
world of breakdancing*

*The weekday
wedding trend*

*Dr Baz
Dreisinger
...fighting for justice*

Dr Baz Dreisinger
Photo: Jermaine Cruickshank

HerFeature

Verdel Bishop

Dr Baz Dreisinger

...a woman on a mission

Dr Baz Dreisinger is a woman on a mission. She was recently in Trinidad in her capacity as founder and executive director of Incarceration Nations Network (INN), a global network of prison reformers and justice reimagers, for the premiere of her new docuseries, *Incarceration Nations: A Global Docuseries*.

The local docuseries premiere, directed by Dreisinger, comes on the heels of a series of screenings worldwide, including a successful world premiere at the Tribeca Festival in 2021.

Dreisinger, from New York City, USA, is a professor, author, journalist, justice worker and filmmaker who, in collaboration with local and global partners, The Caribbean Centre for Human Rights and The International Legal Foundation, has been doing extensive work and research on the criminal justice system in Trinidad and Tobago.

Her magazine recently caught up with Dreisinger to learn more about her life as a modern-day freedom fighter, her docuseries, her organisation and its work within the justice system. While she grapples every day with deep issues about justice, she believes it is her calling.

"Justice work is love work. I am grateful that in this global work, I have an outlet for all of my out-sized love. This work makes me see the worst of humanity, but also the best: the people labouring to make change from one end of the earth to another, in prison and in the real world. The people who love justice and believe that a better world is possible — and they are what it takes for us to tackle these systems, a community grounded in brilliance, passion and love. It motivates me and fills up my soul.

"I don't have a job, I have a calling. As horribly depressing as mass incarceration is, it feels like a great honour to wake up every day and collaborate with beautiful people all over the world in a transnational effort to end this traumatically evil system," Dreisinger said.

INN, she explained, is a global network that supports, instigates and popularises innovative prison reform and justice reimaging efforts around the world. "We have 120 partners around the world engaged in a host of justice work, from restorative justice and education behind bars to legal reform and broad-reaching policy efforts, and we connect them with each other, with the world and with the general public.

"We also sometimes take on deep-dive projects in certain countries wishing to innovate when it comes to the justice space, collaborating with them and bringing our global partners to the table," she noted.

In Trinidad, Dreisinger is looking to do this in the context of juvenile detention, pretrial detention generally and higher education behind bars, building a prison-university partnership with partners on the ground and relevant global partners.

"We are also always looking to shift the conversation from a punitive, tough-on-crime approach — which is not making anyone safer and is in fact making us less safe — to an approach that emphasises smart-on-crime, heal not harm and restorative community building. If we want safe communities, we need to move past archaic, outdated, colonial-era systems of punishment and focus on innovation and smart justice," Dreisinger said.

Trinidad's justice system, Dreisinger asserted, is no different from other countries. "Many of the issues here are issues all over the world: long waits for trial, terrible overcrowding and vile prison conditions, lack of access to legal counsel, and an overall targeting of one particular 'other' group — in Trinidad and Tobago, that's generally poor people who are criminalised and mass incarcerated," Dreisinger said.

When questioned as to whether women suffer within the justice system disproportionately due to their gender, Dreisinger noted that the statistics are alarming. "Women are the fastest rising prison population in the world, which is an appalling statistic. This generally has to do with the international war on drugs, in which vulnerable women and girls, generally low-level foot soldiers, are an easy target. Sexist gender roles and power dynamics also mean that, globally speaking, women are criminalised by way of relationships with male partners with authority and influence.

"Women in the justice system are also likely themselves survivors of great harm. One US study showed that some 80 per cent of women in prison had been victims of domestic violence. When we incarcerate women, too, we incorporate their children and families. It's a system of harm of epic proportions, one

that only increases crime by damaging our social fabric in profound ways," she said.

The activist contended that there is no reintegration plan for people coming home from prison, but there is profound stigma against them. "The general culture is one of punitive anger — a desire to punish instead of to repair and heal. Again, all of these things are crises from one end of the world to another," she said.

But she remains optimistic and vows to keep advocating for change within the justice system. "I often say that optimism is a justice worker's imperative. We must believe change is possible in order to do what we do — to keep pushing that boulder up the mountain. Radical imagination, too, is the essence of justice work.

