

**QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE CALIFORNIA
ARTS-IN-CORRECTIONS PROGRAM**

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The Meaning of Art in Our Lives

The desire to create, to be creative, is inherent in each of us. Talent is less important than the desire to do something, anything, well. The American painter and charismatic teacher, Robert Henri, believed that Art and Life are tightly intertwined and that if given the opportunity and encouragement the “art spirit” in each of us can be unleashed, freeing us to “become an inventive, searching, daring, self-expressing creature.” He understood that the creative life is a desirable one, and is possible for every person who is willing to work at it. The artistic process is one path to an understanding of self and our world. It isn’t easy, however, and demands of us hard work.

Discipline and perseverance are required to master an art form. How many of us have started a project—writing a story, painting a picture, learning to play a musical instrument, or any other creative activity—never to complete it. Often we are our own worst critics, feeling inadequate to the task. Everyday life challenges can divert our attention and rob us of the time and focus required to complete a project.

Discipline and a will to express ideas are necessary, but not sufficient, in mastering art. Time, imagination, passion, courage, judgment, inner-freedom, and self knowledge are essential to the process. What isn’t necessary is space. Art is made inside prison as it is in garrets, studios, and anywhere artists work alone, or in communities.

Arts-in-Corrections: Eloise Smith’s Vision

Eloise Smith was an artist who understood that each of us possesses the “art spirit” no matter our life experience or place in the world. She knew first-hand the discipline and focused hard work that are required to be a serious artist—the very traits that help us to live with dignity and self-respect. As director of the California Arts Council, in 1975 Eloise learned that “nothing of an artistically serious nature was going on in the prisons, and that...there was a wonderful opportunity to start programming through Arts Council grants.” The then Governor Jerry Brown agreed with her.

Eloise, with the assistance of her husband, the noted historian, Page Smith, conceived of a three-year pilot Prison Arts Program (PAP) to be offered in the State Medical facility in Vacaville. Their vision started with the belief that above all else, art—and therefore prison art programs—is about one thing: “the secret of how to work.” They held to the belief that inmates, perhaps for the first time, can learn, through their art, “to work”—and thereby gain some level of self-respect and human dignity.” Inspired by M.C. Richard’s book, **Centeuring**, they wanted to know if the “inner freedom gained through the discipline and rewards of art” would build an inmate’s self-esteem which, in turn, would lead to improved behavior.

The program design was simple: “a small staff of professional artists, assisted by qualified inmate aides, would give weekly three-hour workshops in poetry, ceramics, painting, drawing, leatherwork, and jewelry making.” The Smiths imbued the program with a purpose that was compelling in its simplicity. They wanted PAP to “provide an opportunity where a man can gain the satisfaction of creation rather than destruction, earn the respect of his fellows, and gain recognition and appreciation from family and outsiders...provide the professional artist as a model of creative self-discipline, and show the making of art as work which demands quality,

commitment, and patience...furnish an alternative to idle time, gambling, dope, and other illegalities.”

At the end of the three years, those associated with the program, including inmates and corrections officials, believed the evidence supported continuing a prison arts program.

Determined to secure permanent funding for an arts in corrections program to be offered in every state prison facility, Eloise enlisted the support of State Senator Henry Mello, a supporter of the arts and an amateur Jazz musician. In 1980, Senator Mello introduced a \$400,000 augmentation to the State budget that was to be used exclusively for arts programs in the prison system.

Governor Brown preserved the funds for this purpose when he signed the final budget. The funds were to support a program manager and six full-time civil service artist/facilitators.

As Eloise sought support and funding, she never wavered in her conviction that the Arts-in-Corrections program should be administered separately from the Department of Corrections’ education programs. Furthermore, AIC was to be a fine arts program, managed and taught by practicing artists. It was not to be an art therapy or arts and crafts program.

Previous Research

Twenty-five years ago this author conducted a cost-benefit study of the Arts-in-Corrections program. The 1983 study was both quantitative and qualitative in design. Program costs and benefits were considered from three perspectives—social, taxpayer, and individual. The social perspective included the use of societal resources and the need to maximize benefits to society but did not consider the distributional effects—who were the winners and losers.

The taxpayer perspective considered how one group, taxpayers, benefitted from the program and what those benefits cost in tax dollars. This measure is one assessment of the likelihood of taxpayer support, even though taxpayers rarely see any direct benefit. For example,

if correctional officers spend less time attending to incidents between inmates, or inmates and officers, the resources in most cases will be redirected to other areas. Taxpayer benefits are therefore most often indirect. The individual perspective considers the benefits that AIC participants—inmate artists—enjoy and any costs that they incur.

The four prison facilities selected for study (CMF, CTF, DVI and San Quentin) represented different levels of institutions in the CDCR system; a full complement of AIC program offerings; three institutions with Artist-Facilitators; and varying degrees of involvement with community art organizations. In 1983, AIC operated in each of the State prison facilities and enjoyed autonomy from other educational programs. The instructors were active artists who related to their students as teachers and as artists.

The study found that AIC was cost-effective in the four facilities. Overall, the program produced \$228,522 in measurable social benefits which included \$105,406 in taxpayer benefits and \$123,116 in individual benefits, compared with a cost to CDC of \$162,790. A review of inmate records showed a seventy-five percent reduction in disciplinary actions among those active in the AIC program.

Subsequent research in 1987 investigated parole outcomes for AIC participants. A randomly selected sample of 177 former inmate-artists found a significantly reduced rate of recidivism for these inmates, compared with the general population of parolees. Even more encouraging, AIC participants fared significantly better the longer they were out of prison. For example, seventy-four percent of AIC participants had clean records their first year out of prison, compared with only forty-nine percent of other parolees. The rate of recidivism increased at a greater rate for non-AIC participants the longer they were out of prison. Within a year two of their release, fifty-eight percent of non-AIC participants were in trouble, compared with only

thirty-one percent of those who had been students in the AIC program. The study reviewed 177 male and female AIC parolees from 1980 to 1986.

Numbers alone do not tell the whole story however. The 1983 study included qualitative data, e.g., surveys administered to inmates and AIC staff, interviews with inmates, staff and correction officers, and classroom observations, which suggested improved self-confidence and discipline among inmate-artists. Many self-reported that for the first time in their lives they completed projects because they had learned to “work at their art” with newfound focus, discipline and perseverance. Consequently, they experienced personal and artistic growth. It was not unusual for inmate-artists to enjoy the respect of other inmates and to assume a leadership role in their prison. Arts-in-Corrections as a worthwhile and constructive leisure time activity helped to reduce the abnormality of institutional life, no small feat.

A 2007 survey of artist-inmates at San Quentin provided additional evidence of the positive outcomes of AIC. The inmate-artists surveyed either strongly agreed or agreed that the program provided a safe environment for artistic exploration and creativity. They also agreed that their attitudes toward self and others had improved through their participation in AIC. One inmate wrote that “through other artists and instructors, I am learning acceptance, tolerance and patience.” Personal growth, stress relief, introspection, and increased maturity were words most often used by respondents in describing the meaning of AIC in their lives. Seventy-two percent reported that the program had helped them to “better communicate with others.”

The three program evaluations of Arts-in-Corrections (1983, 1987 and 2007) lend support for Eloise Smith’s vision. In the words of one AIC student, “for the first time in my life I feel a sense of wholeness and inner peace.”

The Purpose of This Study

The loss of State funding for Arts-in-Corrections in 2003, and subsequent organizational and administrative changes to the program prevented us from conducting a quasi-longitudinal study in the four facilities evaluated in 1983. The only two facilities to offer a version of the Arts-in-Corrections program are San Quentin, under the direction of Steve Emrick, and Jim Carlson's program at New Folsom (California State Prison: Sacramento)—Steve and Jim are long-time AIC artist-facilitators. Their art classes are supported through the William James Association and grants, donations and fund-raising events featuring inmates and their art. Artist-instructors are paid modest stipends when funds permit; otherwise, they volunteer their time and provide art supplies as needed. Vestiges of the AIC program can be found at other facilities as inmate-artists teach one another and spend their very limited dollars on art supplies—a testament to the passion and commitment AIC inmates have for their art.

