ARTS-IN-CORRECTIONS  
DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS  

A CASE STUDY (1988)  

INTRODUCTION  

In the early 1970's, a time when work opportunities for artists and arts educators were diminishing in the mainstream culture, many professional artists began to look to society's forgotten corners for a new constituency. Patients and prisoners offered an alternative opportunity for artists to respond to a crying need to be valued. The emergence of these institutional art programs also provides a challenge to artists' preconceptions about the value and potential of the creative processes--a value which was as rooted in the issues of survival as those of aesthetics.  

This challenge has now extended beyond the arts community, taking on popular perceptions of the role of art and culture in America. Artists who have applied their skills to the problems being faced by our community and social service institutions, have shown clearly that the power of "the arts" extends beyond the realms of aesthetics and entertainment. Through their work in our society's forgotten corners, they have generated new technologies for problem solving, communicating, and building self-esteem.  

As a part of the institutional art movement, a good many artists and arts organizations succeeded in developing programs in State and Federal prisons. In California, the efforts of, Eloise Smith and the William James Association proved the value of the creative processes to inmates and prison administrators alike and led to the creation of the California Department of Correction's own Arts-in-Corrections Program. This program brought many artists face to face with a raw and sometimes unsettling culture. Many who accepted the challenge, relished the chance to establish respect on the basis of their skill and knowledge. A respect, which, for those who persevered, clearly ran both ways. These artists came to know that they would be taking out as much as they brought in. They recognized that rather than starting a cultural community in prison, they were joining one.  

HISTORY  

Whether or not it has been encouraged, art has always been a part of prison life. In the "joint," tattoos, graffiti, and prison novels have been as common as bars and time. Arts-in-Corrections began in response to a request for support by inmate artists at the California Medical Facility at Vacaville in 1977. In funding proposals to the National Endowment for the Arts and the San Francisco Foundation, William James Association Director Smith hypothesized that an inmate could improve his self-esteem and thus, his behavior, by replacing his lost physical freedom with an inner freedom gained through the discipline and rewards of art. She proposed a curriculum in the visual literary and performing arts which would "provide an opportunity where a man can gain the satisfaction of creation rather than destruction."  

These proposals and others to the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration and the California Arts Council were met with enthusiastic responses. The ensuing two years of multidisciplinary fine arts programming at Vacaville convinced skeptical prison officials that the introduction of the fine arts, as-taught by professional artists, could improve the quality of the prison experience. The project's unlikely partnership (between the artistic and criminal justice professionals) also demonstrated how those with such seemingly desperate interests and points of view could work together for mutual benefit.  

The William James Association and their Federal and Foundation supporters of also sought to prove that it was in the self-interest of the State to support the expansion of arts programming to all state correctional
facilities. The first step in that direction occurred in 1979 when the California Arts Council and the Department of Corrections jointly funded the position of Interagency Liaison to explore that possibility. Then in July of 1980, the Legislature, through an augmentation sponsored by Senator Henry J. Mello, appropriated $400,000 for a department wide program. This funding provided for six full-time civil service Institutional Artist/Facilitators to be placed in six institutions and a program manager to coordinate activity in these and six other institutions.

During the next three years, the new program called Arts-in-Corrections (AIC), began to make its presence felt in the State's rapidly changing prison environment. Despite the added pressures of overcrowding and new prison construction, AIC managed to build consistent high-quality programs in each of the State's 12 correctional facilities. Beginning in the 1984/85 budget year, the Department began to respond to growing demands with increases in program support. In the following budget years, additional increases allowed Arts-in-Corrections to strengthen programs in existing institutions and expand to new institutions as they were opened.

PROGRAM

To the extent possible, AIC classes are run as if the setting were an art school, not a prison. Inmates in poetry class, for example, published anthologies and chap books. Musicians and actors put on productions for audiences at the institution. Painters submit their works for consideration in juries contests and exhibitions.

