

Witness

an online magazine



Prison Arts

A Path to Transformation

Photographs by Peter Merts
Text by Larry Brewster & Peter Merts

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Wayne's life as he knew it ended when he took another's. At the time of his arrest for murder, he was a successful businessman and the father of two small children. His fall from the world's mainstream to the cold, drab depths of prison life was abrupt. His former middle-class lifestyle had not prepared him to cope with the hard-edged realities of incarceration.

After several years at San Quentin, Wayne sought diversions, "doing anything other than staring out the cell window hoping to catch a glimpse of passing seagulls." Initially he found relief in "reading books of all sorts, including the Bible," but became frustrated because "there was no way of sharing what I was learning with the outside world." Then he became inspired by the drawings of an inmate two cells down. The only chance he had to see those drawings was in passing as he was escorted to the showers or to the exercise yard. Eventually picking up a few pointers from that other prisoner, Wayne began drawing with colored pencils. His tutor would pass him repurposed envelopes containing illustrations of various techniques and eventually Wayne obtained a watercolor set.

Pleased with the results of his early studies and determined to learn, Wayne painted for four hours a day—even after gaining yard privileges. To obtain supplies he had to sell his work, which he "hated doing" because his drawings meant more to him than "a few packs of smokes." Looking back, Wayne feels the struggle was worthwhile, because his art provided a sense of pride and accomplishment like nothing else ever had.



A gun tower at Solano State Prison. (above)
Interior of North Block housing unit, at San Quentin State Prison. (below)





The instructor sets up a drawing exercise, in the gym at Donovan State Prison.

Although he was motivated to seek instruction and pay for art supplies on his own, not until Wayne entered the California Arts-in-Corrections program did his artistic talents flourish and his work gain recognition outside of prison. He was honored in a statewide art competition sponsored by the California Arts Council, and his work was displayed in the state capitol building.

Thousands of inmate artists like Wayne are active in prison arts programs throughout the country. Theirs are the stories of incarcerated and returned citizen artists who, through their writing, drawing, painting, music,



Painting class in the gym, at Donovan State Prison.



The choral music class rehearses in a small chapel, at California Correctional Center.

theater, or any number of other artistic, creative pursuits—often find their unknown selves and come to understand and take responsibility for their past and future behavior. In the process, they find fellowship with other artists—regardless of race, ethnicity, gang affiliation, or crime—in what is an otherwise cold, dangerous, overcrowded, and isolating environment.

In the past four decades, prison fine art programs in the U.S. have been ascendant, with millions of dollars invested in hundreds of programs. Inmates have responded with enthusiasm to the chance to express themselves through visual art, writing, music and theater. Some enroll to pass the

The dance instructor exhorts a student, at Central California Women's Facility.





A vocal improvisation workshop, in the Protestant chapel at San Quentin State Prison.

time, others to learn a new hobby. Still others have turned to the easel, the written word, music, or the kiln with visions of success in the commercial art world. Nearly everyone discovers an identity other than their prison number, experiences greater confidence, self-awareness, and intellectual agility and a heightened motivation to pursue additional educational and vocational programs.

Prior to the birth of Arts-in-Corrections and similar fine arts programs around the country, "arts in prison" usually implied no more than a commercial art instructor occasionally visiting a prison and bringing paint and blank canvases, or craft materials. Inmates who were interested in creative expression beyond hobby craft had to find ways to ferret out additional supplies and work alone in their cells, often long into the night.

"In the past, a lot of arts programs were masked by an unfocused veil," said Bill Cleveland, former Director of the California Arts-in-Corrections

program. "There was no clarity as to how or why they were there. Now, we are focused on individual disciplines." Cleveland went on to say, "Our role as providers of arts programs in California prisons has been to meld that inevitable impulse to create, with the fine arts model of quality, inspiration and discipline." He added that the goal was to improve the prison experience by providing participants an opportunity to "affect their own environment and begin changing their attitudes about themselves and others. Studies of domestic and international prison arts programs, including a series of qualitative and quantitative evaluations of Arts-in-Corrections, consistently show that the personal struggle for mastery and completion in the artistic process is a small but important down payment in the process towards a new and solid sense of respect for oneself and one's fellows."