While it is regrettable that a quasi-longitudinal study of the AIC program is not possible, a qualitative study of AIC is a valuable alternative. In the twenty-three years that AIC existed (twenty-six if we include the pilot Prison Arts Project) thousands of inmates have participated in the program, and many of those have returned to their communities. This qualitative study is based on extensive interviews with former AIC inmates, artist-facilitators and instructors, as well as classroom observations and inmate interviews at San Quentin. It is, however, primarily an evaluation of AIC through the experience of men and women who participated in the program as inmates, and who have returned to society to rebuild their lives.

We were particularly interested in learning what, if any, impact AIC had on the lives of former inmates during and since their incarceration. Although it was never the goal of AIC to prepare inmates to make a living through their art, we nevertheless wanted to know if former

inmates continued to work at their art. Did the program positively influence their self-esteem, work ethic, and identity? Do they self-identify as artists? Looking back, what, if any, changes to the program would they recommend? These were a few of the questions to which we sought answers.

Methodology

Twenty-eight male and two female former inmates were interviewed. The interviews ranged from an hour to, in one case, a little more than three hours. Interviews averaged approximately one-and-a-half hours. The youngest person interviewed was in his mid-thirties and the oldest in his early sixties. The majority were in their late forties and early fifties. The crimes committed included possession and sale of drugs; second-degree murder; vehicular manslaughter (drinking and driving); fraud; robbery; prison escape; and, sex offenses. Time served in one or more of the State prison facilities ranged from five to twenty-three years, with a majority serving between eight and twelve years. All but three have been out of prison at least seven years, and for five of them it has been fifteen or more years.

A majority of the respondents were first incarcerated in their late teens or early twenties. Most were raised in dysfunctional families in poor or working-class neighborhoods. Hispanics, African-Americans, Caucasians, and Japanese were interviewed. Three of the respondents were college educated and somewhat older at the time of their incarceration (late twenties or early thirties). A few did not have a high school diploma at the time of their incarceration, and most did not have any college education. In addition to AIC, most pursued other educational opportunities, including completing two-year and four-year College degree programs. A few were certified in specialized trades, e.g., aircraft mechanics and welding. Only four of the respondents were free of alcohol or drug addiction at the time of their arrest and conviction.

Those interviewed are musicians, writers, sculptors, painters, guitar and violin makers, poets, magicians, ceramicists, and print makers. A majority of them had little or no training in the arts prior to their involvement in the Arts-in-Corrections program. Of those who were trained, almost all of them were musicians. Two self-identified as writers.

We located the respondents with the help of the William James Association, artist-facilitators (now retired), and instructors. Although the men and women interviewed are a diverse group, they are not a representative sample of former AIC inmates. It is possible that we were able to locate this group of men and women with the help of AIC staff and instructors because they are actively pursuing their art. The men and women contacted readily agreed to be interviewed with the promise of anonymity, and for this reason their names have been changed. They were forthcoming about their personal and family backgrounds, the reasons for their incarceration, and the impact of AIC on their lives.

Three artist-instructors, who teach writing, print making, and painting at San Quentin were interviewed. Katya McCulloch has taught print making since 2003, the year State funding for AIC ended. Zoe Mullery has taught writing at San Quentin for a decade, and Kate Decciccio, a painter, has been working for the past year with inmates who have been diagnosed with mental health symptoms. In addition to in-depth interviews with Zoe and Kate outside of San Quentin, I attended their classes and spoke with their students. I interviewed Jack Bowers, a retired artist-facilitator; and, Steve Emrick and his inmate clerks.

FINDINGS

An Overview

The findings of this report are organized by themes that emerged from the interviews with AIC inmates (former and current), artist-instructors, and AIC staff. We begin with a general

observation that the Arts-in-Corrections program served to unleash the Art Spirit in each of the former and current inmate-artists interviewed. They consistently spoke about the importance of the artistic process as the “final salvation of our minds from prison insanity. Our art, in whatever form, tells us, our families, fellow inmates, and society that we, too, are still valuable.” The students’ passion for learning and their focused creativity was evident during my classroom visitations at San Quentin. The AIC inmate-artists interviewed, and those observed in their classrooms, exemplified Robert Henri’s belief that if given the opportunity, encouragement and support each of us can “become an inventive, searching, daring, self-expressing creature.”

They are that and more. I heard over and over again from former and current inmates that the Arts-in-Corrections program taught them how to work at their art with a sense of purpose and focused discipline. The ultimate prize for most of these men and women was earned self-respect, human dignity and self-esteem. Only a very few felt that they possessed these building blocks of human character before their incarceration and participation in the program. Most important, the twenty-eight men and two women interviewed had successfully completed parole and were living productive and reasonably happy lives. Although Eloise never intended the AIC to be a job creation program, nevertheless eight of the thirty interviewed (26%) are earning a part or all of their living through their art. Their professions include magician, guitar, cello and violin makers, musicians, and sculptor. They are successful artists by any measure.

Six of the former inmate-artists interviewed earn a living in a profession related to their art. For example, there are published writers who work as professional editors. Another is a successful chef and businessman whose culinary skills are an art form. “My creativity and discipline are expressed through food that I prepare for others’ enjoyment.” There are musicians and song writers, one of whom is in a Christian band in his Church, and who plays local gigs.

Each of the men and women interviewed, even those who are not pursuing their art, attribute much of their success to the AIC program, as well as to other educational and training programs they may have pursued.

These men and women offer themselves as evidence that rehabilitation is possible if they are given opportunities to realize their humanity. Several of them spoke eloquently about how ironically prison provided them with the opportunity for the first time to take stock of their lives; to ask why they had been so self-destructive and question what they could do to change their lives for the better.

John spoke for many of them when he talked about how he felt when he first arrived at Soledad. He was twenty-eight and had never been in prison. He was sentenced to nine years for rape and he figured he would do at least five years. "My first impression when I arrived at Soledad was that I'd probably never leave there alive. I didn't really know what I should do to survive. Prison is very segregated along racial and ethnic lines. So my first response was, okay, well, I'll hang out with the white guys and see where that leads me. But it just wasn't going to be my thing and I knew it."

He then spoke about wanting to avoid the path taken by so many gangbangers in prison. "It was probably about three months into my time at Soledad that I really started to think about maybe getting out and trying to navigate a path through the system that would keep me from becoming an institutionalized type of individual...I just didn't want to lose anymore of my humanity. And once I started thinking about my life and how I ended up in prison...the first step was really standing in front of the mirror for an hour and staring myself down and searching for some real hard truths. I asked myself what I was about, calling myself a liar, and really just

having a conversation with myself and being very, very honest. And then I decided I was going to try to improve myself.”

John then talked about the many opportunities available at the time he was incarcerated. “Fortunately when I was at Soledad there were a lot of ways to remake your life. There was an eighteen month, cutting-edge computer program sponsored by Silicon Valley companies that resulted in 100% job placement for ex-cons. There were different industries such as textiles and furniture that provided job skills. There were AA and bachelor programs offered through the local community college and San Jose State University. And there was the Arts-in-Corrections program. I took advantage of every program I could get into. My greatest transformation came through Arts-in-Corrections however. I discovered my talent and passion for writing and making things out of leather.”

Jake, a sculptor, is another example of an inmate determined to turn his life around in prison. He was first incarcerated at age nineteen for robbery. Later, he escaped and his sentence was extended. Jake characterizes himself as “a serious felon, but not a violent one.” Jake, like so many I interviewed, spoke about the meaning of art in his life. “When you are doing your art, you don’t care if you are locked down for months if you have materials and your imagination. When you work at your art, you are meditating. You are focused, able to shut out the noise and fear of prison life. You turn off the monkey mind and you no longer think about the streets or fear or girls. You get focused and quiet all the chatter, because you have found another way to be free. That’s what the Arts-in-Corrections and my art gave to me, another way to be free; to reach your calm state of mind.”

