



FIGHTING CRIME BY FIGHTING FOR THE CRIMINAL

BY DAWN HARTH 

FREELANCE WRITER

There is no shortage of lawyer stereotypes. We've heard them all, seen them embodied in TV and movie roles, and have most likely been the subject of a few. But for every wayward character – fictional or not – who unwittingly sets about furthering the typecasting, there are thousands who not only deftly defy it but blaze impressive trails of their own – making us all look good by way of association. One such example: 1991 OCU Law graduate and Distinguished Alumni Award recipient, Christina Melton Crain.

Crain, a Texas native, returned to her home state to practice after graduating from OCU Law and immediately set into motion a career that continues to be defined by noteworthy milestones, unique departures from the norm, and just plain interesting sidenotes.

To name a few: she was the first woman to serve as Chair of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice and served as President of the Dallas Bar Association, the Dallas Association of Young Lawyers, and the Dallas Women Lawyers Association. She received a personal commendation from President George W. Bush for her service and contribution to safeguarding communities through her advocacy work. She is one of a small percentage of the population who can say they have a prison unit as a namesake. (The Christina Melton Crain unit, located in Gatesville, Texas, is Texas De-

partment of Criminal Justice's largest female prison.) She's a tireless champion of rehab and treatment programs for female offenders and mentoring programs for kids. Oh, and she's the lead singer of Dallas-based rock band, The Catdaddies – lending her classically trained voice to area events both public and private where she and her all-male bandmates rouse crowds to “boogie to the psychedelic sounds of the 60s and 70s.”

In the traditional sense of lawyer, Crain is an ardent defender of children who have been victims of medical malpractice or suffered injuries or abuse. But in recent years, the majority of her hours have transformed from those of billable attorney to those of philanthropic humanitarian – helping repeat offenders break the cycles of behavior that keep them chained

to the criminal justice system; thereby creating safer, more productive communities for everyone. In what was yet another break from the traditional career trajectory in 2010, Crain founded Unlocking Doors® — a nonprofit reentry program for individuals with criminal backgrounds who wish to successfully reintegrate into free society.

Her passion for making real and lasting change for both criminal offenders and the communities which carry much of the resulting financial and societal burden was inspired by her time on the Texas Board of Criminal Justice. “That’s when I had that ‘Aha!’ moment,” Crain says; “I had never really seen, at the

level that I was able to see, the criminal justice arena before.” She began to witness the generational effects of incarceration playing out in front of her. “So much of criminal justice is about a family affair. If that is all kids have ever known... they’re just going to follow suit.” Crain began to realize that instead of just telling someone they should know better, there should be a way to show them how to do better.

Unlocking Doors® became that way.

She knew there had to be a better alternative than sending 77% of offenders back to prison within five years simply because they were not equipped with the tools necessary to successfully reenter society. That’s



Top left 2017 Power Women of Criminal Justice in Dallas Left to Right: Then-Dallas County District Attorney Faith Johnson; Dallas County Public Defender Lynn Richardson; Christina; Then-Dallas County Sheriff Lupe Valdez; and Then-Dallas Police Chief Renee’ Hall. **Top right** Christina singing the National Anthem at the annual Unlocking Doors Texas Reentry Symposium. **Middle row** middle to right: Christina with an Unlocking Doors client, Christina being interviewed on WFAA’s Good Morning Texas by Jane McGary about Unlocking Doors. **Bottom** Ribbon cutting - Opening of new Unlocking Doors Headquarters in Dallas.

why, unlike most traditional parole or probation programs, Unlocking Doors® is completely voluntary and focuses its efforts on those who ask for help and are committed to doing the work it takes to make lasting change. The program strives to reduce the risk of reoffending by providing a thorough assessment of the individual's needs and behaviors. "We want to look into their psyche to figure out why they've behaved the way they have," explains Crain. "It's kind of like going to the doctor. We do a full workup and then we build a plan for you. It's a holistic overview of what we think you need to succeed. So it's not just getting you a job. If we get you a job, we know you still have to have a place to lay your head at night so you can get up and go to work. And you still have to have a way to get there, so we're going to make sure transportation is taken care of. If you have a mental health issue, we're go to make sure that's taken care of, too. It goes on and on."

As individuals focus on improving their behaviors and habits, the program simultaneously works on their behalf through a "brokered" Community Network of more than 200 statewide agencies and organizations who are committed to providing the clients of Unlocking Doors® with the services and resources that will significantly improve their chances for successful reentry.

"I'm pleased to say that there are a lot more people, especially employers, who are willing to be 'background friendly,'" says Crain; "It helps if we open our arms and give opportunities to these people. If we can keep them out of prison and we are able to make them successful citizens, it's better for society overall. With-

Christina

MELTON CRAIN

OCU Law Class of 2010

First woman to serve as Chair of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice

Served as President of:

The Dallas Bar Association	The Dallas Association of Young Lawyers	The Dallas Women Lawyers Association
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Recipient of President George W. Bush's personal commendation for service and contribution to safeguarding communities through her advocacy work

Namesake of the Christina Melton Crain Unit

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Lead singer of Dallas-based rock band, *The Catdaddies*

out this guidance, many of them will reoffend, costing taxpayer dollars, increasing the crime rate, and destroying the chances for a healthy and productive society."

Every year, Crain and her team assist more than 700 male and female offenders of nearly every ethnicity, age, race, socioeconomic status, and criminal history, consistently maintaining a 92% success rate. According to Unlocking Doors® literature, success is witnessed when a client finds sustainable employment, housing, medical/mental health treatment and transportation; makes all court-ordered and Unlocking Doors®-generated appointments; and does not have further entanglement with the law.

The 30 years since finishing law school have been a journey of discovery for Crain - something to which every law student should try and remain receptive, she says. "My advice would be, just always keep your eyes open. Even if you decide you know what you want to do and you go out and get your first job, always be looking for what the universe is saying to you. In your

career or through volunteer work... when you really invest in what you believe in, you can come up with something that is going to make a difference."

Unlocking Doors® is making the kind of difference that will leave its mark not only on the individuals served today but on generations yet to come. For Crain, the elevator pitch comes down to this: "We're in the business of human restoration." And frankly, for the 100% of us who've ever had to humbly ask for any kind of second chance somewhere along the way, it's good to know there are people out there who make it their mission to find ways to grant them. 🙏