

Rooted in reality

Women find healing, meaning in Prison Stories project

By LAURINDA JOENKS NWA MEDIA

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GO & DO

Stories From The Inside Out

What: Adaptations of true

stories told by women at the

Northwest Arkansas Community

Correction Center in Fayetteville

When: 7:30 p.m. reception,

performance at 8 p.m. April 19

Where: St. Paul's Episcopal

Church, 224 N. East Ave. in

Fayetteville

Cost: \$10 suggested donation

Information: [nwaprison](http://nwaprisonstories.com)

nwaprisonstories.com Editor's Note: The names of the incarcerated women have been changed to protect their identities and the identities of their families.

Pain. Abuse. Addiction. Death.

Each story is different, yet each story is the same.

Each is a story hard to share. Each story is hard to hear.

But each will be heard.

Residents of the Northwest Arkansas Community Correction Center in Fayetteville will see themselves portrayed and their stories told in a unique drama presented privately inside the center next week.

The public gets a chance to hear their stories in a public production April 19.

Kathy McGregor, Erika Wilhite and Katie Nichol created Northwest Arkansas Prison Stories with a grant from the Arkansas Arts Council. They volunteer their time, meeting with 12 incarcerated women twice a week for four months locked inside the correction center. Through the program, residents have been introduced to various art forms to help them share their stories.

MY NUMBERS

Cost of a greeting card, \$1.58

Cost of 83 greeting cards, \$134.13

Cost to call Oklahoma, \$15

Times in jail, 30

Gun charges, 4

Years on meth, 13 1/2

Teeth in my mouth, 17

Healthy relationships, 0

Kids, 4

Pregnancies, 9

Family members addicted to drugs, more than 10

Cost to spend one second with my daughter, priceless.

- ADAPTED FROM HARPER'S MAGAZINE INDEX, COMPILED BY RESIDENTS
A CHALLENGE

Each session starts with poetry, McGregor explained. "Katie challenges us each week with poetry to start our thinking."

The group first read "Their Eyes Were Watching God."

"It's a difficult book, written in a Negro dialect," McGregor said. "The main character faces trials and tribulations just like they do. They think they can't get through it, but they do."

The difficulty of the book gives the women some literary confidence, she said.

McGregor said the residents initially offer comments like "This book is crA-zy," she laughed.

"But then they get it, and they think it's kind of cool.

They'll go back and share it in their pods."

"We broke it down, and we discussed it," said Nichol, who will earn a master's degree in creative writing in May at the University of Arkansas.

The residents leave each session with "homework" - writing assignments designed to make them think about themselves.

"Many of these women had never written poetry," Nichol said. "In the beginning they said, 'I can't,' or they'd protest their homework."

Nichol taught them words like "specific," "concrete," "real," "attainable."

"In the beginning, they'd just write, 'I'm so sorry for every bad thing I've ever done,'" she said.

During the four months, these women developed strong voices for writing and story telling. "These women are smart, intuitive and reflective," Nichol said.

Jordan, who said she hated school, volunteered Monday to write some other stories about which she had ideas,

feelings. Actually, she asked permission and got the OK.

“There’s power in being able to tell your own story,” McGregor said. “Maybe healing will come.” THINGS I DIDN’T KNOW I MISSED

The touch of others - a nudge, a push or a graze.

The feel of carpet under my feet.

I didn’t know I loved the sound of gravel popping under tires -

- and the scratching of pebbles as the car comes to a slow.

My son’s bony butt on my lap.

Dancing on Friday nights.

It is flip-flops, jeans and a T-shirt with hair grazing shoulders, swinging with each step.

Ramen noodles.

It’s paying my bills, running late and balancing my checkbook.

I didn’t know I loved being sober.

Picking out my own clothes.

Fresh lavender sheets, straight out of the dryer all soft and warm.

My daughter waking me up in the middle of the night because she’s scared.

Dad coming home covered in grease and Stetson.

Country music. I knew I liked it, but, God, that’s what I love.

- COMPILED BY RESIDENTS BUILDING TRUST

After the residents complete their regular writing assignments, Wilhite steps in. She collects their stories, condenses them and writes a script. Actors from her Artist’s Laboratory Theatre will speak the lines of these women during the performances of “Stories From the Inside Out.”

In addition to collecting the writing, Wilhite places an audio recorder next to each resident as she speaks.

“She studies the cadence and incantations of each girl, and has her actors use those when they tell the story,” McGregor said. “Some of the girls can pick out the actor playing themselves or even each other.”

Wilhite explained that her drama company also takes “found writings” such as high school journals and old love letters and puts them together to create plays.

“This is a much more emotional process to find the humanity - and it’s really easy to find humanity with these ladies - to impact the audience as well as them,” Wilhite said. “I hope they reflect on their own community, where they came from and where they are going.”