Steven was an alcoholic and a successful musician when he hit and killed an older woman as he drove drunk. He was thirty-four when sentenced for vehicular manslaughter and

served five-and-a-half years at Soledad prison. He learned about Arts-in-Corrections soon after arriving at Soledad. Word spread quickly that he was a musician and one of the bands was looking for a guitar player. Steven recalled "I just wanted to get involved in the program [AIC] because that's what I do [music]." Within a relatively short time, especially as measured in prison time (things always move slowly), Steven enrolled in writing and poetry courses, joined a band, and became Jack Bower's clerk.

Steven, who had never been in jail or prison before the fatal accident, talked about what it meant to be a part of Arts-in-Corrections, "I loved it. To me it meant escape from the cold, impersonal, and violent world that is prison. ...you don't know what prison is about unless you go there. You can't find out from TV, you can't read about it in books. It isn't just the place that destroys you; it's knowing that you're down on the lowest rung of society...a number to be forgotten by those on the outside."

Steven talked about the creative forces that are in all of us and that need to find a constructive outlet. "I believe people have a creative energy or gift that, if allowed to be expressed, can be a healthy thing. When that energy is not given an outlet it will manifest itself in other behaviors, which in many cases leads to crime. If you start mixing booze and drugs with it, the end result is never good. Arts-in-Corrections provided a positive outlet for the creativity I witnessed in so many inmates. I would think to myself, what if these people had an outlet for their talent when they were younger. Arts-in-Corrections provided the equipment, materials and instruction that so many of these guys never could afford on their own. The Program touched so many lives then and now."

Jasmine is of Japanese heritage. As a very young girl, she and her family were sent to an internment camp during World War II. She and her husband (now deceased) were well educated

and they both were teachers. Jasmine also was a medical illustrator. She was an older woman in poor health at the time of her incarceration for fraud. She feels that she brought great shame on her family and initially she didn't want to survive prison. She attributes her renewed will to live to the Arts-in-Corrections program, and to Roberto Chavez, the artist-facilitator. He recognized her artistic talent and encouraged her to take classes. She studied drawing and painting. Jasmine talks of Mr. Chavez with reverence and said that he was "instrumental in helping me and other artist-inmates find their creative inner core while we served time." Jasmine believes that "art is part of my spiritual life. It helped me to be focused, quiet, and centered...art in prison helped to shut out the dehumanizing aspects of prison life; to focus on the joy of creating and experiencing my inner spirit, core."

Megan was first sentenced in 1987 for possession of heroin, prostitution and passing bad checks. Her life spiraled out of control after the death of her seventeen year old daughter who died of Hodgkin's disease. Megan holds a Bachelor's degree in English from UC Berkeley and her father was Chair of English at a local university. Until her daughter's death, Megan held well-paid and highly responsible positions in business. Her dream, however, was to write. Unfortunately, her father's critical and disapproving nature intimidated her, preventing her from putting pen to paper. Ironically, it wasn't until her incarceration and involvement in the Arts-in-Corrections program that she found her voice as a writer.

Megan beautifully expresses her longing for the approval and love of her father in an untitled poem she wrote and published as a student in the AIC program.

When I was pre-preschool, I told my father that I loved him.
He replied, "Likewise, I'm sure."
I told my father that if I was rich, I would give him all my money.
He replied, "It is—if I *were* rich, Megan".
Late one night, I crept into my parents' bedroom and whispered,
"Daddy, I snuck in here to kiss you good night."

He replied, "There is no such word as *snuck*,
Remember, Megan, *sneak* and *sneaked*."
I don't tell my father I love him anymore, and likewise I'm sure.
If I were rich, I would undoubtedly give the connection all my money.
And about *snuck*...I still *sneak* it in every once in awhile.

As with the other interviewees, Megan attributes her salvation to Arts-in-Corrections, and especially to Ernest Dillihay, the artist-facilitator for her program. "It was Ernest and the program itself that helped me to grow up; to see that there were better things to do with my life than be a heroin addict, and I haven't been one since my release. I have a lot of years clean and sober. That was the only drug I used and it ruined my life. It gave me three prison terms and seven violations in a very short period of time. ... When I look back on those times, the William James Association and Arts-in-Corrections changed me; changed my focus. They changed what I thought about myself; they changed what I thought I knew I could do. And I did it—I became the writer my father never validated."

David resorted to using drugs and alcohol to escape his depression and feelings of worthlessness. In his mid-twenties, alone and homeless, he found his way into State prison for possession after numerous arrests and convictions. Boredom first led him to Arts-in-Corrections, not a desire to paint. In time, he found himself "really getting into it," and he felt absorbed in something for the first time in his life. David spoke about how, with the help of the artist-facilitator, instructors and other inmate-artists, "I felt changed from the inside because I had found something of value inside myself. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was capable of doing something worthwhile; that I had some talent and was developing skills. I liked having people acknowledge and praise my paintings."

As with so many of the men and women interviewed, the longer I spoke with David the more I appreciated his intelligence, articulation and personal insight. There is little doubt that the

AIC program has helped these men and women discover the joy of creating and the satisfaction that comes with purpose and accomplishment.

Discovering Self: Taking A Different Path

The irony for many was that prison provided them with the opportunity for the first time to take stock of their lives; to ask why they had been so self-destructive and question what they could do to change their lives; to ask why they had been so self-destructive and question what they could do to change their lives for the better. A common refrain heard over and over again was that the art program helped to light a spark of self-worth and provided an identity as an artist and not simply a prison number.

They talked about the fact that through their art and the creative process they connected with parts of themselves they didn't know existed. In practicing their art behind the walls and since their release from prison many of those interviewed expressed how they had come to know their own beautiful spirits. They realized a greater and deeper sense of who they were and what they could become. As their self-confidence grew, so did their self-worth. As they grew stronger in their own inner-spirit, they sought to mentor others.

This is not to say that every one interviewed lacked self-esteem, or an identity as an artist. James was college educated, with a major in music theory. The same can be said for Steven, Greg and Brad. Three of these men were addicted to alcohol and/or drugs which contributed to their eventual incarceration. They were successful musicians and song writers. Steven in particular was about to sign with a major record company when he hit and killed a woman while drinking and driving.

James is a convicted sex offender. He was thirty-six at the time of his imprisonment. He helped to start the guitar building program with Kenny Hill, an artist-instructor, at CTF. He

spoke at length about how difficult it is for most to actually cut the wood to make musical instruments: "Nobody ever cuts the wood and you have to make the cuts. You can fantasize and theorize all you want, but eventually you have to cut the wood if you are going to make anything. Arts-in-Corrections gave me the confidence to actually make the cuts." He also had a desire to learn classical guitar while in prison, which he did. He spoke about his changed self-image as a result of AIC. "The program helped me to think of myself as a musician and artisan... it also helped me to begin feeling normal again. The system just beats you down; the humiliation of being a convict is indescribable. AIC was like a breath of normalcy and it helped me to regain my self-respect." As a direct result of the AIC program, James has built a successful shop where he builds and repairs violins, cellos and guitars. He contributes his time and expertise to the community schools where repairs and donates musical instruments. He is well known and respected in the profession.

Leon is an excellent example of an inmate who chose to take a different path. At an early age he expected to end up in prison like his father, two uncles and so many other Black brothers from his south Los Angeles hood. He not only expected to go to prison, but 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 it was expected that he would do the same. He did. He served over twenty years, during which time he eventually decided he wanted a better life for himself and his seven children. He wanted to teach his children that there is another and better life than the one he and his father and uncles had lived. Over time, Leon started reading, taking college courses, participating in 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 on the inside. Eventually, Leon found his way into Arts-in-Corrections and through the program discovered his talents as a song writer, playwright, and actor.

While in the program Leon co-wrote and acted in two plays, composed several rap songs and discovered his talent for drawing and painting. Since his release nearly four years ago, he has completed a novel, co-wrote and acted in a play and continues to write songs and paint, while working a full time job to support his wife and children. 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 so long as they are willing to work hard and finish what they start.

