
Students Hear Firsthand How Dance Transforms Prisoners

Published: November 16, 2010



With a major in criminology and a minor in dance, Debbie Blas '10 hopes to work with juvenile offenders or at-risk youth to give them an outlet for their emotions. When she heard that an ex-offender was going to speak about a women's dance program that she is facilitating in the prison system, Blas ran across campus so she wouldn't miss it.

"I wanted to catch it because what she is doing is so awesome," said Blas. "I think it's an interesting population to work with because everyone brushes them to the side. I think the perception that they need help is one people need to realize."

Blas is referring to Deborah McEnteggart who was brought to UT for a Nov. 15 lecture in a joint effort by the [Department of Speech, Theatre and Dance](#) within the College of Arts and Letters and the [Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice](#) within the College of Social Sciences, Mathematics and Education.



With her story of going from prison to being a mentor, Deborah McEnteggart told University of Tampa students that just one person can make a difference.

"It's important for our students to see people who are in prison are not that different from us," said [Dr. Susan Brinkley](#), associate professor of criminology and criminal justice. "We've got an 'us' and 'them' mentality, and we're all just 'us.'"

A victim of domestic violence, McEnteggart was incarcerated with a life sentence in 1984 for killing her husband. She served 14 years before receiving clemency from then-Governor Lawton Chiles who passed away just days after signing her release in 1998. This was part of the Battered Women's Clemency Project, an effort that reviewed murder convictions of women who may have suffered from battered women's syndrome at the time they killed their abusers.

During the 14 years she was in prison, McEnteggart was introduced to ArtSpring's Inside Out – Expressive Arts Workshops for Incarcerated Women. The nonprofit organization introduces art through creative drawing, improvisation and writing and then enables women to express it all through movement. McEnteggart said women like herself use the program to express their emotions, reconnecting them with their integrity.

"This program has given me my life back," McEnteggart said. "I believe I wouldn't be standing here if it weren't for this program which gave me the self-worth to fight the good fight."

Following her release, McEnteggart enrolled in an associate's degree program in human services and became a certified facilitator for [ArtSpring](#). She now leads programs in the prison system, and says the mere fact that as an ex-offender she is allowed to return and lead a group of offenders is such an anomaly it speaks to the success of the program.

For Blas, connecting with McEnteggart was a networking opportunity. As a student in Professor [Susan Taylor Lennon](#)'s Dance Pedagogy class, where she is learning how to teach dance to diverse populations, Blas is working with a classmate to create a six-week curriculum for substance abusers. She swapped contact information with McEnteggart who is now teaching Inside Out to a group in prison with substance abuse issues.

"I think it's really eye-opening for our students," said Lennon, who has hosted McEnteggart for three years because of the value she sees in her message. "It's inspiring to see what a difference one person can make. And it shows what you can do with a community-based organization."

[Jamie Pilarczyk](#), Web Writer

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