Research further shows that art enables us to express our inner selves and to communicate feelings and ideas. R.C. Sautter (1994) reports, for example, that "engaging in art can be cathartic and can lead to empathy with other people and the world we inhabit." The fine arts programs around



An actor awaits his cue during rehearsal of Shakespeare's Macbeth at Solano State Prison.



The instructor and a student dance during a drumming class, at Salinas Valley State Prison.

the nation have shown that art teaches prisoners how to work with focused discipline. It is through hard work that we learn the value and satisfaction of completing projects. The creative process often has the added satisfaction of having something to show for the effort—a poem, essay, novel, drawing, song, or performance (Brewster 2011, 2014).

There is evidence that prisoners can benefit in a number of other ways when exposed to the arts. For example, arts education can help those struggling with issues of self-worth, confidence, and empowerment. In Norway for example, Langelid, et al (2009) concluded that prison arts education contributes to inmates' self-development by improving motivation



The instructor leading his students during hip-hop dance class, in the gym at Ironwood State Prison.



Dance students rehearse in a visiting room at Central California Women's Facility.



Students rehearse for a dance/theater piece, at San Quentin State Prison.

and social life skills. Further, interdisciplinary research suggests a strong linkage between arts education and practice, and the development of the right brain—which in turn leads to higher-order thinking skills and greater emotional self-regulation. For example, Stevens (2000), Sautter (1994) and Feder & Feder (1981) found compelling evidence that a well-developed right brain correlates with focused attention, creativity, intellectual flexibility, patience, self-discipline, and the ability to work with others.

Olivia Gude, in her 2009 Lowenfeld Lecture, affirmed the importance of art training and engagement in imbuing inmates with a sense of purpose, raised consciousness, and the belief that they can enact positive change in their lives. Another principal benefit of prison arts programs is to serve as a gateway to further learning by establishing a work ethic and by increasing self-discipline and confidence (Brewster 2011, 2014; Cohn 2009; Silber 2005). The arts also are known to encourage a state of readiness to learn, by developing basic communication and other essential skills (Hughes 2005; Anderson and Overy 2010). Studies show that this is particularly true for those alienated from the academic educational system—perhaps because arts curricula, and by association its instructors, are perceived as less threatening and more engaging than those of traditional academic subjects. Arts programs offer an opportunity for inmates to form positive relationships with their artist-instructors based on mutual respect as artists, rather than on hierarchical authority (Dean and Field 2003). Consequently, inmates with arts program experience are more likely to enroll in academic and vocational classes.

Blacker, et al (2008) report one of the most encouraging findings that suggests the artistic process provides a safe and acceptable way to express, release, and deal with potentially destructive feelings such as anger and aggression. Perhaps it is for this reason that prison arts programs positively impact prisoner behavior. A study of inmates participating in arts programming in England showed, for example, a twenty-nine percent reduction in disciplinary incidents compared to their prior records. Staff reported improvements in prisoners' attitudes toward work, including an increased ability to occupy themselves in their cells. Similar reductions in inmate disciplinary reports were found in a 1983 cost-benefit study of California's Arts-in-Corrections program (Brewster).



Printmaking student carving linoleum at San Quentin State Prison.

Multiple domestic and international studies show that the power of prison arts programs is their ability to profoundly change how inmates experience the artistic process and their prison lives by providing equipment, supplies, and high quality, formal, individualized art instruction.

The History of California's Arts-in-Corrections Program

California was the first state to administer a system-wide professional art program. Arts-in-Corrections was the largest institutionally based arts program in the country. The program was supported by state dollars from the budgets of the California Department of Corrections (and Rehabilitation was appended to the name in 2003) and the California Arts Council; and by foundation grants administered through the William James Association, a nonprofit based in Santa Cruz, California. The program founders, Eloise and Page Smith, envisioned that only working professional artists would administer and teach in the program. They believed inmate-artists would benefit both from the expertise of working artists and as examples of achievement. Simply put, the Smiths thought it essential that inmate art students be exposed to professional artists as models of commitment, hard work, self-discipline, and independence.

Eloise, herself an artist, imagined the prison art class as a place where possibility, choice, and skill are rewards for those who accept personal responsibility for their own artistic success or failure. Arts-in-Corrections inmates had to commit to a work personified by the persistence and quality of the artists who came to share their skills. Through their own hard work and with guidance from their instructors, inmates learned—and the more they learned, the greater their investment in the triumph or failure of their efforts. For many inmates this was a new experience. For some, the experience of creativity opened a door to the development of a vastly improved self-worth.