"Arts-in-Corrections taught me above all else the importance of completing projects. I think one of the problems with young people today is that they don't finish what they start. They may get interested in something but often don't follow through. I was like that for most of my life. But not anymore. I've learned with the help of others, especially the art instructors, how satisfying it is to complete tasks and get better at my art in the process.

For example, 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 and liked it. My satisfaction comes in knowing that I wrote a book. My children call me a write 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 important, for teaching me how to work."

Michael was convicted of selling narcotics. While at Soledad prison he started the Soledad clowns, organizing classes to teach magic to other inmates. While in prison he became involved in the "We Care Program" where he would tell his story to children and teenagers in an effort to "scare them straight." Since his release from Soledad nearly seventeen years ago, he has made a good living as a professional magician and life coach—and he has remained clean and

sober. The Arts-in-Corrections program, along with other educational programs he pursued, helped him to have hope and self-esteem for the first time in his life. “You know, I didn’t even realize the impact of the program until years later.” He now is devoted to helping “wounded children” find their own hope and self-esteem through his magic shows and related work.

Michael reflected on how his own self-awareness and esteem were enhanced through AIC and the college education he received at Soledad. He realized that he was “his own worst enemy in laying blame for his poor decisions on his dysfunctional family and self-loathing.” The educational programs, and the time he spent inside Soledad gave him the opportunity to learn “who I am and what I’m capable of becoming. I no longer defined myself as an angry man who had to turn to drugs and crime to make it in this world. I’m smart, talented and I’m now college educated. I can make a difference in the world through my magic shows and life coaching skills.” Michael emphasized that his transformation was underway before he became involved in the Arts-in-Corrections program. “I was already working on healing my life by changing my attitude and behaviors when I first enrolled in AIC’s poetry and writing classes. However, there is no question in my mind that the writing instructors and artist-facilitator, Jack Bowers, were instrumental in helping me to stay focused and to develop disciplined work habits for the first time in my life.”

Jake discovered he wanted to be a sculptor while in prison, having no idea what he wanted to do with his life before incarceration at nineteen. He was a young, African-American male raised in a poor neighborhood, with no real sense of identity other than as a troubled teen. As he said, “at nineteen you’re so young you haven’t really experienced life and then you find yourself in prison with no hope for a future. Your self-worth falls to the bottom of the bucket. It’s easy to get pulled into gangs, to be a gangbanger.”

He spoke about the meaning of art in his life and how it changed his self-image. "Often times after sculpting a piece of art, I looked at my hands in amazement and I would ask myself, 'I did this? Me?' And it made me want to keep doing my sculpting. I knew I had found what I wanted to be in life. I wanted to be a sculptor." And he is today.

Jake wasn't content to simply say he was a sculptor; he wanted to prove to himself that he really was by perfecting his art. He was his own greatest critic. In his words, "the way I was going to prove to myself that this is my profession was to prove myself wrong. I told myself, if there is something I can't sculpt, I'm finding a new profession. So I started sculpting whatever I saw. And I said, 'if it's meant for me to be a sculptor I should be able to sculpt anything.' And when I found something I couldn't sculpt, I kept working at it until I captured the image. This was the deal I made to myself inside prison."

His identity as a sculptor was reinforced through feedback from his artist-instructors, some of the correction officers, and, perhaps most important, other inmates. "My hardest critics were my best customers; inmates will not give you a break. I would hear 'hey Jake, that don't look like him! That nose is too big! That eye is bigger than the other eye. Your ears don't look right. No, no, start that one over. And it got to where officers were asking for sculptures of their children or wife or parents...it made me feel so proud. And they'd come back, 'hey, Jake, I can't give you this but I wanted to show you where I put your sculpture because that's how much it meant to me and my family.' So it made me realize that my art was something special, and that I should do this, and that's what I do."

Roberto was twenty-three when he was sentenced for second degree murder. He had never been incarcerated before his fatal decision that took a life. He is Hispanic and was raised in East Los Angeles. At the time of his arrest he was an auto mechanic and he occasionally painted

cars. The Arts-in-Corrections program was his first exposure to art. He enrolled in drawing, painting and creative writing courses soon after arriving at Pelican Bay prison. Later, he was transferred to DVI, a lower security facility in Tracy, where he was introduced to woodworking class in the AIC program. With the help of Steve Emrick, the artist-facilitator, Roberto eventually hooked up with Kenny Hill, a guitar maker and artist-instructor.

Roberto had no experience in woodworking, let alone building guitars, before joining the program at DVI. As he pointed out, “I didn’t know the classical guitar from a folk guitar—I had no idea about music or musical instruments. So I started to learn from Kenny and another inmate, James, who was building a classical guitar. I learned as much as I could from him (James) and Kenny. That’s when I made my first instrument.” Roberto describes how he read every book he could find on the “history of classical guitar and the builders and musicians like Andre Segovia and Julian Bream. It was just such a rich history and tradition that...it felt like it just fit...like I found my niche, my identity.” The AIC guitar-making program started a ten-year study and practice for Roberto while on the inside. He learned to play guitar for his enjoyment and to test the quality of his instruments. His guitar business is expanding and his clients include Harry Belafonte and Carlos Santana. As he perfected his art and gained the respect of his peers, Roberto’s identity is that of a successful artist, and not as an ex-con.

The writing program had a tremendous impact on John’s self-image. “It was the first time that I truly looked at myself as a writer, as someone who could write well and tell a good story. I was receiving a lot of positive feedback from Zoe, my writing instructor, and the other inmates in the class.” He went on to say, “first and foremost while in class we saw ourselves as writers and artists, even if we were just beginning the process. And, of course, Zoe did a lot to make us feel like writing was the most important thing we could do. And we all believed that it was the most

important thing at the time. ...so it was deeply impactful for me because it caused me to write complete stories and I started to see myself as a storyteller.”

Larry is Caucasian and was raised in a tough, working class and racially divided neighborhood in East Los Angeles. He was convicted of second degree murder and spent seventeen years in prison. Larry is an example of a convict who was determined to avail himself of every opportunity to learn and acquire skills while in prison. He enrolled in college and vocational courses; completing several certification programs, including welding, business administration and aircraft mechanics. He also enrolled in Arts-in-Corrections.

It was during his involvement in AIC that he started “looking over the shoulder of another artist who was building guitars and I soon realized this guy was taking guitar building to a different level. I mean world class. I started working with him; learning from him; and the next thing I knew, I was hooked.” The inmate that influenced Larry was Roberto. That experience forever changed Larry’s self-image. “When people ask me what I do, I tell them I work heavy industry construction, **but I’m an artist.**” He attributes his success as a guitar builder to the Program, Kenny Hill, and especially to Roberto—a fellow con.

Three-quarters of those interviewed self-identified as artists, whether they made their living through their art or not. Larry is a perfect example. He makes a very good living as a welder working high-rise construction. His work takes him all over the country and overseas. Larry explains “I work heavy construction. When whatever project I’m working on is over and I get laidoff until the next one, I go back to my studio and build guitars—that is my first love, the other is for income.”

Doing Time

Each of us struggles to live fulfilling lives no matter our circumstances. We search for meaning and strive each day to accomplish something, anything. In one sense, “we’re all doing time,” in the words of Bo Lozoff. He writes in his book of the same title that it’s not the external trappings of our lives that set us free; rather the enduring qualities of courage, passion, kindness, discipline, self-esteem, honor, and respect. How we choose to use our time, whether we live in luxury or are locked away in prison, determines who we are and what we will become.

The inmate-artists interviewed reported without exception that Arts-in-Corrections changed what it meant “to do time” as they worked at their art. Earlier I quoted Jake when he described how art was meditation for him and it served to turn off the “monkey mind.” Later in our conversation, he told me that he often would awake early in the morning with an idea or vision of what he wanted to create that day and then would proceed to work on the piece until it was done.