During the 1987/88 fiscal year, 41,000 hours of arts instruction were provided to 8,196 inmates by 256 professional artists sponsored by Arts-in-corrections in 17 institutions. Over this 12 month period, prisoners attended classes in painting, modern dance, ensemble jazz, video production, juggling, papermaking, improvisational acting, poetry, songwriting, raku ceramics, and 136 other curriculum offerings.

Other benefits have been derived from the establishment of institutional beautification and community service art projects. Through these endeavors, the program has turned the talent and skills acquired by inmates into a positive resource to be used by the institutions and the communities which surround them. Community members in over 35 municipalities throughout the State have had the opportunity to experience prisons and the people who live and work in them as an identifiable community contributor.

In 1984, AIC presented "Art from California Prisons," a juried visual art exhibition at the State Capitol featuring 120 works by inmates and their outside instructors. A second juried exhibition with 46 works will be touring the State in 1988 and 1989.

Special inmate performances are open to the outside as well. For example, the San Quentin Theater Workshop won the support and encouragement of playwright, Samuel Beckett, for an all inmate benefit production of his play "Waiting for Godot" presented at the prison. Proceeds went to four Bay Area Victim-Witness Programs.

Projects like these provide a rare opportunity for some of the more than 15,000 inmates who are released each year to forge a personal, positive link with the "outside" world. By bringing art created behind bars to the outside, or bringing the public "inside" to see a performance, AIC helps to dispel the notion that no convict has the potential to contribute to society--a notion which is too often earned both by the public and by inmates themselves.

Now after years of growth and increasing stability, the program's mission remains basically the same as it was when it was begun. Arts-in-Correction's role as the provider of arts programs in California
prisons has been to combine these inmate’s inevitable impulse to create with a fine arts model of quality and discipline. Our goal has been to improve the prison experience by providing participants an opportunity to affect their own environment and begin changing their attitudes about themselves and others.

PARTICIPANTS

Arts-in-Corrections serves a broad cross section of the men and women who have been convicted and sentenced to prison for criminal behavior in California. Approximately 46% of the CDC inmate population has been incarcerated for violent offenses (i.e., murder, assault, rape). Another 30% have been convicted of property related crimes such as robbery and burglary. Although only 19% of the states, 75,000 inmates have been sentenced for drug related crimes, a much larger percentage, 60% to 70% have histories of substance abuse. Nearly 47% of the prison population have graduated high school, but a large percentage of those who have not, show evidence of some form of learning disability. While it is difficult to generalize, the most consistent personal characteristics of inmate population are low self-esteem, a lack of self-discipline, and a lack of trust in others. Some attribute this to the fact that many inmates have been victims of child abuse.

IMPACT

Access to arts skills and materials has provided an opportunity for inmates to learn and experience and be rewarded for individual responsibility and self-discipline. Involvement in an arts discipline demands commitment and, once certain skills are learned, can lead to an increase of constructive self-sufficiency, heightened self-esteem, and a reduction of tension. The products (paintings, craft items, even music produced by inmates often provide them an opportunity to contribute to the communities and/or families to which they will eventually return. For the men and women who spend an average of 2-3 years as wards of the State, these attributes are essential to their eventual attempt at reintegration into society.

One inmate describes his changed attitude as "more caring." He adds, "People mean more to me today. You start painting people, and you start getting acquainted with them. I went from a noncaring, nonproductive person, to a productive person, a person with positive thoughts in mind. I went to the Parole Board and they looked at me a little different. When I am paroled, I don't think I'll ever come back. Before I probably would have."

The professional artists presence in prison as a model of this creative discipline and independence also poses a challenge to inmate art students. A challenge which offers a degree of control over a small corner of their lives in exchange for commitment and hard work. Through the art class the instructor makes available a place where possibility and choice and skill are rewards for those who accept personal responsibility for their artistic success or failure.

