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Women prisoners describe hard life to teenage girls from Miami-Dade

By Melissa Hoyos
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Coral Gables · What's prison like? What crime did you commit? How do you survive in the lockup?

Teenage girls in Miami-Dade's Juvenile Detention Center asked those questions of adult women serving life sentences at the Broward Correctional Institution in Pembroke Pines.

They couldn't meet face to face but were able to connect through personal essays and volunteers as part of an in-house writing workshop called Bridging the Gap. The 12-week workshop was designed to deter girls from prison by letting them hear from women inmates.

A documentary on these experiences was shared for the first time Monday during a public screening at the University of Miami. The workshop was organized by the Girls Advocacy Project, an intervention program for girls in juvenile detention; ArtSpring Inc., an arts organization for institutionalized girls and women; and the Women's Fund of Miami Dade.

"I think it was a real eye-opener," said Vicki Lopez Lukis, of the Girls Advocacy Project. "These young girls look like them."

The event drew an audience of more than 200 who watched the women discuss prison life with writing coaches and later showcased their experiences to the group of 30 girls via videotape. The girls' faces were silhouetted in the film to protect their identities. A question-and-answer panel followed the film.

"The women are desperate to reach the girls before it is too late," said Leslie Sternlieb, ArtSpring board president. "They don't want the girls to graduate to prison."

Sternlieb volunteered as a writing coach for the program in February, when it was introduced at the Homestead Correctional Institution. She's also taught writing classes at Florida International University.

"For many of them, it was their redemption," she said, referring to the essays.

Women serving time at the Broward Correctional Institution began attending workshop classes in February 2006 and also met with volunteers who assisted them with writing. Almost all of the 12 women, ages 23-60, in the program are serving life sentences, said Lopez Lukis. They include crimes of murder, armed robbery and one security fraud case.

Many women shared stories of sexual and physical abuse prior to entering prison, including one woman who said she was a victim of human trafficking.

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"They really trusted us to go deep into some very personal, traumatic incidences in their past," said Leslie Neal, ArtSpring founder and artistic director.

Neal helped women in the Broward institution with feedback on their essays. She says the writing ranged from painful and deeply emotional to funny and cynical.

Says Neal: "There was a sense of pride and a sense of meaning that they could do something and their lives are not wasted."

Bridging the Gap hopes to publish the essays to use in future workshops.

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