

Hope Partnership unlocks a future for incarcerated youth

BY TALIA GAD
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

One was about betrayal. One about suicide. And another about the perils of life as a bee.

The scripts-in-progress were being workshopped by a class of a dozen teenage boys. The kids were self-reflective, open to feedback, and pushed themselves outside of their comfort zones, which made it just like any other play writing course, except that these students were incarcerated.

It was one of a number of workshops offered by the Hope Partnership at youth correctional facilities throughout Oregon, and when I heard the teens' stories and the emotional depth of their writing, I wanted to know more about the goals and outcomes of the program.

Project Coordinator Kathleen Fullerton has been with Hope Partnership from its inception, so I sat down with her to discuss the program and what she's learned at its helm.

Talia Gad: *What exactly is Hope Partnership?*

Kathleen Fullerton: It is a youth-designed program where real learning happens. It offers creative writing, play writing, radio journalism and a whole range of skill-building areas. The workshops are led by partners and volunteers, and technically they teach art, life skills and executive functions like process, patience and attention to detail. But the real aim is to repair harm.

T.G.: *How does it do that?*

K.F.: My mantra is that you tend not to harm the things to which you are connected. Through the program, the youth see themselves as a part of a community. They understand that they haven't only impacted a single person; they've made a whole community feel less safe. Now they need to be responsible for building community.

That emerges from the program: to help

them see how they fit into their community, how they harmed it, and what value they can bring to it. If they don't feel they have something of value now, we talk about how they can create that thing of value.

T.G.: *From your perspective, what are the gaps between what's expected of youth as they transition out of prison and what they're capable of?*

K.F.: Their brain development is in a very formative stage, and many of the youth have limited exposure to the world. Everything a parent teaches high school kids, they miss some or all of that. They miss technological education, which is really important in a modern economy. They're unprepared for their top earning years and they may stay behind the curve at every turn.

And then there's the trauma, which most of them have had, too. They may look like an adult, and they may act like an adult, but really they're developmentally around middle school age.

T.G.: *What have you learned about youth incarceration that most people don't see?*

K.F.: How much their families are affected. Their whole families are also doing time. There's a lack of contact. Loneliness. You see how hard it is to maintain relationships with just phone calls and short visits. Family members are another kind of victim: the mantle of shame and hurt, and all the work that has to go into helping them heal as well. Some people think, "that's fine, they deserve it," but it really does have a lasting ripple effect on the whole community.

T.G.: *What inspires you most about your work?*

K.F.: Every young man who does well makes that choice every day. They choose to be vulnerable in a community that demands that they build on strength and resilience: that's a fundamental shift for them. Failure is familiar; success is hard. But the higher you set the bar, the more likely they are to go over it.

T.G.: *How does Hope Partnership hold youth accountable for their crimes, particularly if they've caused others harm?*

K.F.: The thing about the word

"accountability": we have a system that supposedly holds a juvenile accountable, but what really happens is that we send them away.

True accountability comes from teaching them how to hold themselves accountable. We like to think that rules hold people accountable, but accountability comes from choosing to follow the rules. And that choice comes from empathy.

If we help develop empathy and self-empathy, that leads to accountability. Self-empathy is about taking care of ourselves and understanding our own emotions. What is my need that's not getting met, and how to meet it in a healthy way? Then with empathy, understanding that someone else is behaving in a way because their need isn't being met. That process builds connection.

That's what Hope Partnership is. It builds connections.

Most youth incarcerated at Oregon Youth Authority Facilities have been convicted under Measure 11, which results in youth ages 15 or older charged with any of 21 crimes to be prosecuted in the adult criminal justice system and (if convicted) serve an adult mandatory sentence. With sentences ranging from nearly 6 to 25 years, the law has led to a significant rise in youth incarceration in Oregon.

Partnership for Safety and Justice has been reporting on the impact of Measure 11 on youth in a series of publications since 2011. The most recent one from February 2016 addressed the profound disparities of the law on youth of color and the long-term consequences of adult criminal convictions for youth. The next in the series is due Spring 2017.



Talia Gad is communications director at Partnership for Safety and Justice, which advances policy solutions to crime that ensure justice, equity, accountability, and healing to achieve safe, strong communities in Oregon.

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