The idea behind Arts-in-Corrections was conceived in 1975 when Verne McKee, an inmate at the California Medical Facility (CMF)—a state prison in Vacaville, California—had a chance meeting with Eloise Smith, who at the time was director of the newly formed California Arts Council. She



Prisoner shows his painting.



Students stretch before taking up their instruments, during mariachi band class at Avenal State Prison.



An instructor and two students, during mariachi band class at Avenal State Prison.

was at the prison to judge an inmate art show, and McKee asked if she could help get professional artists to come and teach inmates inside the prison. That conversation set in motion events which led first to a pilot program at CMF, funded by a small grant and administered by the William James Association. This was followed by projects at six facilities, funded by the Department of Corrections, leading to a state-wide program which earned national acclaim for artistic achievement and for remarkable improvement of inmate behavior. The experiment offered Eloise the opportunity to test her hypothesis that an inmate



A guitar student watches his instructor at North Kern State Prison.



The hand of a music student at CCI Tehachapi.

could raise his or her self-esteem, and thus improve behavior by replacing their curtailed corporal freedom with an inner freedom gained through the discipline and rewards of art. She proposed a curriculum in the visual, literary and performing arts which would “provide an opportunity where a [person] can gain the satisfaction of creation rather than destruction.”

The three-year pilot program at CMF was called the Prison Arts Program (1977-1980). It was renamed to Arts-in-Corrections at the time it received state funding and expanded to other prisons. AIC enjoyed a



Native American flute students during practice,
at Mule Creek State Prison.



A theatrical student at Donovan State Prison.

successful run from 1980 to 2010, when the California State Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) eliminated the program during the state budget crisis resulting from the Great Recession. Then for several years the program was largely dormant; it persisted only at a few prisons such as San Quentin, in very limited fashion, thanks to heroic but scattered fundraising efforts and a handful of artist-instructors who continued to teach without pay, rather than abandon their students. In recent years, California Arts-in-Corrections has been resurrected; as of 2019, all 36 of the state's adult correctional facilities—33 for men and three for women—have AIC classes with an annual budget of eight million dollars.

The primary mission of Arts-in-Corrections was to provide inmates with diverse opportunities to discover and develop their artistic skills



A theatrical student applies makeup prior to class, at CCI Tehachapi.

and personal vision through instructional workshops in the arts taught by professional artists who exemplified the fine arts model of quality, discipline and inspiration. Through the artistic process, with its focus on creative problem solving and mastery of technique, it was expected that inmates would develop positive self-images and increase their self-esteem. Furthermore, inmates were encouraged to communicate through their art with the outside community by participating in community-service projects and victim's rights workshops. The program also offered inmates meaningful work incentive positions. (Brewster 1983)

Eloise designed the program to include "artist-facilitator" positions at each of the prisons. These unique civil-service jobs were held by carefully vetted practicing artists who became responsible for recruiting, supervising,



An improv exercise during theater class at High Desert State Prison.



A mariachi band instructor demonstrates technique, at Avenal State Prison.

and evaluating artist-instructors, enrolling and monitoring inmate-artists, scheduling classes, purchasing art supplies, and navigating the prison bureaucracy with its complex and ever-changing rules, regulations, personnel, and politics.

In addition to artist-facilitators, Eloise's unique vision required from the outset that the arts program operate separately from other educational programs offered in the state prisons—and that only trained, active, and successful artists should hold the positions of artist-facilitator and classroom instructor. She believed inmates would benefit from the professional artists' excitement about and dedication to their own work, and would learn through them that the artistic process demands focused attention, hard work, and self-discipline.

Steve Emrick, former artist-facilitator and recipient of the Dalai Lama “Unsung Heroes of Compassion” award for this work, once described his aspiration to “create an environment where men can paint, write, or play in

a band while free of the unrelenting pressures of daily prison life. I enjoy seeing individuals gaining a sense of self and learning to identify themselves as something other than prisoners. The arts become a lifeline that they can grab onto and pull themselves up out of the abyss.”

To the extent possible, AIC classes were run as if the setting were an art school, not a prison. Inmates in poetry class, for example, published anthologies and chapbooks. Musicians and actors put on productions for audiences at the institution. Painters submitted their works for consideration in juried contests and exhibitions. During AIC's forty years, several thousand inmates received tens of thousands of hours of art instruction from hundreds of artist-instructors. Other benefits were derived from institutional beautification and community service art projects, including murals at many state prisons and annual fundraisers in support of children with incarcerated parents.



