

PRACTITIONER PAPER

## Sanctuary in the Richmond City Jail

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### Abstract

*The following article is a collaboration among four individuals about unique programs run through “The Sanctuary” at the Richmond City Jail in Virginia, US. The Richmond City Jail is one of few jails in the US to offer programs to inmates who serve only short sentences as compared to prisons where the incarcerated serve much longer. In addition to this anomaly, students from outside of the jail come inside to take college classes with the inmates. Programs include literature classes, yoga, religious studies, creative writing, and more. The article explores the impact of The Sanctuary on the spirit, confidence, and perceptions of self-worth among inmates as compared to incarceration without such programs. Practitioners may use the programs detailed as a model for other institutions and evidence of the success of community building and education inside jails and prisons.*

**Keywords:** Jail education; community building; incarceration.

### Preface

Within the cinder-block walls plastered with black and white computer printouts of Rosa Parks, Ghandi, Huey Newton, and other freedom fighters, photos that are now peeling from summer after sticky Virginia summer without air conditioning, we sit and read in community – in the Sanctuary. The four of us, among others, seek to create meaningful responses to and dialogue around literature as well as create our own art. This article is the result of such collaboration, a collective project among us four: a post-master's graduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University and three residents of the Richmond City Jail. Although three of us are incarcerated at the time we write this, all of us have been locked up and experienced the criminal “justice” system first-hand, behind the bars. Given this, we use the first-person plural. Though our individual experiences may be slightly different, the four of us speak in solidarity.

The Richmond City Jail (RCJ), an aging building from the 1960s, is unique in many respects aside from its dilapidated appearance. This includes a number of programs for inmates, unusual for a jail as compared to a prison. Jail is a transient place. People serve short sentences, get bailed out, or transferred to different institutions. Consequently, few jails in the US offer extensive programs to their inmates who, relative to prisoners, are there for only a short stay. Only because of our gracious Sheriff C.T. Woody, JR, do these programs exist. However, the irony is that people who are soon to be released may be in the greatest need of programs to offer strategies, skills, and ideas about how not to return to jail.

Although, as we write this article, the finishing touches are being carried out at the “new jail,” which promises better amenities such as air conditioning and

fewer dripping pipes, we wonder if our programs will make the leap from our decrepit two-story brick building to the new six-story concrete structure. It looms over us with narrow windows reminiscent of castle arrowslits, but they serve not to keep intruders out as much as to keep the incarcerated in. What looks like shark fins jut up from around the perimeter of the roof; its shadow circles us.

We write this as a tribute to the programs we believe are important and hope will continue in the new space. We hope this article does not become an historical account of what was but a testament encouraging the expansion of the existing programs at RCJ and a model for other sites of incarceration.

The room where we convene lacks the technology and size of a typical school classroom. There are no LCD projectors, smart boards, or even climate control. Once a mattress storage room, it is long and skinny, made even more narrow as it is lined by desks and bookcases, for it is even too small to have a row of desks: they must be turned sideways and pushed against the wall. We sit in a circle, or the best we can make of one, but it looks more like an oblong ellipse. Your nearest neighbors are six inches to either side and you sit facing one another about three feet apart. This closeness may take some getting used to, but it reinforces the spirit of community.

Despite the less than amenable physical conditions, we make learning happen. The room is the only respite from jail life and is referred to as The Sanctuary. We believe any space can be made a safe, caring learning environment with the dedication and participation of those within it.

The space is unique, not just for the appearance of our classroom - our Sanctuary - but for what happens in it. We read, discuss, and learn together and from each

other. There is no hierarchy here. A “teacher” facilitates the class, but it is the community built here that motivates and teaches. The austere conditions, although the result of a deprivation of resources rather than parity, also facilitate the deep learning in this environment. There are no distractions of cell phones, Facebook, or the like. It does not matter whether you have a college degree, GED, or no secondary education at all (and we have all three in the same room). Instead of worrying about differences, we are able to focus on building a community that lifts up everyone.

### **General Population**

When the three of us who are currently incarcerated at the Richmond City Jail\* first arrived, we were placed in general population, or “gen pop.” There was much chaos. People argued incessantly, stole from each other constantly, and fought regularly. Fights were so common, it was abnormal not to see at least one attack daily. We consider ourselves compassionate individuals by nature, but here we could not be kind for it would be considered weakness and you'd end up on the wrong side of a punch. Here, there were only two options: put on a mask and hide who you are or become a victim yourself. It was seriously dehumanizing.