In his words, “I could start early in the morning, seven o’clock working on a sculpture and stop at seven that night, twelve hours later, and I would still be sitting in my boxer shorts at the table with a mess of soap or some other material, and I look at the time and I say to myself, ‘Man, I feel like I just woke up’...because you have no concept of time. My body would be totally relaxed and I would feel good about what I had made that day.” Others told similar stories as they worked on their music, wrote their stories and poems, and painted. They mentioned that artists need time to perfect their work, and time was the one thing they had in abundance. Ray told me that other inmates would tease him, saying, “Ray, you’re not going to have time to do your writing on the outside like you do in here, you’ll have to get a real job.” They were right, he told me. Even so, he sees himself as a writer and the writing program helped preserve his sanity

while doing his time. “The perception of time,” observed Russ, “is a very important thing. You know, prison time can be a monster, it is oppressive. That changed for me while I was in my art classes, or working at my art in my cell. Time never went as fast as it did during those times when I was focused not on me, or my surroundings, but on my art.”

Ronin, who is serving a life sentence at San Quentin and is an active member of the writing program, wrote in response to my question: why should the State continue Arts-in-Corrections and the writing program, “to continue this class [Zoe’s writing course] would be a wise investment in a continuing journey for those of us who have little else in our lives. I have written more in this course than I have in my life time. It has enabled me to sharpen my writing skills and broaden my scope of awareness. As an inmate trapped in a cage, this program allows me the capacity to feel, to speak, to vent and, yes, even to cry. It is the one thing I look to each week more than anything else. This class is a wise investment...in its continued embrace I will grow, be challenged and learn. Such experiences are rare indeed. I truly believe that this class and its teacher [Zoe] have changed me for the better and nurtured an artist in me I never knew existed.”

Chris spoke at length about how Arts-in-Corrections helped him do his time. “Oh yeah, I counted on going to classes and working on my art in the evenings and in my cell. It provided a space in which to escape daily prison life. When I was working on my art I didn’t have to think about all the other stuff. It was just me and my art.” So many of the men and women interviewed did not want to spend their time “sitting around lifting weights, playing dominos, hanging out on the yard—the typical activities associated with prison life.” Dan put it this way. “It helped to have a creative outlet, a positive activity that kept me off the yard and other places you might be

if you didn't have anything else to do with your time—places that may not be safe.” All agreed that Arts-in-Corrections helped to keep guys from getting into trouble.”

The musicians spoke longingly about playing music together with their bands, practicing long hours to perfect their techniques and, in some cases, their song writing. James recalled that the music program felt like a “breath of normalcy...because we were in this trailer (Soledad) making fine music, Vivaldi and Bach and stuff and right outside, you could hear the clanking of the weight pile. It was right outside the door, and inside the trailer you are playing beautiful classical music...really fine music...you welcome the relief from the realities of prison life.”

Jasmine believes that art is part of our spiritual life. She thinks it is “important to be quiet, focused, centered during the creative process. Time is an important element...art in prison helped to shut out the dehumanizing aspects of prison life; to focus on the joy of creating...experiencing your inner-spirit, your core being.”

From the perspective of an artist-instructor, Zoe observed that she has some students “who only write about their prison experience and find a kind of relief, release, in trying to make sense of it. And I have other students who will never write about prison and who only want to use the writing to go to another place. I have one student, Ernie, who...he was a gold prospector at the time of his incarceration, a real mountain man. He spent all of his time in the woods and mountains and he only writes about those experiences. He only writes about the life that he loved and it's a way for him to go back there and not be in prison for a while. He talks very eloquently about how important that is for him...to be able to escape. The title of our latest anthology is, *A Means of Escape*.”

A common refrain heard from so many of the former inmates interviewed was “how am I going to learn while paying for my mistakes.” A surprising number of them feel strongly that

prison, thanks to programs such as Arts-in-Corrections, quite possibly saved them—albeit, it was a painful path to redemption.

Creating a Safe Haven, Bridging the Racial Divide

Prisons are dangerous places, made more so by overcrowding, racial segregation and gangs. An unwritten rule of prison life is that inmates are to hang with their own kind—defined by race. The general thinking is that if you want to survive prison you need to join a gang or, at least, associate with people of your own color. The racial dynamic in prisons dictates that people of the same race band together to protect each other from predators. Simply put, race lines are stark and prison politics requires that inmates remain loyal to their race.

The exception to this rule may be found inside the classrooms of Arts-in-Corrections. Those interviewed recalled how they found themselves working alongside men of different races, many for the first time in their lives. I observed this in my classroom observations as well. The writing class, for example, had nine men engaged in a lively and thoughtful critique of a book assigned for that night's class. They did not always agree with the others' opinions and expressed their differences in no uncertain terms. They did so, however, with civility, courtesy and even humor. These men were African-American, Caucasian and Hispanic. Their love of writing bonded them despite their racial differences.

R.F. Gilliam, a student in Zoe's class, wrote:

Once a week I sit at a table surrounded by the dregs of society; men banished to a grim Purgatory; men I didn't know three years ago. I sit with them and bare my soul through the words I've written, awaiting their judgment. These men are all convicted criminals, as am I, who have committed robberies, burglaries, and murder. I share my thoughts and creativity with them because they, like me, yearn to make something more of our existence. They dream of becoming more than the sum of their crimes, more than the labels they've become in the eyes of others.

Even though these men are criminals I have discovered all of them are intelligent, thoughtful individuals with unique experiences and perspectives on the world we live in. Their voices are the ones you don't hear in polite society; their stories reveal the darkness

and demons we all wrestle with, some more successfully than others. These men, who speak from experience of broken homes, abusive relationships, and of life lived on the gritty streets inhabited by gangbangers, drug addicts, hookers and hustlers have helped me to grow as a person, and to expand my horizons. Although they never ask it, I thank these men for their sharing, and it is with equanimity and humility they accept my praise as they struggle to become something more than they are, through writing, as I do. That's what this program means to me; a chance to redeem myself in the eyes of society, and in my own.

I found the same mutual respect and support in Kate's painting class. She knows that many of her students "watch out for one another while living with hundreds of other men in a large open gymnasium." Kate asked a rhetorical question, "Imagine how difficult it is for these men who have been diagnosed with mental health symptoms to live in open bunk beds with hundreds of other men. Now imagine I'm a guy who has committed crimes and I'm being asked to sleep in an auditorium with hundreds of other men who I know have committed crimes, and I know they have it in them to be violent towards one another. Then factor into the equation that I've been diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic." Kate's students may or may not be on medication, and the level of psychiatric care is minimal at best. They have one another however. She knows of several occasions when her students came to the "rescue" of another student regardless of skin color or mental diagnosis as they share a love of painting and community.

James, Roberto and Larry are excellent examples of three men, two Caucasians and one Hispanic, who profoundly influenced one another. Roberto first took an interest in the guitar program while watching James build a guitar. Roberto became the teacher to Larry who, to this day, considers Roberto his greatest positive role model and friend. When asked about race and prison, Roberto explained that "it is all about survival. You're thrown into prison at a young age and you quickly learn that you can't shake this guy's hand or sit in a certain part of the yard....it's very easy to get caught up in prison politics and racial divisions. The art program took me out of that scene. It showed me something different inside prison. It allowed me to

communicate with people without being so conscious of their race or affiliation.” Others pointed out that the “racial stuff” went away and they “were artists first; part of a community of artists. Arts-in-Corrections was like a subculture.” You may recall that Larry and Roberto grew up in East Los Angeles in very different neighborhoods where their worlds were separated along race lines. Ironically, they found one another in prison through Arts-in-Corrections.