A theater class instructor helps a student with his makeup at Norco State Prison..



A performance of Shakespeare's "The Tempest" in a chapel at Folsom State Prison.



A performance of Shakespeare's "The Tempest" at Folsom State Prison.

Arts-in-Corrections Today

In its current incarnation, Arts-In-Corrections is structured as a partnership between the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), which funds the program, and the California Arts Council (CAC), which administers it. The CAC in turn contracts with arts organizations throughout the state, which hire and supervise teaching artists. The artist-facilitator position was not resurrected.

In addition to the William James Association, provider organizations now include local arts institutions such as the Fresno Arts Council and the Arts Council of Kern, as well as non-profit arts organizations such as The Actors' Gang, Marin Shakespeare Company, and the Alliance for California Traditional Arts. The Prison Arts Collective, based at California State University—San Diego, is the first university-based AIC program; it offers multidisciplinary classes led by a collaborative teaching team comprised of staff, interns, and incarcerated peer leaders, with a university-model curriculum including art history, art making, and reflection.

The population of California state prisons is quite diverse, and the AIC program strives to provide varied and culture-specific art forms. In recent years inmates have studied Aztec dance, hip-hop dance, modern dance, Native American flute, mariachi band, Afro-Caribbean drumming, choir, abstract painting, print making, origami, commedia dell'arte theater, play writing, poetry, spoken word, and storytelling.

Amongst the inmate population, demand for AIC classes is high. Many classes have waiting lists, which recently became longer after CDCR added AIC classes to the list of those that qualify, upon completion, for incremental sentence reduction. Students must be infraction-free for a year to qualify for art classes, and once enrolled they must actively participate and avoid disruptive behaviors.

Prior to starting any course, the teaching artist must work with the prison security staff to arrive at a list of approved materials and tools. Solvents, some adhesives, and metal tools are prohibited in many California prisons; where allowed they are carefully inventoried before and after each class. Some teachers are fortunate enough to have onsite lockers for storing materials between classes—otherwise, every paintbrush, eraser, pencil,



Painting students in the Catholic chapel at Sierra Conservation Center.



An instructor guides a student during an audio journalism class at Solano State Prison.

dance skirt, and drumstick must be carried in and out by the instructor—and counted in and out by prison custody staff. Theater classes make do with minimal costuming and props; facemasks are usually disallowed, and Shakespearean swords are replaced with wooden yardsticks. Painters construct frames for their works out of dowel rods, which they first create from tightly rolled-and-glued newspaper.

Space for programming is scarce in California prisons; only 2 of the 36 have a dedicated room for Arts-In-Corrections—in the rest, teachers and students make do with gyms, visiting rooms, chow halls, and chapels. Both male and female teaching artists work in both the male and female prisons. Prison staff exerts a varying degree of control over the content of artwork, and some teaching artists who felt uncomfortable with a student's proposed subject matter have engaged the student in discussions about intention, perception, and respect for the feelings of others.

A Few of the Many Stories Told

Prisoners will tell you that some are “doing time,” while others allow “time to do them.” Those in the latter camp are unable to transcend their environment, leading to negative attitudes and self-destructive behavior. Regardless of how time is experienced, prison is often a lonely place. Quotidian life is a constant reminder of the loss of privacy and control, over even the most mundane aspects of existence. Inmates cohabit with bunkmates they may not have chosen, in small spaces that are often deteriorating; they have no agency over when or what they will eat, or what they might confront as they move about their constricted world. They can't even choose when to go to bed, or to rise. Prison life is monotonous and replete with tedious routines, perpetual noise, pungent smells, and sudden danger.

Fortunately, we hear many positive stories, and witness extraordinary creativity and fellowship, from the men and women prisoners who participate in arts programs. Here are a few examples:

We begin with a heartfelt letter written by a mother whose son committed murder just before the start of his senior year at high school, as part of a gang initiation. She read this testimony before the 2013 California



An art student with a textbook at Calipatria State Prison.

