

Man Responsible for Jen Angel's Death Receives 7 years

Would restorative justice been a better outcome?

Peter Werbe

2025

The man responsible for the death of Oakland, Calif. social justice activist, anarchist, and baker, Jen Angel, was sentenced to seven years imprisonment for manslaughter and robbery. Twenty-year-old Ishmael Burch accepted a plea deal in August of last year.

Angel was dragged to death in February 2023 when she became entangled in the car Burch was driving after he had stolen her purse.

From the beginning, Loved Ones of Jen Angel, a group of friends, community members, and activists, rejected the path of the traditional justice system calling upon the city district attorney to use “all available alternatives to traditional prosecution such as restorative justice.” They proposed a framework for this that would entail a non-carceral process in charging and sentencing options to “mitigate harm done through the prison system.” The D.A.’s office rejected their wishes.

The Loved Ones wrote that the plea deal was “the best possible outcome under the current legal system. We know Jen would not want someone involved in her death to waste away in prison for decades, and take some comfort in knowing Ishmael has a chance to repair some of the harm he caused.”

Like other prison activists and abolitionists, Jen believed that accountability was crucial, but that cops and courts, prosecutors and prisons were part of a system that only bolstered a violent and unequal society. That equation can be seen on the day of Jen’s death where a poor, young black man acted out one of the scripts endemic to poverty—crime—and met fatefully with a white, middle-class woman where all of the injustice of class society became tragically manifest.

One of the functions of the so-called criminal justice system is to assure the sanctity of property, particularly from predation by the poor. Crimes of the rich, which create the context for those of the poor, rarely get punished. nineteenth century anarchist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, saw it clearly: “Laws! Spider webs for the rich and powerful; steel chains for the weak and poor.”

The massive state institution of apprehension, adjudication, and incarceration of those who violate laws is a multi-billion dollar industry in itself that requires the continuance of transgressions regardless of its claim to want to end what is the basis of their existence. Justice can be seen as one of the many rackets of capitalism.

Restorative justice is an extra-judicial practice exterior to the state punitive bureaucracy based on healing harm and repairing community integrity and safety through a number of non-carceral techniques. Would this have provided a resolution in the situation that ended in Jen Angel’s death? Or, was the social gulf between Jen and Ishmael Burch too great and too deep to make a process based on community even possible? It’s clear no good will come of Burch going to prison. It won’t restore Jen’s life and probably won’t act as a deterrent as cops and prison never do.

One can only speculate on what would have been Burch’s reaction if he was spared imprisonment and instead, had to do what? Community service? Work in Jen’s bakery? Would he think he had gotten off easy or truly be repen-



tant for a crime he didn't intend to commit? Hopefully, it would be the latter, but we do know that prisons, with their repressive and violent conditions, usually only serve to diminish the humanity of those caught in the spider web.

Prison reform is possible based on some of the models in countries such as Denmark, but crime can only disappear when we have a fully cooperative society in place of the current class-structured one.

The memory of Jen's work and commitment continues on. Agency, an anarchist public education organization, established the Jen Angel Anarchist Media Grants. Launched in 2023, as a collaboration with the Institute for Anarchist Studies, the grants support media projects that advance awareness and understanding of anarchist principles and practices and make them accessible to a broad audience. Her bakery continues to be an Oakland community fixture, as well.

More information about Agency and application for media grants is at **anarchistagency.com**.

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