

WILLIAM JAMES ASSOCIATION POETIC JUSTICE PROJECT

When he paroled from prison two years ago, Guillermo Willie didn't plan on wearing prison blues ever again. But within a year, he was dressed in the same clothes he'd worn for 38 years as inmate of the California Department of Corrections. This time, however, the clothing was a costume, not a mandated wardrobe. An actor with **Poetic Justice Project**, Guillermo brings a lifetime of experience and a passion for the arts to the stage.



Poetic Justice Project, established in 2009 on California's Central Coast, is dedicated to the creation of original theatre that examines crime, punishment and redemption. Through passionate collaboration of formerly incarcerated writers, artists, musicians and actors, **Poetic Justice Project** produces groundbreaking theatre to challenge and transform our culture.

Poetic Justice Project is a new program of the [William James Association](#), located in Santa Cruz and founded in 1973 to promote work service in the arts, environment, education, and community development. In 2010, the William James Association received the Accomplished ChangeMaker Award from San Francisco's Intersection for the Arts.

Since 1977, with its [Prison Arts Project](#), the William James Association has dedicated itself to providing arts experiences to incarcerated individuals in the belief that participation in the artistic process significantly and positively affects one's view of oneself and the world. The Prison Arts Project began as a pilot project at the California Medical Facility at Vacaville, with funding provided by the California Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, the San Francisco Foundation, and the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration.

The success of the project led to the creation of Arts in Corrections, a program within the California Department of Corrections which placed artist facilitators in each prison in the state, to teach in their arts discipline and to manage multi-disciplinary arts programs. Arts in Corrections was eliminated in 2010 due to budget cuts.

Both the [Community Youth Arts Project](#) and [Poetic Justice Project](#) have grown out of the Prison Arts Project. **Poetic Justice Project's** founding artistic director, Deborah Tobola, worked for more than 12 years in the California prison system, teaching creative writing and managing the Arts in Corrections program at the California Men's Colony in San Luis Obispo. She left the California Department of Corrections at the end of 2008 to begin **Poetic Justice Project**. "I witnessed how powerful engagement with the arts can be inside prison," she says "and I knew it would be just as powerful for people coming out, trying to find a way back to their communities."

Poetic Justice Project unlocks hearts and minds with bold, original theatre that comes from the experience of incarceration. Because prison is an almost invisible sub-culture to the general public, **Poetic Justice Project** brings audiences a look at a world they might not otherwise see.

Guillermo Willie began creating visual art in 1985, studying in Arts in Corrections in whatever institution he found himself at around the state. By the time Deborah Tobola met him at the California Men's Colony in 2000, he was an accomplished artist who was always willing to donate his work to nonprofit and community groups. When she learned that Guillermo Willie was paroling two weeks ahead of her departure from the California Department of Corrections, Deborah urged him to get in touch with her at **Poetic Justice Project**.



Guillermo was cast in the Project's first play, *Blue Train*, and has a larger role in the current production of *Off The Hook*. He is also on the advisory board of **Poetic Justice Project**. What started as a concept—being of service—has turned into a calling for him: “Being a part of *Blue Train* and *Off The Hook*, seeing what Poetic Justice Project has done, I see that I need to make myself more available to assist in the transformation of other people's lives.”

Located on the Central Coast of California, **Poetic Justice Project** draws cast and crew members from Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties and beyond. Actors in **Poetic Justice Project** productions have been incarcerated in prisons, jails and juvenile facilities. Although most are new to stage performance, they bring passion and authenticity to their roles.



In 2009, **Poetic Justice Project** produced the play *Blue Train*—written and first performed at the California Men's Colony in 2003—to sold-out audiences at the San Luis Obispo Little Theater during the traditionally “dead week” of Christmas. The play featured a cast of 14 formerly incarcerated actors.

Last year, the California Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the LEF Foundation helped to fund **Poetic Justice Project's 2010 Prison Town Tour** of the play *Off The Hook*. More than 1,000 Californians in Bakersfield, Tehachapi, Fresno, Sacramento, Redding, San Diego, North Hollywood, Santa Cruz and San Luis Obispo saw the play.

An original musical ensemble drama, featuring 15 formerly incarcerated men and women, *Off The Hook* examines the ever-present threat of violence and racial segregation in prison. Separation from family, the danger of becoming too close to others and, finally, the triumph of the human spirit come to life in *Off The Hook*. Each performance was followed by a [talkback with the audience](#). Audiences also completed response cards, with comments such as:

- “Reminded that prisoners are human beings.”
- “So, so healing for all of us!”



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- “Put a human face on the prison population.”
- “What was good was that the actors had lived this.”
- “Just loved it! Please don’t stop the music.”

“We are always looking for original plays that examine crime, punishment and redemption by writers who have been incarcerated, their family members or people who have worked in the system,” says Deborah Tobola. Interested writers should email staff@poeticjusticeproject.org.

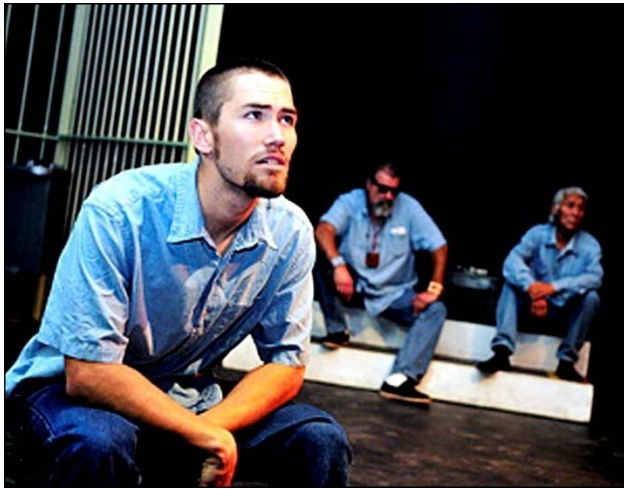


Photo subjects and credits (in order presented): *Jon Esguerra and Guillermo Willie as Lucky and Joker in Off The Hook*, by Barry Wisdom; *Brad Tobola as Officer Pearce in Off The Hook*, by Barry Wisdom; the cast of *Blue Train* with Artistic Director *Deborah Tobola* at the San Luis Obispo Little Theater, by Helen Marrs; *Cooper Wise as John Boy in Off The Hook*, by Barry Wisdom.

In addition to theatre productions, Poetic Justice Project offers formerly incarcerated people workshops in the performing arts. At Unity Church of San Luis Obispo, Poetic Justice Project cast and crew have a place to rehearse and perform and receive acting and vocal instruction from Pastor Leona Evans, who appeared in the original Broadway productions of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* and *The Fiddler on the Roof* during her 30-year stage career.

In 2011, **Poetic Justice Project** will continue to perform *Off The Hook* for at-risk youth, universities and other groups. A grant from the James Irvine Foundation’s Creative Connections Fund will help **Poetic Justice Project** produce John Steinbeck’s play *Of Mice and Men*, to be performed at the Steinbeck International Festival in Salinas in August. And the original play *Women Behind Walls*, written by Claire Braz-Valentine, will be produced next fall.

The William James Association’s **Poetic Justice Project** receives funding from the California Arts Council’s [Creating Public Value Program](#), which supports arts organizations in rural and underserved communities, and is managed by [Lucero Arellano](mailto:larellano@cac.ca.gov) (larellano@cac.ca.gov).

