

The Mural Arts: A Solution to Healing and Restoring People who go through the Criminal Justice System

Jane Golden 31 January 2010

When we think of the criminal justice system, sentiments of denial, punishment, confinement, and retribution may be the first to come to mind, and perhaps rightfully so. Incarcerating individuals who have committed crimes is critically important to a society that deserves to be protected and to live free of fear. And it is important to the victims of violent crime and their grieving families, who suffer in the face of something lost that can never be regained.

The moment in which a citizen becomes an inmate and the moment that that same inmate returns to the fold of a community are two key occasions in which strong philosophical differences regarding our responsibility towards those incarcerated begin to emerge. The work that we do with and the kind of attention we give to this confined population between those two punctuated moments will effectively shape their lives long after their prison terms end and help shape the communities to which they return.

In my 25 years as head of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, I have come into contact with people of all ages and from all walks of life for whom living is synonymous with struggle. I have observed men, women, and young people who cycle through our courts, detention centers, and prison system as though this was how their lives were always destined to be — a world in which crime is the looming constant and opportunity a scarce and coveted resource. Through our seven-year-old Restorative Justice program, the Mural Arts Program has sought to challenge the accumulation of disconnection, indifference, and lost chances that risk fostering life-long offenders. We have sought to challenge our own assumptions about the creative abilities, capacity for good, and desire to do well among incarcerated individuals, observing how awe-inspiring acts of forgiveness can help mend the wounds of victims and their families, and how cooperative art projects that engage inmates and ex-inmates with their former and future communities are among the most effective tools available to us in the fight against recidivism.

In 2003, Mural Arts began working with inmates at the State Correctional Institution at Graterford Prison through an informal pilot mural program funded by the Ford Foundation. We began with a simple belief in the transformative power of community art and the recognition that one of the most serious threats to our most vulnerable, at-risk populations is an underdeveloped

sense of engagement with the world around them — the kind of social engagement that is a cornerstone of healthy social behavior and interpersonal relationships and can have disastrous consequences when undernourished. Our first Graterford project — what would become our *Healing Walls* mural in North Philadelphia — sought to challenge the conventional thinking about the ability and desire of prison inmates to change paths, acknowledge mistakes, and take steps to restore themselves, help others, and contribute to their communities in positive ways.

While it was one of the most difficult projects I have ever been a part of, *Healing Walls* ultimately became one of the most rewarding. The process — which was captured in the newly released film *Concrete, Steel and Paint*, by independent filmmakers Cindy Burstein and Tony Heriza — proved a humbling educational experience that surpassed what any of us could have expected. The project brought together artist-inmates, crime victims, victim advocates, community members, and volunteers to forge a difficult but important dialogue among groups that, at a glance, have no common ground other than cruel circumstances and brief, fateful convergences. Inmates and victims' groups helped determine the theme and design of the mural, and all helped paint pieces of the mural at "paint days" held at the prison. The project raised issues about our approach to crime, incarceration, and rehabilitation that still resonate today, and we began exploring the role that community arts can play in

promoting justice and reconciliation and in reconnecting incarcerated men and women with their communities.

At the time, we had little notion of where the project would take us. Six years later, we have not only formalized our art- and mural-making programs at Graterford, we have also expanded our work in prisons to include an additional five facilities within the Philadelphia Prison System, as well as mural programs for young men and women at St. Gabriel's Hall, the Philadelphia Family Court, and the Youth Study Center.

At Graterford, we now offer an Arts 101 class for beginning artists, a mural-making class for inmates with a desire to learn the mural-making process, and a twice-weekly advanced mural-making class. For the advanced class, an experienced muralist works with inmates assigned to a paid workshop through which they paint large-scale murals for the City of Philadelphia. The classes provide inmates with invaluable work skills and community-building experience in preparation for their eventual release.

At the five Philadelphia area prisons, a newly established Guild Program links our existing mural-making programs at the five sites with a re-entry job training program. The program enables former inmates to transition into part-time positions within four different fields that emphasize building practical job and life skills, providing a path to long-term employment.

At St. Gabriel's Hall, a residential program for delinquent young men from Philadelphia, we offer mural-making classes that provide opportunities for the young men to build critical life and jobs skills while completing on-site projects such as murals in residential units, and, ultimately, a large-scale outdoor mural with professional muralists and community partners. We recently formed a Mural Repair Crew, through which eligible participants would work on Saturdays — repairing walls, covering graffiti, touching up murals, and doing landscape work on the surrounding properties. This on-site weekend work gives these young men the chance to assist in lot reclamation, mural restoration, and installation projects throughout the city. Those residing at St. Gabriel's would receive community service hours for their work, and those already released would receive an hourly wage for their services, as part of our effort to sustain peer and mentor relationships with youth as they re-enter their communities and to ease the transition back into the workforce.

Most recently, through a three-year partnership with the Youth Violence Reduction Partnership of Philadelphia, we have begun offering a nine-month part-time job and training program, called The Guild, that will pay up to 40 youth partners ages 19-24 to work for 20 hours per week on our Mural Repair Crew. They will be trained in industries that connect with Mural Arts activities — basic painting, sealing, stucco, and brick wall repair and

preparation; landscaping, cleaning and lot reclamation; conservation; and the creation and restoration of murals.

The foundation of this ever-evolving work is our belief that the key to disrupting the cycle of crime and violence that plagues our communities is to provide meaningful opportunities to those individuals who have made mistakes. By providing opportunities for inmates and ex-inmates to participate in large-scale public art projects, create their own personal art projects, and find gainful employment just as they are poised to be released from prison or detention centers, we have established firm, encouraging footholds on which these participants can build anew. We have strived to go beyond walls and beyond paint to create a formalized curriculum and work programs with a lasting impact, hoping to inspire a cultural shift from fear and restraint to repair and redemption.

Some may always struggle, sadly, but many more simply need an open door through which they can re-enter the world with respect, concern, awareness, and a second chance. The criminal justice system can and should function as a vehicle for healing and restoration. Because in the long run it is too difficult, too unhealthy, and too expensive to build inroads to rehabilitation and change from the raw material of anger and vengeance. In an atmosphere of isolation, among the countless narratives of personal struggle, Mural Arts and our partners are determined to work tirelessly to locate that spark of hope

that will ultimately ignite transformation and change.

For more information about Mural Arts and the variety of programs they offer, visit www.muralarts.org or contact Jane Golden at jane.golden@muralarts.org.