Most of the men and women recalled how the Arts-in-Corrections classrooms offered a safe haven for inmate-artists to do their work, share ideas, offer critical and positive feedback to their peers, and forget, through the artistic process, that they lived in the cold, bleak, regimented, and threatening world that is prison. Russ described it this way,

...in the AIC classroom we could sit and kick around ideas. When you're on the yard there's a certain mindset. As much as you think you can ignore it, there's a certain mindset that permeates everything and everyone in prison. You just never know what's going to happen...but when you're in the art room, everybody's mindset is locked into doing their art, and offering help to the other guys. We can forget being the tough guy. You know, forget doing the rooster thing. It is safe to kick ideas around... 'Hey, what about this lick [if you're a musician]? What colors did you mix together to get that scene in your painting? What, pastel? Oh man, are you using a thesaurus when you're writing? How're you getting this—how are you finding this stuff, man?' It's a whole different environment inside the classrooms and workshops. It's like a subculture within the subculture. It's just a state of mind that you're able to achieve. Of course, you are in prison and you never know what's going to jump off, you never know. Still, locked in a classroom with the teachers and inmate-artists...it's a beautiful thing.”

Katya, an artist-instructor, told about an inmate in her print making course who was nearing parole and wanted a safe place to finish his time without incident. He was on medication for a mental disorder that caused his hands to shake uncontrollably. His condition made it very difficult for him to make a block print, but he worked at it with great patience and determination. The other inmates knew how important it was for him to be in the class and they were very supportive, actually protective. As Katya explained, “he was a very mild-mannered, gentle guy who just needed a place to be safe. The other guys took him in and were happy to oblige him

even though he lacked real artistic skills and experience. They knew he was close to parole and that he just wanted and needed a place to be that was off the yard.” He was paroled, and he was able to complete his block print for his family.

Reconnecting with Family

Children pay the price for their parents’ crimes. The impact of incarceration on families is devastating and is a national family crisis. Families, and especially children, must also deal with feelings of shame and social stigma. Imprisonment is not a reason for celebration, nor a reason to be proud. Many families do not tell even their closest friends about a relative’s incarceration and often go to great lengths to protect the inmate’s children from the consequences of revealing this family secret. There is compelling evidence that the incarceration of parent(s) often leads to a child’s lowered self-esteem, depression, and anti-social behavior.

Studies show that families are important to prisoners and to the achievement of major social goals, including the prevention of recidivism and delinquency. Statistics show children of incarcerated parents are eighty-five percent more likely to go to prison as adults. We also know that there is a greater chance of preventing intergenerational crime 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.

A few of the men interviewed spoke poignantly about how Arts-in-Corrections played an important role in helping them to remain connected in a meaningful way to their children. Some said their art helped other inmates to reconnect with members of their families. Ray, for example, said that one inmate said to him, “You know what Ray? You’re a blessing.” When Ray asked why, the inmate answered, “because of you my grandmother is speaking to me again. When I sent the portrait of my daughter that you did for me to her for Mother’s Day, it softened her

heart. Because of you, man, she really thought that was wonderful and she figured that my giving the picture to her showed that I really did care. You made it possible.”

I had the opportunity to speak with Jake’s and Roberto’s sons. In both cases, the fathers and sons talked about the fact that their art served to open the channels of communication and was a source of pride. Roberto described his family as “tight” and their communication remained open during his incarceration. His two boys were very young at the time of his arrest and conviction, and they were raised by his sister while he was in prison. “What the Arts-in-Corrections program did, I think, is 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 art 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.”

Today, Roberto’s boys are young adults who learned to play on their father’s first hand-made guitar. Roberto’s son, Tony, said to me “I fell in love with playing the guitar through my dad’s program. 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. It made it easier for me while he was in prison. I’m really proud of what my dad accomplished.”

Roberto’s two boys are good students and they have clearly identified career goals. Jake’s son is thirteen and helps in his father’s sculpting shop after school. The admiration and love of the three boys toward their fathers was evident in their words and demeanor.

Self-Improvement

The probability for a successful “reintegration” back into society is greatly improved as inmates acquire skills and knowledge through college and specialized training programs, as well as treatment for their addictions. Unfortunately, the de-emphasis on rehabilitation in combination with the rise of American mass incarceration has contributed to the “revolving door” syndrome that keeps our jails and prisons bursting at the seams. The number of inmates receiving drug treatment, job training, arts and other educational programs has steadily declined under the now dominant penal paradigm of literal “incapacitation.”

Most of the men and women interviewed for this study were fortunate to be incarcerated at a time when California prisons offered a plethora of training and educational programs, and they took advantage of the opportunities for self-improvement.

Larry is an excellent example of someone who wanted to improve himself while serving time. “I was determined to make the best use of my time while paying my debt to society. I was fortunate that Deuel Vocational Institution (DVI) offered a number of vocational and educational programs. I went through a welder apprentice program that last six years, for example. I’m now a journeyman welder and make my living at it. I’m certified in a number of vocational fields...and they were as good as any trade or technical school on the outside. I also knew Arts-in-Corrections was teaching me important skills and a work ethic that would serve me...mostly, it provided me with a passion for guitar building that defines me today.” Larry also earned a college degree while doing his time.

It was commonplace for AIC inmates to pursue other educational and training programs.

Michael is another excellent example of an AIC inmate-artist who sought a college education while serving his time at Soledad prison. “I went back to school, which was very scary

for me. I pulled it off and even got on the Dean's honor roll several times. I thought, wow, I'm smarter than I thought." A few, like Brad, discussed how in a strange way they felt freer while in prison than they did before their incarceration because they had opportunities to get an education or training, and they had time for honest self-reflection, an opportunity which was not available to them when they were young and poor. To be sure, they were anxious to do their time and get out of prison, but they were more relaxed about it and focused on their art and other educational programs. Russ expressed it this way, "I ended up not feeling so attached to getting out...the programs gave me something to look forward to each week, and I knew I was growing and learning, and I felt hopeful...all of which were new experiences for me."

Michael Willis, a San Quentin inmate-artist, wrote: "I constantly find myself becoming more appreciative of the life I have today. I am due to graduate from Patten University with my A.A. degree in June 2009. I'm writing short stories and performing in Shakespeare plays. These are all things which I could not have imagined before June 2005. Just goes to show that no matter how dim things may appear one moment, in the next, your life can become fully illuminated and filled with blessings. The most beautiful part of all is that I am just scrubbing the surface of my potential and the best is yet to come."

Giving Back

In acknowledging their guilt and regret for past crimes, many of the former inmates took great pleasure in donating their art and performing concerts and plays in support of community-based organizations. Each year, AIC sponsored fundraisers, including the annual art auction have raised thousands of dollars for the Child Abuse Prevention Council. Larry recalled how he and the other inmate-artists "focused on the annual fundraiser for the children. We worked hard on

our projects and really looked forward to selling them in support of a worthy cause. It gave us an opportunity to produce for the benefit of others. We felt it was a noble cause.”

Dan talked at length about how he and many of the other inmate-artists looked forward to the annual art sale and auction which was organized by Steve Emrick, the artist-facilitator at DVI at the time. “One of the great things about Arts-in-Corrections was the yearly art sale that Steve organized to benefit the San Joaquin County Child Abuse Prevention Council. Not only did we raise money for this worthy cause, but I think it helped some of the prison staff and community leaders to better understand and value what we were doing in the program.” He went on to say that “it gave the inmates a purpose, a way to give back, especially to the children. Every year we would have bets for candy bars on how much we would make that year. We always wanted to make more than the previous year, and it became a real team effort to produce as much art as possible.”

Giving back to society through their art and related skills continues for some after their release from prison. Michael gives back to children through his magic shows which are designed to help “wounded children” build self-esteem and hope. James and his wife serve their community through their violin and cello shop by “donating musical equipment to the local schools as well as repairing their string instruments. Its the same in the outside world as it was in prison—there’s very little money for the arts. The value of it is just not understood by the general public. We enjoy helping the kids and their teachers rebuild and add to their instruments.”

James invites teachers and their students to visit his shop. “We have classrooms come in here [the shop], home school and regular classrooms who come in and take the tour of the shop and we tell them about violins. My wife tells them about the types of instruments and a little bit of history and I take them back and show them how they are made. I also make presentations at

schools and city groups on violin and cello making, both in lecture form and in costume as an Italian violin maker.”

