

## **Mary Baron --“Living Inside,” Art in the Jail Program**

University of North Florida (UNF) English Professor Mary Baron, a student, former students, and a visual artist each share a common goal: to help change the lives of the juvenile inmates at the Duval County Jail in Jacksonville, Florida for the better. The way in which Dr. Baron, undergraduates Sarah Barksdale and Jennifer Kollasch; graduates Karen Roberts-Mills, Alicia L. Matthew, and Ian Michael Mouzon; and the artist Mr. Tony Roderigues successfully do so is through the teaching of different art forms such as painting, and the writing of poetry, rap, riddles and memoirs in what is known as “Living Inside,” Art in the Jail Program.

Sarah Barksdale is doing an independent study course on working with incarcerated writers with Professor Baron while Ms. Roberts-Mills, Ms. Kollasch, Ms. Matthew, and Mr. Mouzon studied with her in previous semesters at UNF. It is through the inspiration, direction, and example of Dr. Baron that these individuals have the opportunity to transform the lives of the inmates through this program. In a UNF In Context Audio Player interview with Joanna Norris, Professor Baron claims that many of these juveniles who are incarcerated for assault, robbery and even murder were born into a certain story. That is, they were given a certain setting and cast of characters and situation at birth which led them to the situation they are in now. She asserts that the Art in the Jail Program encourages the inmates to visualize the kind of life they wish to be living. She and these other young teachers teach them that they must imagine and write

about the life which has been out of their reach until this point. Only then will it become possible for them to make changes in their lives when they do get out of jail and to help them have a productive creative life when they are in it. Dr. Baron maintains that what she and the other volunteers do is to be interested in each of the inmate's respective stories which, she claims, inspires them to want to express themselves through poetry, riddles or memoirs. In this same interview, Dr. Baron states that each of these individuals can "walk out of that story and reconstruct a different one."

Professor Baron explains to Ms. Norris that she and her creative writing cohorts usually begin teaching poetry to the inmates because it "has fewer rules and is less threatening" to those who have never attempted writing before. She and artist Tony Roderigues show the inmates a variety of pictures and photographs "of what they could be," as stated by Dr. Baron, to inspire the inmates to have more positive images of themselves and the lives they want to live in the future. Tony also teaches them to paint and make collages together. Thus, the mediums that Dr. Baron and Mr. Roderigues use overlap and complement each other.

In an interview with the author at the jail Ms. Barksdale asserts that her work with word association and poetry writing with the inmates is changing her life as much as it is changing those of her students. She finds that these juveniles "have a lot of potential" and agrees with her professor that "we shouldn't just write them off." However, most significantly, she finds "we can make a difference." Thus, Sarah feels she is transformed by having the opportunity to have impact on the lives of others. It makes her feel as if

she has an effect, an extremely positive one. Mr. Mouzon's words echo hers when he reveals in the same interview that he is "amazed that he could communicate and make a difference." He also states that it makes him feel good that he is doing something that actually helps the inmates. This experience of teaching in the Art in the Jail Program has helped this recent UNF graduate to grow and change to such an extent that he no longer takes life for granted. He claims that the opportunity to volunteer at the jail also fully makes him realize that one really gets only "one shot in life," and that teaching in the prison constantly reminds him "that what I have is absolutely precious." Thus, this young man has become profoundly more mature by being able to interact with these young inmates to such an extent.

Tony Roderigues also claims that teaching in the program in the Duval County Jail with Professor Baron and students has been "incredibly rewarding" for him. He states that the fact that the inmates are "happy to see us" has an effect on him and that he misses these young men when he does not spend time with them.

It is certain that Karen Roberts-Mills has a positive effect on the inmates of the Duval County jail whom she is teaching. She asserts in the same UNF In Context Audio Player interview mentioned above that "We can challenge, change them in some way through books, radio and painting." It is apparent that she believes in her work there and in these individuals about whom she cares. In a July 3, 2006 news interview with Bryan Kelly of the local Television Station, Channel 4, Ms. Roberts-Mills describes those who are required by law to live there as "the same as the other kids I teach. They are viable,

have potential; a lot of these kids are really gifted.” In a letter to Professor Baron, Ms. Robert-Mills writes, “I found myself rewarded by how intelligent most of these kids are. One split second has changed their lives. They were receptive to us and treated us with the utmost dignity and respect.” Both Professor Baron and Ms. Roberts-Mills feel that the inmates in this institution are able to open up to them and to trust them. In a UNF Campus Connection interview with Sharon Ashton, Ms. Roberts-Mills states that she feels they can talk to her like a mother while Dr. Baron indicates that the inmates trust her as if she were a grandmother. She claims that when they write to her they address her as “Grandma Mary.”

