

# A new non profit taking on a life of its own

*“Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison...? He will reply, I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”*

– Matthew 25:44-45

**By Tammy Finwall**

*Fern Ridge Review*

Melissa Brown, a Veneta resident, budding non-profit executive director, website designer and worker bee, launched the notably ambitious and controversial website Adopt an Inmate (AAI) in July 2015. Since then, her feet have barely touched the ground. “This is all I do from sunup to sundown,” Brown says. AAI’s website tag is accurately entitled “Calling all Angels.” Part of the program mission “is to remind the world and those caught in the grip of the justice system that both accused and adjudicated are human.”

Brown strives to remind the free world that there are human faces and hearts hidden behind prison statistics. More important, Brown is the advocate’s advocate, and her job is to create a link between the disenfranchised and volunteers willing to help them, one inmate at a time.

While Brown does not specifically refer to the Bible, her work certainly has a spiritual focus that is sometimes unpopular. Brown says haters post on AAI’s site daily. Her response to them is, “My job is to simply do this work, by waking up every day and being of benefit to others – and those who

are moved to do so, will respond. It is said that you begin saving the world by saving one man at a time, so that’s what we’re doing, and that’s what we’re encouraging others to do.”

A family tragedy moved Brown to create the AAI website and her current full-time job. Her brother is currently incarcerated in Texas. The events that led up to his imprisonment devastated and confused their family. Navigating the judicial and corrections systems was difficult and frustrating. They had many questions about how they could help and communicate with their loved one and no one to help them. “Even the simplest of tasks seemed designed to be unnecessarily challenging,” Brown said.

For a detailed list of these commonly asked questions and for specific details about Brown’s story, see “Our Story” at [adoptaninmate.org](http://adoptaninmate.org).

Brown says she quickly learned that they were not the only ones who could benefit from some help during this kind of stressful and difficult time. At the time of this interview, AAI’s website following was 3300 and according to Brown the inmate adoption waiting list numbers 700.

What started as her brother’s



**Executive Director of Adopt an Inmate, Melissa Brown dedicates her life to helping other inmates and their families after her brothers incarceration.**

idea to help a few inmates, is now a website that is intricate, varied and large.

“I have a feeling that whether I stay and continue to develop this program or walk away, this program will survive and grow,” Brown says.

Brown works on average twelve hours a day. In order to devote this amount of time, Brown moved from her house in California to Veneta to live with her

mom. AAI’s base of operation is her mother’s dining room table, and her mother completely supports her, both emotionally and monetarily.

Currently, Brown is experiencing growing pains and many sleepless nights. Most of AAI’s daily tasks revolve around mail that is received from the general public and inmates. Last Monday, Brown received 82 pieces of mail. Each letter is logged, sorted, replied

does accept donations for postage and ink. Mostly, everything else is paid out of their own pockets.

“I have roughly ten of my own personal adoptees, and try to schedule at least one afternoon a week focusing on correspondence with them, sending books, cards, and commissary when I’m able to,” Brown says.

In addition to pairing inmates with volunteers, Brown does the following as a part of the grow-

to, and filed. Some of the letters include requests such as passing along messages to loved ones, research and other tasks that inmates are not able to do for themselves.

Roughly half of the incoming mail consists of completed surveys from inmates, which are the heart of the AAI program. Brown uses them to match inmates with prospective supporters, volunteers who want to write to someone in prison and, if possible, assist in other ways.

Brown matches each inmate to an advocate that best compliment the inmate's needs (i.e., age, location, direction of growth, similar interests). She insists AAI is not a dating site nor the typical inmate pen-pal site. "There is no cost to either the inmate or the adopter for what we do," Brown says. AAI

ing AAI program: manages all social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and the AAI website), attends local hearings and events regarding criminal justice issues, and connects with family members of inmates. She also publishes a quarterly newsletter specifically for families and advocates of inmates. The upcoming newsletter is "Winter 2016" and will be available on the AAI website soon.

Though Brown has a couple of volunteers to help with mail, office details, and grant writing needs, AAI welcomes and needs more volunteers and has a fundraiser in progress. To donate to AAI and for more information, go to [adoptaninmate.org](http://adoptaninmate.org). AAI's mailing address is P.O. Box 1543, Veneta, Oregon 97487, and phone number is 971-ADOPT-97.