"The docuseries is a mixed media series that looks to make people aware of the global crisis of mass incarceration, how it looks similar in its traumas and harms from one country to another. I created the ten episodes of *Incarceration Nations* to be notable in many respects for what they don't feature, even more than what they do: no lurid prison scenes that are exploitative and reinforcing of stereotypes. No more reiteration of the problem, but an emphasis on solutions, via the work of INN's global partners. No talking heads like me; the experts in the docuseries are formerly incarcerated people themselves, living witnesses and global changemakers."

Dreisinger is no stranger to Trinidad. When her book *Incarceration Nations* was published in 2016, she read at the Bocas Lit Fest which was livestreamed via Facebook from the Port of Spain Prison. "I have been to Trinidad more times than I can count. I love this country deeply and consider it one of the most rich, beautiful, forceful, witty and wise cultures in the world. Carnival is the highest of art forms; it is also, fundamentally and historically, revolution — it is a spirit of resistance that informs and inspires my justice work every day.

"On most trips, I am working on articles about music, culture and travel or just seeing dear friends here, but starting about five years ago, I began also coming in the context of justice reform."



Justice worker and filmmaker Dr Baz Dreisinger. Photo: Jemaine Cruckshank

About the docuseries *Incarceration Nations: A Global Docuseries*

The first of these projects is *Incarceration Nations: A Global Docuseries*, a mixed-media series about global mass incarceration narrated entirely by those who have lived incarceration around the world, from England to El Salvador, Argentina to the US, Brazil and Lebanon to South Africa and Sierra Leone.

The ten episodes of *Incarceration Nations* expose an international crisis while also spotlighting solutions, showcasing the work of INN justice partners from one continent to another. The series is currently being screened in communities worldwide.

Episodes:

- The Nefarious Plot: Introduction to Global Mass Incarceration
- Waiting... and Waiting... For Trial
- (In)Justice for Women
- Families Behind Bars
- Education Not Incarceration
- Smart on Drugs, Not War on Drugs
- Homecoming
- Those Closest to the Problem...
- Correcting Correctional Centers
- Heal Not Harm

Docuseries screening at IMAX

THE Caribbean Centre for Human Rights, Incarceration Nations Network and the International Legal Foundation recently hosted a screening, discussion and reception for the launch of the *Incarceration Nations* docuseries at the IMAX Theatre in One Woodbrook Place, Port of Spain.

Members of the legal fraternity and the penal system joined medi-

ators, activists and rehabilitators to examine the docuseries and open discussions on the feasibility of the groundbreaking Prison-to-College Pipeline Programme here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Following the panel discussion those in attendance were invited to share in refreshments.

—Photos: JERMIANE CRUCKSHANK



Diana Mahabir-Wyatt, chairman, Caribbean Centre for Human Rights; Dr Baz Dreisiger, founder, Incarceration Nations Network; and Denise Pichey, executive director, Caribbean Centre for Human Rights.



Attorneys Cheyanne Ramhilt, Robert Doodnath and Daniel Khan have a chat following the viewing.



The Womantra team, from left, Hallegh Smith, Safiyyah Acosta, Stephanie Leitch and Elyse Marcella.



Alexus McNally, attorney Joanne Joseph Ramays and Aigla-Bernadette.



FRIDAY APRIL 15TH 2022

**BIGGER
BETTER
FOOTBALL**



VS



VS



VS



POLICE FC

WEST FC

TERMINIX FC

CSW WORLD

PLAYING AT THE LA HORQUETTA REC. GROUND

GATES OPEN AT 4.00PM | HEAVY POLICE PRESENCE
ARTISTS (SNOWMAN, TOPPY BOSS, JR & STARBRITE), CHEERLEADERS,
BANGERS, RHYTHM SECTION, HOST TOMMY SHMURDA

MASK MANDATORY



TICKETS

640 COVERED | 630 UNCOVERED

TICKET OUTLETS: PHASE 2 LA HORQUETTA REC. GROUND,
TERMINIX OFFICE (LP 401 OLD SOUTHERN MAIN ROAD LEHOORE VILLAGE, MONTROSE, CHAGLIANAS) |
LA SOLYRIERE OFFICE (ESPLANADE, P.O. BOX 2859 WESTERN MAIN ROAD CHAGLIANAS, TRINIDAD, W.I.)
AND URBAN LOUNGE TUNAPUNA (OPP FCB BANK)

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