

The New Breed of American Prisoner

An Effort at Building Pride in Prison

Iasha Salim, 25, is a member of the black independence group, New Republic of Africa. She was arrested and imprisoned last August in connection with a shooting incident in Jackson, Miss., in which a local policeman was killed, and another patrolman and an FBI agent were wounded. While in the state penitentiary at Parchman with two other women members of RNA, she did her best to win over to her social views white and black male inmates in cells within hearing distance.

Miss Salim: At first we didn't talk to the men prisoners on the other side of the corridor. At first they could hear us and knew we were women and they'd

curse and talk tough about sex.

There were two white men and the rest black. They'd boast about their sexual conquests. It was pretty sad . . .

Then the men began asking us what was going on on the outside and up North. I would explain the need for respect for women. Sometimes this would degenerate into sex talk but most of the time they were serious and so were we. We would explain why it was important to have a strong family, how we as black women felt about the movement, how Daniel Moynihan could tell white America about the weakness of the black family.

We impressed on them

how every mind and all the dedication is needed to make this world in such a way that we black people are not going to be annihilated . . .

We would build pride of the men on the other side, by telling how the black men had been kings in Africa, and how many great civilizations there were in Africa. We told them that even if they were incarcerated they did not have to be slaves in their minds . . . Some of the men had been there in those cells six months and some 10 years, but they all listened.

At first, the two white men were very insulting and skeptical. They'd laugh and snicker and say, "Why, you ain't nothing but a little old

nigger gal." but as we progressed, everyone got more articulate and intelligent.

By the time we left, all the black men were giving the New Africa Oath of Allegiance, at breakfast and at bedtime. We were doing our nation-building all the time we were in prison. And it changed them as persons . . .

At the end if we said, "Please quiet down, Sister Njeri is sick," they'd quiet down and the next day they'd ask how she was.

When we left every prisoner said goodbye. The white men said, "Best wishes." The black men sang, "Power to the People," and the matrons thanked me for helping them with their books. I felt that something good had come from it.