

'Orange' author visits county to talk about re-entry



Anna Jeffries, Reporter

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(Photo: Sara C. Tobias/The Advocate)

NEWARK - Tina Cole was serving time at the Ohio Reformatory for Women when she picked up the book, "Orange is the New Black."

At first, Cole wasn't sure she had a lot in common with the author of the memoir, Piper Kerman, who spent 13 months in a women's prison in Connecticut in 2004.

Kerman was a Smith College graduate who was charged with felony money laundering. Cole was a Newark mom who served six years in Marysville for selling drugs.

But when she picked up the book again recently, Cole's life had changed dramatically. She's out of prison, recently celebrated the birth of a grandchild and is working as the general manager of the Sparta in downtown Newark.

One of her goals is to be an advocate for other former inmates as they try navigate life after incarceration.

"When I read it again, I found it very motivating to keep me going in what I do, not only in my day-to-day life, but also with what we are doing in Newark to help returning citizens," she said.

She was thrilled to welcome Kerman to the Sparta on Tuesday for lunch and a discussion about her book and criminal justice reform.

"It's really exciting," she said. "I never would have thought I would meet her."

Since she was released, Kerman has been an advocate for prison reform and speaks about her experiences across the country.

Her book was the inspiration for Jenji Kohan's award-winning Netflix series, "Orange is the New Black."

She and her family moved to Columbus in January 2015, and she's been co-facilitating nonfiction writing classes at the Ohio Reformatory for Women as well as the Marion Correctional Institution.

Knowing Kerman has been speaking around central Ohio, Jack Shuler, an associate professor of English at Denison University, invited her to speak on campus.

"She's been an advocate for the rights of prisoners and returning citizens, and I wanted her to see what people are doing in Licking County," he said.

She spoke to Shuler's nonfiction writing class and gave a lecture Tuesday night at Swasey Chapel.

But Shuler wanted to make sure she also visited the Sparta, which works to provide opportunities for people who are returning from jail or prison.

He and Cole worked together to organize an "Orange is the New Black" reading group, made up of Denison students, former inmates and members of several community groups, including the Newark Think Tank on Poverty.

They met several times to discuss the book before Kerman's visit.

When she arrived at the restaurant, the group launched into an informal discussion about theories of punishment and rehabilitation as well as the obstacles people face once they are released.

"After their punishment is over, people need to be able to rejoin their community and be on the right path," Kerman said.

People face barriers to safe housing, employment and positive support systems, but changes can be made in communities, she said.

"If we want fewer people locked up in this country, the most important work is getting done at the local and state level," Kerman said.

Kerman said she was glad to see so many interested parties, from different walks of life, gathered at the Sparta to talk about what's been accomplished and the work that needs to be done.

"Everyone who comes home needs help," she said. "We need institutions like the Sparta, schools, hospitals and universities (to offer support). They are really important for people to come back into the fold."

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