Joint Committee on the Arts, emphasizing the transformative powers of Arts-In-Corrections in her son's life: “The bad path [he] had suddenly chosen in his life was fortified by the environment he found inside the walls. The gang mentality was there to greet him and foster further bad choices on his part. I knew this was not what was at the core of my son, but it was the only choice that a frightened, impressionable 18 year-old with no street smarts thought he could make if he wanted to survive. This is too often the scenario that vulnerable, young inmates like him, face.”

She continues, “So what do they do to survive? It's true that there are the mandated education and self-help programs, but that's not always the right fit for everyone.” She wrote about the importance to her son of the music and writing programs and of the compassionate persistence of



A creative writing student talks about his work at Pelican Bay State Prison.



Drawing students work on a class assignment at High Desert State Prison.

those teaching artists, and her belief that those programs and instructors were responsible for saving her son's life. He came to understand through his writing and music that his prior belief in his own invincibility was an empty posture. "Music" she said, "ignited a talent for classical guitar and song writing that he never knew he had. Creative writing has been an enormous therapeutic tool allowing him to connect to personal issues that he otherwise would not be willing to address".

Leon is another inmate who discovered a new and rewarding path through writing. His story is similar to those of so many others who have acknowledged that prison provided them with the opportunity, for the first time, to take stock of their lives—to question their self-destructive behavior, and to seek a different path. A refrain heard over and over was that the art program helped to light a spark of self-worth and provided an identity beyond a prison number—an identity as an artist.

Leon reflected on how, from an early age, he expected to end up in prison—just like his father, two uncles, and so many black brothers from his



A creative writing student reads his work to the class at Kern Valley State Prison.

south Los Angeles 'hood. He not only expected to go to prison, but also looked forward to it. He romanticized prison as a place where real men earned their badges of courage and respect. His role models served time, and he expected to do the same. And he did; Leon spent 20 years behind bars. Fortunately, he was one of those who, while incarcerated, decided he wanted a better life for himself and his seven children. He wanted to teach them that there is another and better life than the ones that he, his father, and his uncles had chosen.

Over time, Leon started reading and taking college courses, then joined a twelve-step program and a peer-counseling group. His changed attitude and determination to better himself led him to spend more time alone, avoiding trouble as much as possible. Eventually, Leon found his way into Arts-in-Corrections and through a variety of classes discovered his talents as a songwriter, playwright, actor, and painter.

While in the program, Leon co-wrote and acted in two plays, composed several rap songs, and discovered a talent for drawing and painting. Since his release nearly eight years ago, Leon has completed a novel and co-written and



Students rehearse for a dance/theater piece, at San Quentin State Prison.

acted in a play; and he continues to write songs and paint while supporting his wife and children with a full-time job. He talked about the satisfaction he receives from completing projects, and the importance of teaching his children that they too can do anything they set their minds to, as long as they are willing to work hard and finish what they start.

In Leon's words, "I've worked hard to get better at my writing and drawing. I decided a few years ago to set myself a writing schedule. My goal is to write three pages a day. Some days I might be on a roll and complete ten pages, and other days maybe only one page gets written. But at least that is one more page than I had the day before. That's how I managed to write my first novel, and it feels good to have finished that project. I don't know if it is any good, but a few of my friends have read it and liked it. My satisfaction comes in knowing that I wrote a book. My children call me a writer and actor. They saw me in a play I co-wrote, and after the show my little girl said, "Daddy, you're an actor!" It makes me feel good as a person and father, and I'm forever grateful to the Arts-in-Corrections program for helping me to develop my talents and, more importantly, for teaching me how to work."

Another man, Jackson, speaks of his initial struggle to gain a foothold in the prison pecking order. Employing life-skills he had learned on the streets he fell deeper and deeper into the lifestyle and "survival of the baddest" mentality of some hardcore prisoners. A drug teetotaler before his incarceration, Jackson learned to mainline methamphetamine and heroin from his fellow prisoners. He learned the rules of prison gangs, and to make a game of harassing prison "punks and sissies". At some point, Jackson began to realize that he was fitting in too well. "I was getting into a subculture I didn't want to be in," Jackson said, while rolling up his sleeves to show the indelible marks that subculture left on his body—dark, angry, crudely-made tattoos covering his biceps. He added, "I was sitting back doing nothing [positive], while looking at doing a lot of time. I was going downhill fast—depressed and lost in a world that was alien to me."