What evidence is there that this openness and trust has any significant effect on the young men in jail? Dr. Mary Baron asserts in the April 17 “Ask the Expert” Television Show on Channel 4 noted earlier that one young inmate wrote a poem in which he praises a correctional officer which she does not believe would have happened before his experience with the writing and painting program. On this show this professor also reads aloud a very positive poem by a teenager named William. The poem is a Mother’s Day assignment and is about his grandmother:

“Ida Benjamin”

If my grandmother were a color,

She would be brown.

And she would be caramel because

She is sweet and kind

And loves to help.  
And if she were to be a plant,  
She would be a lily plant.  
She would be a lily plant,  
Because she always smells good.  
And if she were a sound,  
She would be soft music that relaxes me.

This very beautiful and touching poem is quite a strong indication that the program at the Duval County Jail is effective in helping the inmates become more productive citizens, one of its major goals. Who would not feel good after having produced such a loving work of art? And sharing it? Hopefully the other inmates who have contributed their creative pieces in “An Anthology of Poems and Artwork of Juveniles at the Duval County Jail, Jacksonville, Florida” also feel good about themselves.

In further exploration of the transformations which have occurred as a result of the “Living Inside” program is the one experienced by Ms. Roberts-Mills. In an interview which occurred in the lobby of the Duval County Jail on July 10, 2006, this devoted individual indicates that she is presently a teacher at the Kirby Smith Middle School in Jacksonville and has been accepted to graduate school. Not only does this teacher feel she has the potential to change those with potential in the jail, but that she has also been changed by having this opportunity to make a valuable contribution in the prison.

Teaching here has helped reinforce her career goal of being an English Professor, following in the footsteps of her mentor, Dr. Mary Baron. She claims in a letter to her professor that this program has allowed her “to see and utilize knowledge gained at the University of North Florida in a classroom setting.” Here she also asserts that she gets great satisfaction from knowing that she has contributed to such a program that “ensures these children don’t become recidivists.” She concludes by stating, “I came away feeling like they had given me much more than I had given them.”

The UNF graduate Alicia L. Matthew indicates in a letter to Professor Baron that she has the same feeling as Ms. Roberts-Mills about teaching creative writing at the jail: “It is not just what we can offer them. It is also what they offer to us.” She elaborates in this letter about her opportunity to volunteer by claiming it is “an invaluable experience.” She feels that she has learned to look at herself and see some of her “biases and misconceptions about juveniles.” Ms. Matthews continues: “These young men taught me how to play. They taught me to cherish pizza (it is a part of my freedom). I learned a new language (lingo). I learned the different way in which we cope with life situations. I learned that these kids are human. Though the students were there to learn, they ended up teaching me.” This enlightening opportunity has helped to prepare Ms. Matthew to teach youth at Southside Estates Middle School as well as to help her know how to live her own life.

Jennifer Kollasch’s letter to Dr. Baron relates what she has learned in her experience volunteering in the jail with her professor. An excerpt follows below:

This program has instilled in me a confidence that is indescribable, but I will make some attempt. As a future teacher I now feel that I could walk into any classroom, in any city, and feel comfortable as the leader of that class. As a human being, I have learned that it IS possible to treat everyone I meet with the same respect that I expect to be treated with. (This particular act is extremely difficult. For those who don't believe me, please consider how you would behave in a room with someone who had killed your next door neighbor.) I have learned that the person committing evil acts is not necessarily evil and they can (and want to) change. Most importantly, I know I have made a difference.

Thus, it is evident that all those who participate in the Art in the Jail Program at the Duval County Jail have the opportunity to transform each other. Tony Roderigues, Sarah Barksdale, Jennifer Kollasch, Alicia Matthew, Ian Mouzon and Karen Roberts-Mills all gain deep satisfaction knowing that they have made a difference in the lives of these young inmates. However, all feel that they have gained more than what they have given.

It is significant to note that this Arts in the Jail Program is presently funded by an anonymous private donor. At other times it is funded by the Cultural Council of Greater Jacksonville -- which pays Professor Baron as well as Tony Roderigues. The summer there were no funds Dr. Baron volunteered. The Jacksonville Sheriff's Office and the Duval County District Attorney's Office also fund the program because the individuals in

these organizations discern a difference in the behavior of the inmates when participating in the program, according to the July 10, 2006 interview with Professor Baron.

Below are student inmate riddles written within the context of the Art in the Jail Program:

Something I always want  
Never hard to find  
The closer and closer I get  
Trouble strikes me from behind.

What is it? *home*  
Shaman

They help us deal with our time  
Take stress off of our mind  
Have paragraphs and periods  
People and pictures.

What are they? *books*

Aaron

It flows most of the day  
It's fun to ride on  
It's a major part of Jacksonville  
It's a good place to look upon  
And you can see it from cell 85.  
What is it? *St. John's River*

Justin

It's always on top  
It looks down on everything  
It's the last thing put on  
It's usually shaped like a triangle  
And rain rolls off it when it hits it.

What is it? *a roof*

Justin

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