James takes every opportunity to advocate for greater support of the arts in the schools. “I get on my bandwagon whenever somebody gets within ear shot. Unfortunately, I end up preaching to the choir most of the time. Poor old music teachers are buying strings and other materials out of their own money for the kids. There isn’t enough money in their budgets to run decent music programs, or any of the arts for that matter, but school administrators will buy new computers at the drop of a hat.”

The respondents were saddened to learn that funding for the AIC program had been eliminated, as they lamented reduced funding for the arts in primary and secondary education. Four of the men (Jake, Michael, Roberto and Steven) would welcome the opportunity to teach in the program if it were reinstated. They believe inmates-artists would benefit from their experiences as professional artists and small business owners.

Rehabilitation

Nearly everyone interviewed spoke in their own way about the power of art as a means for rehabilitation and restoration of human dignity through disciplined and focused personal work. Each of them recalled how the artistic process significantly affected their self-esteem and general outlook on the world. Most thought of themselves first as artists and then as ex-con..

Kenneth Brydon, an inmate at San Quentin, and an active member of the writing program, expressed why he thinks it is important to support Arts-in-Corrections, and especially the writing program. “Creative writing provides meaningful rehabilitation for inmates including myself. Learning to express one’s self is a process of self-discovery, and very beneficial to finding productive and positive expressions in opposition to negative and destructive ones.”

Rick, a lifer at New Folsom prison, wrote a poem about rehabilitation and the artistic process that captures the sentiment of many of the men and women interviewed. His poem is entitled, "Rehabilitation."

Rehabilitation is said to be a faded memory,
A lost thought that no longer occurs.
But I don't care what is said and I don't care what is thought,
Though it's true day after day and year after year
for years and years on end.
They tried to kill rehabilitation and creation
with condemnation and correction,
but year after year they still fail to obliterate the
passion of an artist's soul.
And I hear rehabilitation day after day and year after year.
I hear it in the scratching of pencils across paper.
I hear it in the newly formed notes of an instrument that still remains,
and I hear it boldly announced in the public's words
'To hell with rehabilitation, and yet I and many other artists
will not be denied the God-given gift to create and to dream,
to escape the confines of Corrections on the wings of our passion.
So when there is a flute, a pen, a paint brush, a guitar or any other artistic
paraphernalia in our hands, we are examples of rehabilitation—
no longer of condemning or correcting.
Rehabilitation is found in an artist's passion to create.
Rehabilitation lives. It lives in me and in every other artist who
in spite of this place still exercises the God-given gift to be an artist.

Artist-Facilitators and Instructors

Arts-in-Corrections' inmates are not alone in benefiting from the program. The same is true for the artist-facilitators and instructors. They have learned important lessons as teachers, artists, and on very personal levels. Katya, for example, learned "to be patient. I've learned a lot in that regard. Time is just different in prison, I've learned. The way guys take time to have a conversation, for example, is very different than for most of us in our daily, hectic, fast-paced lives. I'm trying to be more patient with my art and in my life generally." Zoe's perception of time and the importance of patience in our work and personal lives has changed as well.

The artist-instructors spoke about the joy of teaching many of the same students over several years; witnessing their growth as artists and as people—a luxury teachers rarely experience in a “normal” school environment. The instructors and facilitators commented on how most of the inmates are ideal students in that they are enthusiastic and grateful for the opportunity to learn. They are prepared for every class, often coming with questions or completed projects for which they eagerly seek answers or feedback. In the time between classes, which can be several weeks if there is a lockdown, the inmates spend their free time working on their art or homework assignments. Zoe described her San Quentin class as a “fantastic environment within which to work. I have eager, interested, respectful students, most of whom are experiencing profound life changes as they struggle with their writing. It’s just a wonderful experience as a teacher.” All three instructors feel of value and valuable to their men—as a teacher there is no better feeling.

This may help to explain why they are willing to donate hundreds of hours and art materials each year in support of their students and the program. When the Department of Corrections eliminated the Arts-in-Corrections program in 2003, the limited version of AIC offered at San Quentin and New Folsom prisons became dependent on donations and grant funding, along with the generous spirit and commitment of the artists. [Rehabilitation wasn’t added to the title of the Department until its reorganization in 2005.]

Zoe, Katya and Kate are particularly admiring of their students’ focused attention on their art because they live and work in an extraordinarily crowded and loud space, all the while deprived of any privacy. Katya said, “What I really respect is that they never have privacy, or quiet. Never, ever, ever. Not even for the most intimate daily activities. And somehow they learn how to shut-out all the noise and clamor and chaos and focus on their art work. I envy them.”

“I don’t know how they are able to write in their environment,” commented Zoe. “I mean, can you imagine being in, what is it, an 8 x 5 cell with another person and trying to write when it’s so noisy, incredibly noisy, and lots of interruptions and buzzers buzzing and keys clanking and toilets flushing and TVs blaring and people screaming and yelling. I just don’t know how they do it...I think the ability to focus and tune it out is also one of the gifts of writing, that you can kind of tune out that chaos for at least a little while.” Undoubtedly, Eloise would be proud of their ability to tune out their environment through discipline, focused attention, and passion for their art.

Zoe believes her strong suit as a writing instructor is to “create a space where people feel safe and can share their work, can share their inner feelings through their writing, and push themselves to stretch and find their own voice.” She, like the other instructors, enjoys the “opportunity to work with students long-term. ...In that sense, it is much more like a writing group and I benefit as a writer along side the men.”

One reason Zoe is interested in teaching writing in prison is the potential that story telling has for helping men and women in prison to put themselves in the shoes of others. “I think there is a direct correlation between writing stories and compassion. The characters in your story will not be authentic or truthful if you don’t write from their perspective—you must become each of your characters. You have to think about what’s it like to be this other person. How would this person respond? I think that’s one of the most powerful experiences my students can have...to be able, through their writing, to image what its like to be someone else and to experience things the way that person experiences them. I assume that someone who commits a crime isn’t thinking about how their criminal act will impact the victim or their family. I believe there can be a direct correlation between writing, conscience, and compassion or empathy.”

She talked about one inmate who wrote stories with “vengeance” as a constant theme. She would ask if he was even aware of this recurring theme, and if so, why was it so important to him. She gently prodded him to consider “ other possible storylines, to nudge him out of his fixation with revenge and get him to imagine different outcomes, possibly even involving forgiveness. The writing course gives us permission to have conversations about alternative ways of thinking and behaving.”

Eloise Smith knew she did not want Arts-in-Corrections to be an art therapy program. Her belief was that prison art programs facilitated and taught by accomplished working artists could unlock for inmates the “secret of how to work,” and in the process help them to develop “self-respect and human dignity.”

Kate, who you may recall works with inmates who have been diagnosed with mental health symptoms, described why she chose to teach in programs like AIC rather than work as an art therapist. “When I started studying how to use art inside institutions I was told to study art therapy. However, I was apprehensive about going down that path because as an artist I understood that it would feel very differently if my art were critiqued from a therapeutic perspective rather than from strictly an artistic or creative perspective. It feels very differently when a peer artist provides feedback than it would if they wanted me to gain insight about myself through my art—especially in an institutionalized setting. I’m already feeling vulnerable when engaged in the artistic process without worrying about how a therapist may interpret my paintings.”

Kate does her best work as an artist when working in a community of artists and she wants to create a similar environment for her students. “I know I have been the most creative when working in a community of other artists in which we are free to comment on our respective

work, provide feedback when asked; and otherwise support one another in our creative process. I hoped to create this same dynamic at San Quentin. ...while my students and I are sitting talking about their drawings, we'll talk about their families, their kids, their girls on the outside...it is a safe environment in which to talk about our art and our lives and even how one impacts the other. They don't feel like they're going to art therapy, but they do feel like they are going to their art class where the door's open if they want to talk about mental health issues."

