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The actors exit the stage, murmuring, "Words, words, words. Words Words, words."

Words are at the heart of what brings the inmates together.

The group at Two Rivers, which changes depending on whether someone is released or leaves the group, has discussed fatherhood, what it means to be a good citizen, how to live a happy life, or a better life, and, inevitably, why they are in prison, the mistakes they've made in their lives, and their pasts.

Stallings used to create topics that the men would talk or write about. But more often, there is something they want to talk about – whether it is something that happened to them during the week or something from their life they want to share.

"It's really just listening," said Spencer, 31, who co-directed "Metamorphoses" and helps facilitate the dialogue group at Portland's Columbia River Correctional Institution. "It's not trying to answer, not trying to fix, not trying to help; it's just giving air time to whatever is going on."

Rocky Hutchinson, 40, said he was a broken man when he started attending Stallings' dialogue group in 2013. His mother had died the year before. She was his only contact outside of prison.

When Hutchinson was a child, his mother was a prostitute and was addicted to crack, leaving Hutchinson to be raised by his grandfather who abused pills and alcohol. As an adult he lived in Portland and had "been through it all," using and dealing drugs, living as a junkie.

Participating in the group has allowed Hutchinson to step back from his life and "see my faults, admit my faults." He finds inspiration in hearing other people's stories; they all find camaraderie in gathering to talk and, oftentimes, commiserate.

Hutchinson has lost 50 pounds; he disparages the criminal lifestyle he once lived. He is at turns serious and thoughtful, then happy and cracking jokes – it is nearly impossible to think of him once living life as a thug on the streets.

He likens Stallings to a compass.

"He pulled me from broken wreckage and turned me into a pretty decent person, I think," Hutchinson said. "He gave me the ability to take myself back to be who I always intended to be.

"He brings out what's in your heart," Hutchinson said.

The inmates in the Two Rivers dialogue group have participated in the group for years. Week to week, they most look forward to the two hours they spend with one another each Saturday.

They have come to love one another – their closest friends, their chosen family.

"When I was out there robbing banks and realized that it was inevitable I would be going to prison, I never thought there would be a time during my incarceration that I would meet people who I cared about," Baird said.

They have long sentences, up to life without parole. But sitting in a dialogue group, a person might never guess they faced charges of sex abuse, drug possession



PHOTOS BY JOSEPH GLODE

Above: Johnny Stallings facilitates a dialogue with inmates from Columbia River Correctional Institution in Portland.



Left: Richard Dormer, 42, is an inmate at Columbia River Correctional Institution. He has played the guitar since he was six years old, which "has been a blessing and a curse," he said. He has synesthesia, a condition causing him to see colors when he hears sounds, including when he is playing.

and dealing, attempted murder, robbery and burglary. The inmates are polite and so forthright and thoughtful about their lives that it is almost disorienting. Many of them are talented musicians, singers, writers. One wonders, what is this person doing here? And for so long?

The answer is easy: They committed criminal acts against victims. But many of them are also victims – of abuse or neglect at the hands of their parents, of undiagnosed or untreated mental illnesses, of growing up and living in a world of gangs, drugs, poverty, violence, chaos. The odds of escaping that reality for anyone is miniscule. For the inmates, it was zero.

"It's hard," Spencer said. "They're sad stories, a lot of the time. Once I know the context they've lived in, I have a hard time blaming them for their actions."

Of Hutchinson, who grew up with drugs all around him, Stallings said: "His life is over-determined. How could he *not* go to prison?"

"Crime is seen as an individual moral failure: 'You knew right from wrong, and you didn't do the right thing.' This is nothing at all like how the world actually works," Stallings said. "You could go to any random house, look in, and decide whether the 3-year-old inside is going to an Ivy League college or is going to prison."

Stallings believes we are all that 3-year old.

"If we get the right nourishment and love and attention, we get to blossom and flower," he said. When we do not is when many of society's problems are created, including criminality, he said.

Undoing the trauma the inmates have

faced, Spencer said, "takes so much self-work." That is the overarching goal of the dialogue group. "We want everyone to see a better life for themselves ... to thrive and have joy in their life," she said.

The inmates in the groups led by Stallings are self-selecting. There are 16 regular attendees – roughly 1 percent of the prison's population. "We do get guys who are at a certain point where (they say), 'I'm done with this,'" Spencer said.

Over the years, many inmates have told Stallings that they had never had the opportunity to reflect on their lives. Many tell him they think it's good they wound up in prison, saying that at the time of their arrest, they were on a trajectory of pain and chaos that would have only worsened,

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