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WOMEN IN PRISON: Female inmates tell stories through art

An arts program is helping inmates share the harsh realities of prison in the hope of helping at-risk girls avoid the same fate.

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On a miserable gray day near the edge of the Everglades, past thickets of razor wire, doors guarded 24/7, past the sounds of a woman screaming at the voices in her head, a dozen women sit in a circle in a place they call Wellness.

In this bright room with its under-the-sea mural, these women with terrible stories to tell and hard experiences to share become writers, dancers, performers, poets, artists, singers, playwrights.

Outside of this circle, an oasis that is created for two hours each Saturday, 11 of the women are inmates at the Broward Correctional Institution in Pembroke Pines. Eight are serving life sentences for murder. And in the years before their crimes, many of these perpetrators also were the victims of violence and abuse.

In the past 13 years, dozens of female inmates have shared their stories with Leslie Neal, an associate professor of dance at Florida International University and founder of **ArtSpring**, a nonprofit organization that brings an arts program called Inside Out to women in prison.

On Thursday, some of that painful, creative work goes public at Any One of Us: Words from Prison. A benefit featuring Vagina Monologues creator Eve Ensler and singer-songwriter Amy Carol Webb, the event -- staged by Neal, with original music by Webb, dance pieces, video of prisoners talking about their lives and readings by a cast that includes community leaders and former inmates -- is set for 8 p.m. at Miami's Gusman Center for the Performing Arts.

For Neal, Ensler and the many volunteers who bring writing workshops and the cathartic power of the arts into prisons, passion for the work is based on two ideas: that artistic expression really can be a tool for healing and change, and that women who have been locked away from the world are still human beings with value.

"There's this terrible thing that women do called their crime. Then there's the rest of them, which is full and extensive and powerful and important," Ensler said. "Isn't there something about people transforming themselves and becoming new kinds of people that can benefit society? Wouldn't that be honoring the people that they hurt, rather than just punishing and just holding people forever?"

For Neal, who has made the 100-mile roundtrip from her home in South Miami-Dade County to BCI nearly every Saturday since 1994, sitting with the women in that circle is a deeply rewarding calling -- though it's one that comes with a price.

"I've got a history of abuse and a dysfunctional childhood. It's a fine line that separates me from them. That's what motivates me most. There, but for the grace of God, go I," Neal said. "Sometimes I go home and cry. I sob at 1 a.m. on my deck in the moonlight. I sob when my husband is asleep. It's not for everyone. It's very hard work."

LOCAL PARTNERSHIP

Beginning in February 2006, **ArtSpring** partnered with the Miami-based Girls Advocacy Project to conduct four-month writing workshops called Bridging the Gap -- GAP for short -- at both BCI and the Homestead Correctional Institution. Many of the pieces in the Any One of Us program were written during those workshops, prompted by questions for the inmates from young girls in detention facilities -- girls already struggling to overcome abusive relationships, family problems, early motherhood, addiction and more.

RECURRING PROBLEMS

The stories of women doing hard time in prison and girls in detention are hauntingly similar.

GAP founder Cindy Lederman, administrative judge of the Miami-Dade Circuit Court's juvenile division, said, "What we've learned is that whether they're girls or women, they have the same stories, the same trauma."

The hope is that the inmates' cautionary tales and frank talk about the realities of months, years or a lifetime in prison might help at-risk girls avoid the same fate.

Deidre Hunt, a former Death Row inmate serving a life sentence for murder, reflects on the way many women wind up in prison, and what never getting out really means.

"I know a lot of these girls are here because of men. Because of boys. Their association with them. Because of love. Because you want somebody to love you so much that you're gonna cling to the first person you feel like loves you . . . And beating, and being abused, is not love," Hunt, 38, said.

"If you end up in prison, when your grandmother goes to the hospital, you ain't gonna be able to go see her. Or if your mom dies, you can't go to the funeral. Every single person that gets sick or has a baby or gets married, you won't be able to hug 'em. You won't be able to be there. And you won't be part of anything. The world is going to go on without you."

CHALLENGING INMATES

Maggie Carr, a BCI inmate serving a life sentence, has gone from laughing about "all this fruity stuff" that the **ArtSpring** volunteers have the inmates do to becoming a believer in the healing power of the arts.

