

Speaker 1:

We're going to be funny because Eric's really tall.

Eric:

We're introducing the Prisoner Neighborhoods Art Project. It is a program that bridges the gap between prisons, prisoners, art exhibition, higher education, and the community. This is a class at Stateville Prison. At Stateville, art has always been a way for prisoners to express themselves. But what P+NAP has brought to the prison is a structured teaching on the different disciplines of art and the way for prisoners to help get a voice and bring that voice to the outside world. P+NAP classes were available at Stateville much due to Dr. Margaret Burroughs. Really, she was a great fighter, activist, artist, teacher and pioneer for more than 50 years. Dr. Margaret Burroughs, who was more known for her work for DuSable museum and during the Black Arts Movement, rather than her fight for prison was very, very paramount in the differences and the changes that have been made today.

Speaker 1:

A couple of years ago we did the exhibition where we pulled a bunch of documents and largely because Rebecca Zurac, myself and Erica Miners to write an article. And we found all these amazing histories of Margaret Burroughs work in this defender article. She was on the defense company for Nathan Wright, who was wrongfully convicted, and he got out of prison for Pontiac prison to go to his own exhibition that raised money for his own defense committee. So it's pretty amazing. And of course that's 1973, I think, or '5. But she also wrote this article in the defender right after the uprising at Attica asking for support and also she raised money for her projects, and this is one way that she's doing that. She's asking for support for classes at Stateville and Pontiac.

So we're part of that Prisoner Neighborhood Arts Project. And we got started about seven years ago with the goal of making a visual and literary work that would speak about the conditions of the 1%. And that's 1% of other on this 1% of American residents who are combined to prisons, combined to cages who are both subjects and witnesses to this historic era of mass incarceration. Our approach to teaching was one of collaboration because we knew that people inside were already writers, already artists, already scholars doing work way before we came and doing work when we left. So our approach was to think collaboratively about how to make it work together, how to match our different skills that we could bring together.

So we wanted to create a vehicle for folks to tell... or a vehicle for folks in prison to tell stories and to report what was happening by connecting work made in classes back to neighborhoods, which are both places where incarcerated people were from, but also places that seemingly have no connection to incarceration, but we know every place has a connection to incarceration.

We imagine the purpose of the work as a pedagogical one that artists and writers would educate... the incarcerated artists and writers would educate communities about issues of criminalization and incarceration through creative and critical works. So we tried to develop a set of exchanges between inside and outside communities and create works that ask questions about who's behind the wall and the policy and the laws that keep folks there. And so the work was trying to create... hang on, sorry. I'm misreading on it. So we sought to create work with folks that could teach us what we needed to do to decarcerate.

We started with art and poetry, but quickly grew to teach humanities classes, sociology, political science, history, and more faculty from Northwestern had taught with us for many years. Now we teach 13 classes a year. We hold monthly think tanks in the prison and do produce special projects in the think

tanks. And we host a guest lecture series. We also partner with Northeastern Illinois University to offer a bachelor's degree program. So this May, the first cohort of eight students will get their bachelor's degree from Northeastern Illinois University, which is exciting. Yeeey for the arm of people who do that work.

So we're really divided into three spokes of a wheel, if you will, that we have art and exhibitions, we have higher education, what Eric said before, and then we do the community engagement and that works a lot with art and exhibition. And so the people who are doing the higher education work have really been working hard to make sure that degree program works. But as the project grew, we knew we had some political and creative goals to do... to the best of our ability, we wanted to bring people into the prison, different kinds of people into the prison to puncture, even for a few hours, the isolation that prison produces and to bring cultural work out of the prison. To puncture the myths that prison are a form of public safety or a form of corrections. And so we started the project as a cultural project. So we're just going to run through some slide. Eric's going to talk about some of the artists and more.

Eric:

Yeah, well, P+NAP offers a variety of art classes, visual art, writing, the spoken word, it offer movement and performance art classes such as dance and theater. From my experience as one of P+NAPs former students and the recent exoneree, these types of classes are necessary because they allow Gus and El lit in a way to rehabilitate themselves and stimulate their minds. These classes are now progression and achievement, things that we all need. Since its inception, P+NAP has heal prisoner, artist by forcing us to think outside of the box and allowing us access and resources and knowledge that would have otherwise been foreclosed us. As a result, you see different facets of art and every discipline now being produced by prisoners at Stateville.