To realize the possibilities, have the choice and take advantage of these resources, inmates must commit to a kind of work which is alien to prison life. A work personified by the persistence and quality of the artists who come to share their skills. And as they work, they learn. And the more they learn the greater their investment in the triumph or failure of their efforts. For many this is a new experience. For some this opportunity to experience the exercise of creativity, opens a door, albeit often a back door, which allows them to continue beyond the curious attraction of the first few classes. A door to the development of a personal sense of self-worth which is quite different from the one being imposed upon them by the environment in which they live.
An inmate at the Correctional Training Facility at Soledad, makes the point that "criminal activity is rooted in gaining attention from others." He contends that "art is related, but it's not negative. My motivation is to pull myself out of the rut I got into, instead of waiting for someone to give me something, I am earning it."

Correctional personnel notice the change too. "The people in the art program are easier to deal with", notes a guard at San Quentin. "They have an outlet. Their tension is released in a constructive way."

A Correctional officer at the California Men's Colony comments that, "they carry themselves a little different--with their chests out a little more. And they seem more friendly. The atmosphere inside the program is nothing like it is outside these doors."

Of course, it would be naive of us to believe that the creation of one or two pieces of art is going to markedly alter one's value system overnight. But, it has been our experience that, over time, each step forward in the personal struggle for mastery and completion in the artistic process is a small down payment in the progress towards a new and solid-sense of respect for one's self and one's fellows.

EVALUATION

It is difficult to measure the impact art programs have on social institutions. But, it has been important for the Department to consider Arts-in-Corrections contribution to its overall mission, and to justify the expenditure of public funding for its activities.

In 1983, a Cost Benefit Analysis of the program was conducted by Professor Lawrence Brewster of San Jose State University. In it he concluded that in the four institutions studied, the program produced 68% more in measurable benefits than it did cost. Specific evidence on reduced incident rates by art program participants was also cited. The evaluation stated that 1175% of the Arts-in-corrections participants at the California Medical Facility and 81% of those at the Correctional Training Facility demonstrated improved behavior through fewer disciplinaries.11 (see attachment A) This evidence of dramatic reductions in prison infractions such as violent behavior and drug taking helped establish the programs practical utility to corrections officials. It also prompted a call for further study of its potential beneficial effects.

The next obvious area for evaluation was to study the program's effect on parole outcomes. This was not undertaken until 1987 because the Arts-in-Corrections program had not produced a large enough sample of "graduates" for a proper study. The results, though not entirely attributable to AIC participation, give further indication of the program's benefits.

In 1986, over 15,000 inmates were paroled or released back into California communities. These re-entered citizens spent an average of 42.8 months in California prisons at an average annual cost of $18,683. Within 24 months of their release from prison, over 58 percent were returned to prison for committing a crime or violating the terms of their parole. The 1987 Arts-in-corrections recidivism study showed that rate of return reduced by 51 percent for parolees who had participated in Arts-inCorrections (see Attachment B) programs while in prison. A comparison cost analysis showed that in 1986 Arts-in-Corrections spent approximately $19.21 for each hour of professional instruction it provided to an average class of 13 inmates.

These figures gain even more significance when we look at the future of California’s prisons. Now, in 1988, the Department of corrections house 75,000 inmates in 17 prisons. By 1990, there
will be over 90,000 prisoners vying for space in overcrowded facilities. It is estimated that Arts-in-Corrections' budget will grow from its current $1.86 million to approximately $2.5 million in 1990--less than .01 percent of the Department of corrections, projected annual budget.

Arts-in-corrections has come a long way since the first artists visited Vacaville. In ten years, it has grown from a tiny pilot program in one prison to the largest institutional arts program in the world. Thousands of prisoners and parolees can now think of themselves as something other than a con, a thief or an illiterate. They are redefining themselves and their attitudes, and words like "work," "commitment," "student," "beauty," and even "time," have taken on new meanings for them. There is now a place in prison where, in the words of one inmate, "You could forget where you were...where the blacks and the browns and the whites put their 'shanks' aside and not mess it up for a change."

SUNSET

Dan slaved hunchback on his knees, probed the trowel, pried out a weed's intrusion, admired his garden's order, rushed to water.
The only emotion he understood was gratitude; his expression of love, perfection.
He never learned
love is a lifestyle of forgiveness,
not a reward for things done correctly.

--William K. Murphy*

*Mr. Murphy is a student in an AIC Poetry Workshop.