"I used to say, 'How can the arts be rehabilitative? How can the arts soothe you?' " said Carr, whose 20-year-old son Lezley was only six when she went to prison.

"It's hope. It's manifested hope in every essence you can think of: in the writing, the dancing and laughing, and even in our idiosyncrasies and personality defects and loving each other and hating each other. It's the only thing in the Department of Corrections that offers you normalcy and hope," she said.

Those things can be in short supply for a young woman serving a long sentence. Valencia Byrd, still as slender as the teenager she was when she entered prison, is one of them.

"[When] I came to prison, I was 17 years old, with a 6-month-old baby and a 40-year sentence. And I wish that everything that was [said] in the Bridging the Gap group, and by people like Leslie and the volunteers that come in, I wish somebody would have said that to me. 'Cause that was me at 17," said Byrd, now 31. "My son is 14, and I've been here since 1994 -- 13 ½ years. I never even gave him a birthday party."

PERFORMER'S CRUSADE

Enslar, a star activist whose V-Day organization is dedicated to ending violence against women and girls, has morphed from performer-playwright to crusaderfundraiser. She began coaching inmate writers in 1998 at New York's Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. The women's writing was featured in the 2003 PBS documentary *What I Want My Words To Do to You* and in the first *Any One of Us: Words from Prison* fundraiser in New York last year. But since a change in the prison's administration, Enslar said, she hasn't been able to go back into Bedford Hills.

She remains a committed advocate for programs like hers, **ArtSpring's** *Inside Out* and *Bridging the Gap* -- and for their expansion.

"It's insane that we can't do writing groups and let women process their feelings and come to terms with their crimes. That we let them just sit there and essentially rot, because there are no programs," Enslar said.

"Then we recycle people: We recycle pain, and we recycle violence, because there's no transformation."

WHAT ABOUT VICTIMS?

Yet victims advocates ask: What's wrong with letting someone convicted of murder rot? That tension between punishment and rehabilitation in a prison system is constant and, like so much of life, political.

"I certainly empathize with victims. They are really important, and it's important we pay attention to their feelings," said Laura Bedard, deputy secretary of the Florida Department of Corrections and a reader at the *Any One of Us* event.

Bedard, who taught criminology courses at Florida State University and served as warden at Lowell Correctional Institution, is now working to expand arts programs in Florida's prisons.

"Inmates need to understand the impact of their crimes on victims and to look at the tremendous consequences. Arts in corrections is not about having fun; it's a process, so inmates will be better equipped to deal with life. Our job is to hold inmates accountable and to provide opportunities for change," she said.

Webb, who has written two new songs (If Only I Could See the Ocean and Any One of Us) for the Gusman event, has performed inside prisons many times, and the just-punish-them attitude ticks her off.

"Being in prison is getting stripped of your selfhood," Webb said. "The world at large doesn't see the series of events and circumstances that led to these consequences. People think, 'Well, if they were convicted, they must have deserved it.' It's a fact that a lot of us got a second chance, got an education. We have no right to be righteous about who we are and why we aren't on the other side of that cage."

Someone who has been on both sides of the bars, Vicki Lopez Lukis, is a performer in Any One of Us. She is a former Lee County commissioner who served 15 months in federal prison on a mail fraud conviction before President Bill Clinton commuted her sentence. She is statewide expansion director for GAP and was chairman of the Florida's Ex-Offender Task Force under former Gov. Jeb Bush.

"Nobody in this work says these are poor, innocent women. But they are paying with their lives. They are human. I can't dismiss them and say they have no more value," she said, adding that the arts give women who "may never see the outside again" a way to cope with that reality.

"The Department of Corrections has been much more punitive than rehabilitative over the past 30 years. But [most] of us come home, and when you release inmates, you should help them have the tools to be better people. This is not about being soft on crime. It's about being smart on crime."

A WAY TO GIVE BACK

For the inmate writers who have taken a life, writing something that could serve as a reminder and help change someone's future is a way to give back, the discovery of a purpose.

Said Valerie Rhodes, serving a life sentence at BCI: "I wanted to be somebody else's lifeline. And if I could give them one or two words or a poem, or something that would help them to pull through whatever they're going through, then my life isn't wasted. I am very proud of that."