This work has taken on more political stance and wow, what more can I say about it? As you see these are some of the artworks or some of the exhibits that we worked on and each one had some type of goal in mind, whether it was collaborative between spoken word and art, the visual artist or whether it was just creating spoken words to ultimately signify some point or some type of thing that was going on. Whether it was the time, the long sentences, the torture, the every realm of any type of incarceration that you can imagine, these artists have ultimately covered. These here are our thing. We've been doing portraits of ourselves of the way that we think. There's actually mine right there. Yeah. I think that it all was reflective of just the things that we do and the way we feel and just the work that we did.

Speaker 1:

And at the time that we made these, there was new pictures that staple, they brought back pictures.

Eric:

Yeah. [inaudible 00:08:41]

Speaker 1:

There hadn't been pictures of, say for maybe 15, 20 years?

Eric:

Yeah, almost 20, 30 years.

Speaker 1:

So people who had... so we talk about the ID was the only picture that people had.

Eric:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 1:

But that's not a picture, that's a document. You would never use your license to be, hey which I got this picture of me. Mine's particularly terrible for instance. But so we tried to take the state ID and make an intervention in it by adding these patterns in the background-

Eric:

[inaudible 00:09:08]

Speaker 1:

At the exhibitions we always have, just like what Mary said with CTGMs work, we always have events and speakers come and talk. This is a group of young people who went through the show and made poetry based on the show and then perform the poetry in the exhibition. We also did a project last year. This was led by an artist named Erin who taught printmaking in the prison. And it was actually the first time we think that printmaking had been taught since Margaret Burroughs was last there. She actually taught printmaking with real tools. Were you there when that happened?

Eric:

No.

Speaker 1:

No. You [inaudible 00:09:51] But because we're not allowed to use sharp tools, we use it with styrofoam and pen. And so these artists made these prints and then with their consent Aaron, arranged them into the shape of a billboard, and we put this up in North Lawndale. And the people in North Lawndale pick the colors and pick some of the quotes that were on it, et cetera. We had a big paint day in order to do that. I know we're out of time. Okay. So this is just the work we do. We develop work inside and bring that outside in order to have conversations about issues of incarceration. Just recently we did the same... we did another GoBoard with some of the same work in Washington Park. And Washington Park, they really wanted to highlight Margaret Burroughs and so we added her in there.

We had poets come and read. Eric came and read. And the work we have up now is an example of the work that we're developing more and more, which is to focus on a thematic that is identified by people inside of the things that they want to talk about. The issues that are important. And so here we, hang on the time, here we talked about we did a two year project around long-term sentencing and the other long-terms it produces. And we worked for two years, assigning classes with different prompts around long-term sentencing, learning from people on the outside and the inside what long-term sentencing is, how do we end up this way with so many people in prison. Today one in nine people who are in prison serve life sentences, and one in seven have sentences so long that they will probably die and put in their... have virtual life sentences.

And so we interviewed people, family members whose children were in prison. We had a dinner with formerly incarcerated people to talk about how long is long. We asked artists to respond to essays and a book that we just produced that you can get on Amazon or your local bookstore called The Long Term and just came out. It's actually... you can get it from Haymarket pressed. And so all these prints correspond to certain essays in the book. And we spent a year with artists making a hand drawn animation that looks at the impacts of long-term sentencing on the people in the class. And so we had a class of, I think, 14 artists and only one person in that class has an outdate. And that's because he was re sentenced under juvenile life without parole, under Alabama University.

Eric:

University of Alabama.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. And Eric developed a whole guide on long-term sentencing. So we hope that this work will connect to the policy issues that people want to push about bringing back the parole boards and [inaudible 00:12:39] State of Illinois or ending truth and sentencing. So in the laws that work to lock up people for longer and longer terms. And there's so many artists and people that are involved with us, and I just did as many names as I could to stay to the hat. So thanks.

Eric:

Thank you.