Jack Bowers, an accomplished musician and composer, devoted more than twenty years as artist-facilitator working with inmates and instructors at Soledad prison. Jack made the point that while the AIC programs at each of the prison facilities offered a range of art classes, "every prison had a different artist facilitator who, in turn, brought to that facility a unique focus based on artistic interests and background. If the facilitator was a visual artist, there would be an emphasis in that medium. Everett Jensen, an outstanding muralist, evolved this incredible mural program at Mule Creek."

Jack recalled Dick Crispo, a well-known muralist who preceded him as artist-facilitator at Soledad, who "created along with AIC inmates the longest indoor mural in the world. At one time it was in the Guinness Book of World Records." Under Jack's direction as artist-facilitator, the Soledad AIC program eventually offered one of the most robust music programs in the State prison system. At its peak, there were over 20 bands. Jack's greatest source of pride was the development of his music theory curriculum. Guitar building became his marquee program, garnering public attention, and he raised funds for community-based programs through art sales and auctions, including the sale of guitars.

He fondly recalled the Arts-in-Corrections conferences in which "the most extraordinary and dedicated artists and teachers gathered to talk about how best to expand programs in

response to the needs of the inmate-artists. These gatherings were exciting, inspiring and the creative energy was infectious.” Jack went on to explain that Arts-in-Corrections was “the most significant thing that happened in my life. Working inside prison where I met some extraordinary men and worked with amazing artists was a real gift. I learned and I watched men develop as artists and human beings. I’m proud of what we accomplished.”

Each of the artist-facilitators shared in Jack’s enthusiasm for the program. Over the years they have received letters of thanks from former inmates who attribute much of their success to the lessons learned while in the AIC program. As Jack put it, “the public would be surprised to learn how truly diverse the prison population is...every kind of person can be found inside the walls. My guess is that the State prison system is the world’s greatest melting pot. You meet all kinds.” I could not help but think as I listened to Jack and recalled the men and women I interviewed, ‘There but for the Grace of God go I...and you.’

Concluding Remarks

There are over two million people incarcerated in the United States, far exceeding other industrialized countries. They are disproportionately African American and Latino and two-thirds are serving sentences for non-violent crimes. The public, and therefore politicians, demanded “get tough” policies without thinking about the exorbitant fiscal and human costs. California, once home to the finest public university system in the country, now spends more money locking people up than on giving them a college education.

A growing chorus from diverse communities is beginning to pierce the deafening “tough on crime” mantra heard in the past thirty years. The mounting costs for building and operating prisons by state governments teetering on the brink of bankruptcy have opened the minds of citizens and lawmakers to sentencing and prison reforms. In an article entitled, “Why We Must

Fix Our Prisons,” U.S. Senator Jim Webb wrote, “America’s criminal justice system has deteriorated to the point that it is a national disgrace. Its irregularities and inequities cut against the notion that we are a society founded on fundamental fairness.” He went on to say, “Our failure to address this problem has caused the nation’s prisons to burst their seams with massive overcrowding, even as our neighborhoods have become more dangerous. We are wasting billions of dollars and diminishing millions of lives.”

Nonviolent offenders, often with addiction and/or mental health diagnoses, and parole violators make up a majority of those incarcerated. Furthermore, a majority of parole violators are returned to prison on technical grounds, not for newly committed crimes.

Jeanne Woodford, former warden of San Quentin State prison and former acting director of the California Department of Corrections, believes that “many inmates are willing to change, but do not have the benefit of choosing programs and treatment, because they are largely unavailable in our overcrowded prison system.” She acknowledges that there are inmates who are content to hang out and simply do their time, but they are in the minority. If given the opportunity most inmates would participate in programs to better prepare them for life after their incarceration. Three of the reforms she advocates are:

- Change the purpose of prison from punishment, to incarceration and change;
- Reform our penal code to require that inmates fully participate in programs and treatment prior to parole;
- Provide evidence-based treatment and programs to the incarcerated.

At least for the men and women who participated in this study, the evidence that Arts-in-Corrections led to significant life changes is compelling. They were fortunate to have been incarcerated at a time when the AIC program and other educational and training opportunities were provided by the State. AIC inmates are excellent examples of the men and women Jeanne

Woodford claims want to participate in programs that will make their time in prison meaningful, and prepare them for productive lives after incarceration.

Although we cannot establish a cause-effect relationship between Arts-in-Corrections and the successful reintegration of inmate-artists back into society, we can report that for these sixteen men and women the program was instrumental in helping them to “do their time” with purpose and meaning, and they are forever grateful. Those who make a living through their art directly attribute their unexpected and rewarding career paths to Arts-in-Corrections.

The interviews reveal that the inmate-artists cultivated a work ethic, fueled by their creative imaginations, focused attention, learned skills, and improved self-confidence; contributing to their self-esteem and dignity. Most self-identified as artists rather than as ex-cons. All were more or less able to insulate themselves from the insanity and inhumanity of prison life through the artistic process and the support of their instructors and fellow artists. In a few cases the program facilitated family communication and even reunification. The AIC classrooms provided a safe haven from the uncertainties of prison life, and for many race became irrelevant within their community of artists.

The artist-facilitators and instructors personally and professionally benefitted through their involvement in the program. Observing the inmates working within the rules and rhythms of prison life, including frequent lockdowns preventing classes, taught them patience, perseverance, and a deeper understanding of the human spirit. Their experiences inside the walls have helped to demystify and humanize inmates—a perspective that if widely shared by the public and policymakers might lead to prison reform based on “incarceration and *change*” rather than on punishment.

The California Arts-in-Corrections program was first evaluated in 1983 and it was found to be cost-effective. A 1987 recidivism study found that there was a significant reduction in the number of former AIC inmates returned to prison compared with the general population of parolees. A 2007 survey of inmate-artists at San Quentin State prison confirmed high levels of satisfaction with the program, even though its scope and design had changed with the loss of State funding in 2003.

This qualitative study offers additional evidence that Arts-in-Corrections exceeded the goals of its founders and confirms the potential power of the Art Spirit in each of us. The men and women interviewed and those observed in the classrooms at San Quentin reminds us that art can help to heal the heart and put us on the path to redemption.

The personification of art leading to redemption and a healed heart may be found in the words and life of Jake, the sculptor.

I am a 47-year-old African-American male. I'm living with my ex-wife, nine-year-old son, and Katie, our dog. My mother married at sixteen. After my parents divorced, three military stepfathers raised my brothers and me. The military moved us every three years to Texas, Hawaii, Louisiana, Colorado, New Jersey and California. I'm the oldest, and I had to constantly adjust to new schools, people, places and the 'rules' of how to best fit in. I learned how to make friends, but it has taken me much longer to learn how to keep them.

At seventeen, I joined the Army, and received basic training in South Carolina, followed by two years of active duty at Ft. Ord, California. At nineteen, I was arrested for multiple armed robberies. My civil conviction led to a general discharge from the Army.

Sixteen years of my life were spent in California State Prisons with a C-xxxx identification number to represent me...breaking the law to feed my addiction to cocaine caused me and my family a lot of pain. I have learned from my mistakes and I hope to help others make better choices for their tomorrows. I've been out of prison since March 11, 1997. ...creating art has given me the strength to believe in something greater than myself and to move past my addictions and the heartaches of child abuse. Through my ability as a sculptor, mold maker, and wood carver I have something to give to others and to myself. I am passionate about teaching and creating and making a living doing what I love. Art was my escape when incarcerated and now that I'm free, art is the 'wind beneath me'.

Hard work, focused attention, and determination to better myself helped me to develop my talent and provided me with a well rounded set of skills that can always be

made better through experience, education, and the creative process. These are the tools given to me by Arts-in-Corrections and I've used them to shape various mediums, including my life. We all have strengths and weaknesses and can learn from each other if we are willing to open ourselves. I offer to render my services through the power of creativity, the sharing of truths, and a fair exchange.

Jake's story and so many like his serve as a reminder that we should not, cannot give up on people—perhaps especially those on the “lowest rung of the ladder.” Hope may be found in treatment, training and educational programs; whereas, the “punishment” model merely serves to grow the prison industry at an unsustainable cost to taxpayers.