Jackson is now out of prison and employed. He attributes his unlikely survival inside the walls, and his eventual success on the outside, to the Arts-in-Corrections program. In Jackson's words, "Prison arts were a salvation for me." Wanting to escape the dark side of prison life, he asked fellow inmates



The creative writing classes at San Quentin State Prison & California City Correctional Facility.





Creating a mandala with flower petals at California Institution for Women.

and prison officials for help—and they directed him to Arts-in-Corrections. The program, he found, was one of the few places that fit his personality and his desire to better himself. Today, Jackson considers himself an artist, while he makes his living as support staff for a medium-sized company. He became adept in the lost wax technique of metal sculpture, and now creates brass sculptures and sells them to augment his income. “I’m not religious at all but getting involved with Arts-in-Corrections was akin to becoming a born-again Christian. I did good time when I joined the program, became a model prisoner, and continue my art now that I’m a free man. Doing my

time in prison became easier and more meaningful as I studied sculpting and mastered my art. I am forever grateful.”

Cole was sentenced to prison for second-degree murder in his eighteenth year. During his twelfth year of incarceration—having recently become a Buddhist Postulant Priest—Cole signed up for Arts-in-Corrections in search of greater opportunities to better himself. He wrote in a letter, “If I wanted something more in my life, even while in prison, I had to get off my ass and take a risk. I would like to say I knew what I was doing and that I wasn’t scared, but that would be a lie.” Through the program he learned he could paint quite well; he also became a gifted writer. Cole is now nearing forty and hopes one day to work with at-risk youth.



A student paints a mandala, during art class at California Institution for Women.

Hip-hop dance class, in the gym at Ironwood State Prison.



In that same letter, Cole wrote about how “A 43 year old biker from San Diego serving a life sentence gave me my first set of acrylic paints. AIC held annual art auctions to benefit local charities. We chose to support the Antelope Valley Children’s Center. Every painting we produced we gave away to the auctions. I never thought that painting could lead toward self-awareness, but the practice of spending hundreds of hours on a painting only to give it away to benefit others really bit deep into my closely held selfishness. Through the arts program, I began to interface with members of the public. The artists who came in to teach various classes brought

with them their own brand of outreach, and these classes became like a therapy for me. One teacher used painting and drawing to teach patience and perseverance. The blank white canvas can intimidate even the most confident artist, and the problems that arise in every painting must be solved with patience and an emotional learning component that only can be accessed through the creative experience. Later, I discovered that I had a knack for teaching, and in the budgetary deserts of the last decade [2003-2013], I have consistently taught beginning and intermediate painting to other prisoners.”

Children are collateral victims of a parent’s crime. The impact of incarceration on families is devastating and qualifies as a national crisis. Families, especially children, must cope with feelings of shame and social stigma. Studies show that families are important to rehabilitation, and to the achievement of major social goals—including reduction of recidivism and delinquency. Statistics indicate that 70 per cent of children of incarcerated parents are likely to go to prison as adults. We also know that there is a greater chance of preventing children from following in their parents’ footsteps if inmates remain involved with, and attached to, their children. Communication between inmates and their families provides the most concrete and visible strategy to manage separation and maintain family connections.

Research shows that prison arts programs can play a vital role in helping prisoners to remain connected in a meaningful way to their children. Robert and his oldest son Tony described how the art classes served to open channels of communication between them and became a source of pride. Robert described his family as “tight”, and their communication remained opened during his incarceration. His two boys were very young at the time of his conviction and were raised by his sister while he was incarcerated. In prison, Robert learned to make guitars and play them; he also studied painting and songwriting. Harry Belafonte admired one of his guitars while visiting the prison and asked if he could buy it as a birthday gift for Carlos Santana. The warden gave permission, and Robert’s hand-made prison guitar passed into the hands of a great musician.

Robert embraced the arts program in part because “it gave me and my boys something to talk about in the visiting room...a topic of conversation other than the idle or awkward chit-chat you so often hear among families during visitation. We’d draw pictures on napkins and talk about fine art and my guitars and music. Because I was enrolled in other courses, it wasn’t just the guitars that we talked about. There was always something of interest that helped us to communicate and that made my boys proud of me... they could talk with their friends about how their dad made guitars and painted pictures...they showed their friends the guitars I made for them, and eventually they learned to play as well. They tell me it helped erase the stigma of having their father in prison.”



One guitar student helps another with finger placement, during class at High Desert State Prison.



