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# Unfettered Expression

Prisoners find release through art.

In prison, being an artist is a status symbol. In a social structure that creates a pecking order based on crime committed and physical stature, an artistic bent, an imaginative talent, garners respect. Because that's not usually the case on the outside, "where artists are expected to pay their dues, to starve," says Ron Chase, director of Sponsors, a non-profit that works transitioning ex-offenders back into the community, that respect is even more poignant.

On Oct. 24, the exhibit *Art Behind Bars*, original artwork created by inmates and ex-offenders, will open at Maude Kerns Art Gallery, paying homage to incarcerated women and men who've found an outlet for imaginative release. A benefit for Sponsors, the show is more an offering of those who've been in the system, to show there's an aspect of spirit and beauty in everyone.

Nearly 30 years ago, Sister Margaret Graziano, this year awarded the E.R Cass award — corrections highest honor — entered the women's dorm in Lane County Jail and asked the women what they needed. They told her, "Anything to relieve our boredom."

Art was at the top of her suggestion list, and the class was eagerly accepted by Graziano's students.

"When the men heard about it, they wanted one, too," she says. In addition to her art classes, Graziano created a library, with furniture donations from St. Vincent's, books donated by Smith Family Books and others in the community, and volunteer librarians. "So many people in jail are thirsting for knowledge and education," she says.

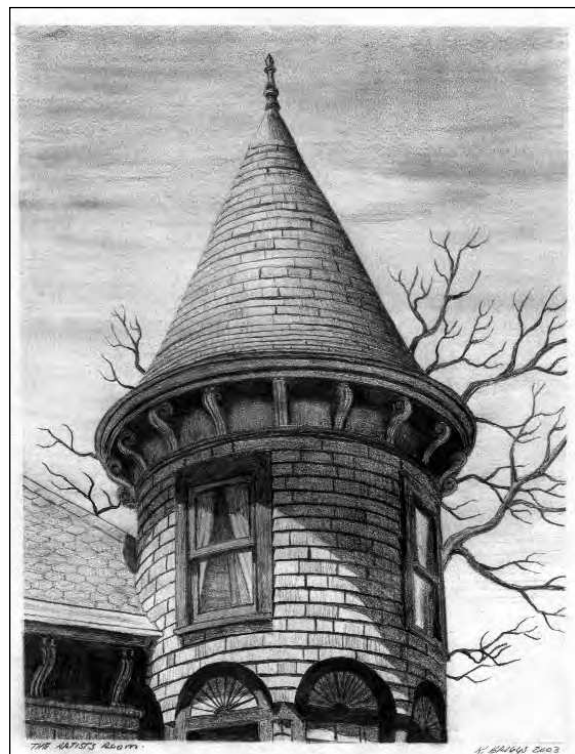
But the art classes were her first project. "People get really isolated in jails and kind of hopeless and often lie in beds all day and this is a nice break. Motivation, for one, is a big thing."

Graziano saw inmates change during the classes. "Art is a way of expressing what is within them," she says, adding that inmates will often draw angry animals or angry faces at first, then, "As they accept the fact they're going to be there long term, there's a greater peace within their hearts. You see their art change." Graziano adds that the release of emotions often results in art depicting what they miss: for men: beautiful women, for all: scenes of nature.

At first, some feel they're not artists, not good enough or the art is too hard, says Graziano. "I let them know that everyone is an artist and has it in them. In our jail we can only use one inch-long pencil to do drawings." In the education dorm, however, other art supplies are brought in and work can be done in various media. Graziano adds, "I believe in art and music and drama and dance and all those things that lift the spirit. Men and women in jail are looking for more spirituality now, too."

Psychologically, art has a profound im-

act on the lives of inmates, according to art therapist Susan St. Pierre, who volunteers with Graziano. "The benefit of creative art therapies in general is that they bypass the



The Artist's Room by Kevin Briggs

**'I believe in art and music and drama and dance and all those things that lift the spirit.'**

**- Sister Margaret Graziano**

verbal process. We have a lot of skill there but also a lot of resistance. We manage that really well so it's hard to get through to someone." Yet with art, St. Pierre says, "different parts of the brain become accessed and people get clarity in certain issues." Seeing, feeling or dancing it is a different experience from talking about it.

Specifically for fine art, St. Pierre will often set up a still life, so that inmates must focus on it for long periods of time while they sketch. This takes their attention off their problems, she says. After, the group can discuss the work they've done. "Warmth is being created while they talk about their work, and they become more connected with others," she says, adding, "Maybe they'll find a passion in there."

Ron Chase, who oversees Sponsors, says the show is not meant merely as a fundraiser, but "to show people there's another side to the ex-offender population." With a show that features work in woodcarvings, computer graphics, paintings, sketches and more, Chase says, "Hopefully people will look at these folks as human beings, and with some encouragement and opportunity, we can activate the other side."

*Art Behind Bars* opens Oct. 24 with an opening reception from 4-6 pm, Sunday, Oct. 26 at Maude Kerns. The reception will feature speakers and artists. The show runs through Nov. 14.

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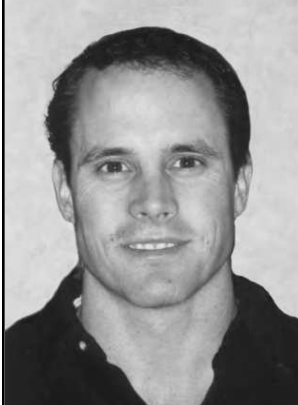
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