

Life after prison



PHOTO BY ARKADY BROWN

Tyrone Rucker will participate in "Shaping a Future: Life After Prison," an event where former inmates will share their experiences with the public.

A project gives former inmates an opportunity to share their stories of re-entry and of injustices in the prison system

BY SARAH HANSELL
STAFF WRITER

Tyrone Rucker was 14 the first time he went to juvenile hall, before he "graduated" to prison, as he puts it. It was the same age he first tried crack.

Jackie Whitt was 14 when she became homeless and began learning how to steal cars to make money.

Years later, both Rucker and Whitt live in Portland, clean for eight years and five years, respectively. Rucker works on the Integrated Health and Recovery team at Central City Concern, and Whitt is an electrician.

Rucker, Whitt and eight other former inmates will share their stories Oct. 29 at First Unitarian Church of Portland as part of a project

called "Shaping a Future: Life After Prison." Their stories run the gamut of prison experiences, from extended stints in solitary confinement to racial segregation to prison guards' abuse of power. Most of the stories, however varied, have a common thread: Prison does more harm than good.

Carol Imani, the organizer of the project, has been a community college writing instructor in Portland and Klamath Falls for 25 years. Imani became interested in the impacts of incarceration because she has a family member who struggled with substance abuse and was involved in the criminal justice system.

In 2015, she organized an event, funded by the Regional Arts and Culture Council, where family members of inmates or former inmates

shared their stories. "Shaping a Future: Life After Prison" is her opportunity to continue creating a platform for people affected by the prison system and a space for them to build community with one another, this time focusing on the challenges of re-entry after prison.

"I thought that's something people generally don't understand, that when you get out of prison, it's difficult in a lot of ways," Imani said.

She facilitated five writing workshops with the 10 project participants. They had the chance to delve into their experiences with prison and re-entry and share them with others who have also gone through those challenges. The Oct. 29 event is an opportunity for the former inmates to share their experiences with a public audience, to "tell their stories without shame," Imani said.

And this is how Rucker and Whitt tell their stories of prison and re-entry - without shame, but with gratitude and with conviction.

Tyrone Rucker's story

Rucker starts his story off at the age of 14, when he was first sent to juvenile detention and drugs began to consume his life, he said.

"It's funny how you think a system is rehabilitating you," he said. "But everyone I was in juvenile hall with I saw in prison later on in life. So something was going on. The system's broke. Not saying we weren't doing wrong, but juvenile hall graduated us to prison."

Rucker grew up in Pasadena, Calif., as one of three boys, years apart from his older brothers, each from different fathers. Their mother was raising them on her own.

By the time he was an adult, he was "homeless and broke," smoking crack and sometimes meth, and in and out of jail and prison.

"Never got any information, never heard about treatment or anything like that," he said.

Rucker never felt like prison was about rehabilitation, preparing him to succeed on the outside or helping him overcome his addiction.

"I remember the time before the last time I went to jail; I remember leaving and everybody was like, 'All right, man,'" he said. "And I remember saying, 'I'll be back.' And was dead serious, was like, 'Man, I smoke crack, I'm going to be back.' I was serious. And it happened. I went out and smoked crack and was right back."

Jackie Whitt's story

Whitt grew up in an environment surrounded by drugs, her mother a heroin user in and out of the criminal justice system. Whitt suffered neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse - trauma that remained untreated for a long time. When Whitt was a youth, she and a group of friends whose parents all abused drugs vowed that they'd never touch hard drugs (anything beyond alcohol or marijuana) and that they would make it out.

At age 14, her mother relapsed, and they lost their home. Whitt dropped out of school in the eighth grade, stealing cars to make a living.

"I didn't realize that because of my childhood trauma, there was a lot of stuff going on inside my head," she said. "Depression, anxiety, a lot of difficult things."

At age 19, she met the man who would

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IF YOU GO

What: "Shaping a Future: Life After Prison"

When: 1 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 29

Where: First Unitarian Church of Portland, 1211 SW Main St.

Cost: Free; open to the public