Two students embrace during a theater class at Folsom Women’s Facility.



A student stops to inspect his painting in window light at Pleasant Valley State Prison.

Robert's boys are now young adults who learned to play on their father's first handmade guitar. Robert's son Tony said, "I fell in love with playing the guitar through my dad. Before then I didn't have an interest in music. It changed my life and now I'm a musician and artist like my dad. Talking with dad about his art classes and what he was learning made it easier for me while he was in prison. I'm really proud of what my dad accomplished." Robert's two boys are good students and they have clearly identified career goals. At the moment, Tony works with his father building guitars and other string instruments in a growing business.

For many decades in the United States, punishment and imprisonment were favored over rehabilitation and non-carceral alternatives—which is especially tragic for victimless and nonviolent crimes. The American criminal justice system—some say unjust system—holds "almost 2.3 million people in 1,719 state prisons, 109 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,163 jails, and 80 Indian Country jails, not to mention military prisons, immigration detention facilities, and state psychiatric hospitals." Furthermore, our system disproportionately punishes people of color and the poor.

Fortunately, the "tough on crime" mantra is beginning to subside, as the escalating cost of building and operating penal facilities has opened the minds of citizens and lawmakers to sentencing and prison reforms. More of us are learning that non-violent offenders—often with addiction and mental health issues—make up a majority of those incarcerated. Many people, legislators, judges, and the general population are asking if it is really necessary and worth the high cost of imprisoning these people and whether alternatives exist.

Evaluations of prison arts programs consistently show that significant, positive, and persistent life changes happen for the vast majority of men and women who participate. The various fine arts classes offer prisoners the opportunity to "do their time with purpose and focused attention to their art," and to better prepare for productive lives post-incarceration. Prison arts programs in this country and abroad consistently demonstrate the power of the artist in each of us, and remind us that we should not, cannot give up on people—regardless of their past mistakes.



A theater student emotes during class at Ironwood State Prison.



MINORS
ARE TO BE
SUPERVISED
BY AN ADULT
AT ALL TIMES

NO
SMOKING

FOOD
AND
BEVERAGES
PERMITTED

MINORS
ARE TO BE
SUPERVISED
BY ADULTS

VISITORS

VISITANTES

FOPS
FACILITY OPERATIONS PROGRAM SERVICES
NEW LEANING/LEARNING

A dance student practices with joy in a visiting room at Central California Women's Facility.

Dr. Larry Brewster, Ph.D. is Emeritus Professor of Public and Nonprofit Administration, and former Dean of the College of Professional Studies and the School of Education at the University of San Francisco. He regularly consults with public, nonprofit and for-profit organizations, primarily in the areas of program evaluation, public policy and organizational development. He first evaluated the California Arts-in-Corrections program in 1983, with a cost-benefit analysis. In 2014, he completed a quantitative evaluation of pilot prison arts projects in five California prisons. These studies appeared in peer reviewed journal articles and resulted in state funding of the prison arts programs.

Dr. Brewster, earned his doctorate in Political Science at the University of Southern California and has served as Dean at three universities. He has authored several books and articles, including *The Public Agenda: Issues in American Politics*, *A Primer of California Politics*, and, co-authored *Paths of Discovery: Art Practice and Its Impact in California Prisons*.

Peter Merts is a photographer specializing in fine art, portrait, and documentary projects; his work has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, *Newsweek Online*, *the Los Angeles Review of Books*, *La Fotografia Actual*, *The Independent*, and *Geo Saisson*.

For several decades Peter has been documenting the work of *Bread and Roses Presents*, a California-based non-profit that provides free entertainment performances to institutionalized and otherwise disadvantaged audiences.

Peter has been pursuing the prison art project for about 13 years and has now photographed in all 36 California adult state prisons. His prison art photographs have appeared in several films and textbooks and have been exhibited throughout California including in the state capitol building, and at Photoville-Los Angeles. In 2015, he co-published the book *Paths of Discovery: Art Practice and Its Impact in California Prisons*. Peter serves on the advisory board of the Prison Arts Collective, a provider of prison arts programming

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Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of investigative journalism, documentary photography, multimedia, film, and education.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural, and historical impact documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in journalism, photography, video, design, web technology, and education.

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For further information contact:

Vision Project Inc.
www.visionproject.org
info@visionproject.org