

Lessons Learned on the Inside

By [Laurinda Joenks](#)

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Last week, I had the privilege of being “locked down” inside the Northwest Arkansas Community Correction Center in Fayetteville. While there, I met 12 amazing residents participating in the Northwest Arkansas Prison Stories project, led by Kathy McGregor.

The center impressed me. Even though the building previously served as the Washington County jail, it did not look like a jail. Throughout the facility, bright murals of scenes in Northwest Arkansas had been painted on the walls. Residents painted them, with the help of local artists, according to Maggie Capel, center director. (Don’t call her a warden, I was told. Don’t call the facility a prison. And don’t call them inmates.)

Everyone — from the center administrators to staff to residents — was so kind. None of the residents looked like “potheads” or “meth fiends.” Eyes were bright, and smiles were plentiful.

Residents of the Community Correction Center wear numbers on their yellow scrubs, but they are young, nonviolent offenders. Most agreed to their placement there for mounting drug charges, and the center offers more of a rehabilitation program than incarceration.

Capel explained each resident has a four-hour-a-day job and must attend four hours of educational programs designed to encourage rehabilitation and help turn bad decisions into good ones.

During the four-month prison stories program, McGregor, Erika Wilhite and Katie Nichol teach the women various art forms — painting, writing, mask-making and songwriting. It is their hope that the women can use their art to tell their stories — the stories of their lives, their challenges, their downfalls and their incarceration.

In addition to the grace and poise these women presented, they revealed their talents. I listened to several pieces of poetry they created. Wow! Great writing. Truly better than some reporters’ copy I’ve read in my 25-year career as a journalist.

This might be the first time a woman tells her story, McGregor explained. Or maybe the other women in the room hear something in the story the teller never realized.

Some of the stories are horrific, McGregor admitted. But she shared some with me, probably hoping to bring some peace of mind to herself after hearing them. During my evening on the inside, I heard one woman share her story. I feel honored that she felt comfortable with me there and trusted me — as well as the program coordinators and center director — to hear the worst moments and innermost secrets of her troubled life.

No one starts out in life wanting to use drugs or to be locked up. When a baby is born, no parents want to harm their child. But life happens.

Every girl she has ever worked with tells of abuse as a child at the hands of an adult, McGregor said, and children repeat what they are modeled. Some never are taught how to make good decisions. Everyone in this program wants better things for their children.

Then I thought about some girls I knew, girls I saw every day as a teacher, and their stories. What will happen to them?

The girl who was removed from her home when her mother told the judge, "I love meth!" The girl whose mother showed up with alcohol on her breath for the class Christmas party.

The girl whose mother works hard but leaves the student to get herself to school. The girl whose parents move her to Mexico, although the girl was born in the states and knows nothing else.

The girl living with her family in a car. The girl in a household of 10 people that just moved into a house but spent all their money on deposits and such and had none left over for food.

The girl I was pretty sure was being sexually abused but told no one anything about anything. Her reality is that if she tells, and if her abuser is head of the family and goes to jail, the family will have no money. And abuse can't be reported based on a "hunch," I learned.

Will they break the cycle?

In the meantime, I live with lessons of the prison stories project. They empowered me, too.

One resident noted that she put on makeup, knowing I was coming to visit. Having recently made some tough decisions in my own life, this was a great affirmation for me. That I knew what I was doing. That I was important. That somebody wanted me.

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