In addition to writing, the Prison Stories project introduces the women to other art forms through which they can tell their stories, McGregor said. Shannon Wurst, a local singer and songwriter, helped the residents create a “Lullabye From Prison” for their children. Artist JoAnn Kaminsky led the group in mask-making, and residents shared their stories as others played rhythm instruments in a circle.

“One woman who was not very forthcoming in class was able to tell more of her story from behind her mask,” McGregor said.

The culmination of the four months of work comes when the women draw their life maps, where they list important events in their lives that led them to this jail and use them to tell their stories to the group.

“This is the most critical part,” McGregor said. “By the time we’ve created these life maps, we’ve established trust with these women.”

This trust allows all the women to get involved, Mc-Gregor said. One woman who was raped as a child by her father’s dope dealer was told by her parents that it was her fault because she dressed too suggestively.

(The other women) “told her, ‘Even if you walk the streets naked, that doesn’t give him the right to rape you.’”

“These last meetings are crazy and beautiful and wonderful and hard,” Mc-Gregor said, reflecting on the Prison Stories session that is nearly over.

ABBY’S LIFE MAP

We lived in a camper they took off the back of an old pickup. It was crappy. The door was hanging closed with an old coat hanger. They’ve been rebuilding it since I was 5 years old, and it’s still not finished.

I did well in school. The only time I was called to the principal’s office, I was crying and screaming because I thought I was in trouble, and I’d never been in trouble before. But I was sent to the principal’s office because I received the Terrific Kid award.

In fifth grade, I met my best friends for life, but that was also the year that my family split up.

Everything just kind of started to suck then.

Abby’s parents became consumed by running their family business. They started drinking, and her mother, who suffered from arthritis, became addicted to pain medication.

Things spiraled from there. The children took care of the home and farm and were beaten if the jobs weren’t done. Abby told of taking drugs in school, cutting herself, indiscriminate sex, abusive relationships, giving a child up for adoption, stealing and the death of two friends because of drugs.

“I still have his belt. I still have his shirt. I still have his shoes,” Abby said of one while wiping tears. She said she overdosed many times after that “because I just didn’t care.”

Sitting next to her, Jordan watched Abby closely with a supportive look, an open smile. If touching were allowed in the center, Jordan would no doubt have her arms around the woman who has become her friend.

“The program really touches my life,” Jordan said. “We’re all different, but we’ve all been through so much. If you look at us, you would never think we’d had these bad things happen to us.”

“These 14 months in here. They will save me,” Abby said.

MAKING THINGS BETTER

The Community Correction Center stands in the middle of downtown Fayetteville, in the building that formerly housed the Washington County Jail.

“When we took over this place, we worried over what we could do to make this place better,” said Maggie Capel, the center director.

She proudly shows murals painted by residents in the main hallways of the prison.

Many are scenes of Northwest Arkansas - War Eagle Mill, Beaver Lake, Thorncrowne Chapel. The artists of these pieces had no formal training, she said.

Residents spend four hours a day in a work assignment and four hours a day in treatment, Capel said. “We treat them emotionally. We treat them spiritually. And we treat them physically - a volunteer comes in and teaches

them yoga. We try to affect them at a lot of levels.”

“We don’t ever ask what their crime was,” McGregor said. “We know that they did something criminal or they wouldn’t be there.”

In her experience, most of the residents suffered abuse in their lives, which led them to drugs, alcohol and addiction issues. They range in age from “early 20s to almost 40.” All of them are mothers.

Only 15.9 percent of the center’s residents return to prison, Capel said. The statewide recidivism rate is 23.4 percent, according to the Arkansas Department of Correction. The goal of the center is “to make them better, so they don’t come back,” Capel said.

“I see such a tremendous difference in the women from when they come in here, to when they leave,” Capel said. “And for each one, it’s different. I don’t know what the thing is for each individual, but I say throw everything we’ve got at them.” HOPES AND DREAMS

I want to open my own restaurant.

I want to be a part of my daughters’ lives - I’ve been in prison a lot.

I just want to be a mom. I want to go back to school. I want a normal life.

- Jordan

I’ve been working on my self-esteem, completing the confidence packets. I really want to sing openly. They are going to sing one of my songs in the show.

I want to go back to school, get a welding degree.

I want to be a real mom, to admire my child, to see the beauty in the world rather than looking for my next fix.

This program has opened my eyes to the person I really can be, not just a junkie.

- Christie ANOTHER CHANCE

“I think working with women is really important,” McGregor said. “I think they are an underserved population.”

“Women are a special circumstance, having a child when paroling out. There’s not enough safety coming out of prison. They return to the same situation that got them there.”

McGregor now hopes to create a healing halfway house, where graduates of the program could live and support each other “where they can take full responsibility and recovery of their life in all aspects.

“My goal now is a house,” she said. “I know it will happen. All I need is a house.

I want to offer women another chance.”

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