It felt hopeless, and many of us considered stooping to the level of those around us because hey, if you can't beat em' then join em.' We felt defeated, because facing felony drug charges, we knew no one wants to hire a felon, so why not try to figure out how to not get caught next time and be the best criminals we can be? This is what the chaos of general population does to a person; it's how it makes a person think. It is hell.

### **Sanctuary**

Fortunately, we escaped general population by entering recovery programs that allowed us to attend the one place in the jail where we can be creative, be ourselves, be human: The Sanctuary. This is the only place in the chaotic confinement where there is a sense of calm. It is not hyperbole to call it The Sanctuary. It is not just a “school” where we take classes, earn certifications, and learn together; it is much, much more.

In a typical school setting the teacher instructs and the students follow the lead, but here in The Sanctuary, we all learn from each other, sharing our creative minds through stories, poetry, music, dance, religion, art, and politic. Many of us are from the inner-city and have never been exposed to some of the things we come in contact with here: yoga, a music studio with industry standard equipment, interpretive dance, literature, and college classes.

Some of us had not been in a classroom for decades and even more intimidating was the prospect of taking classes alongside college students through the Open Minds Program which brings university students from the outside to take classes with us on the inside. Further anxiety provoking was the fact that it had been nearly a year since some of us had seen or interacted with anyone that wasn't an inmate, deputy, lawyer or judge. It was nerve racking, fearing the students would judge us,

look down on us, and see us the way we saw ourselves at the time - a caged animal with no feeling or soul.

However, what we found were students who were compassionate, understanding, accepting and not so different than us. The most powerful change happened when we realized that their compassion and acceptance of our situation allowed us to be more compassionate and accepting of ourselves; and then a huge weight was lifted. We became infused with feelings of self-worth and comfort, knowing that despite our criminal charges and incarceration, we were still sentient people that others cared about, and we had a voice that others wanted to hear.

This was what we feel saved many of us and our sanity throughout our incarceration; the students' compassion for us was contagious, causing us to care about ourselves again. Learning with the students strengthened our confidence to leave these walls and continue our education on the outside. This has been perhaps the most valuable part of our Richmond City Jail experience in the Sanctuary: confidence, self-worth, and hope.

Through college classes offered by Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia Union University, and the University of Richmond, we have read poets such as William Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Etheridge Knight, Amiri Baraka, Edger Allen Poe, and many more. We've read works from Ghazzali, a Sufi scholar. We studied the works of Houston Smith, a religious writer. In taking these courses, we've uncovered knowledge we thought we had forgotten over the years.

Many of us learned a new skill with respect to reading literature. One of the teachers taught us how you can compare anything you read to another piece of literature. This skill can be used in everyday life. Comparing newspaper articles to excerpts from books we're reading allows us to delve more deeply into the text and gain a richer understanding. Also, many of us have applied this strategy to our religious studies, comparing scriptures in order to better understand them. The limits to this strategy are endless.

In addition to learning academic content, we collaborate with each other to write, revise, and share our original poetry, music, and other art forms. The Sanctuary has allowed us to unlock our creativity and awaken parts of ourselves that had been latent. We've discovered we have amazingly talented singers, songwriters, poets, dancers, writers, storytellers, and composers who we never knew were sleeping in a bunk just a few feet away.

### **Realizing What Matters**

During our incarceration at Richmond City Jail, we have come to realize some truths: no matter our backgrounds, we as people and especially as inmates, come to recognize what is truly important in life and appreciate the simple things. As the old saying goes, “You don't know what you've got until it's gone.”

For instance, without any control of your meals – when you eat them or what they include - things as humble as a bowl of cereal become significant. Usu-

ally, you cannot get cereal (especially name brand!) in the jail, but once a year during the holiday season, the jail makes this and other exclusive items available for purchase by friends and family for residents. Residents cannot buy these items directly from the commissary. Someone on the outside has to order and purchase these holiday packs for residents from a special catalog. For one of us, his family sent such a care package. While many people on the outside were opening gifts of new computers, iPods, and other expensive items, he was jumping for joy over Fruit Loops! The cereal was important not only because it was unavailable 364 days of the year, but because his family sent it to show their love even though they could not be there in person; this was his first holiday away from them.

This anecdote underscores how the austerity of jail life can allow us to focus more on ourselves and what's truly important: relationships with other people. The Sanctuary, a truly unique place, has taught us this. Don't get us wrong, it's still a jail and we wish never to return. But we feel The Sanctuary has been the best thing to happen to us in a long time, life changing and life saving. It's ironic how a little room inside the Richmond City Jail has helped open our eyes to the world and is making us more responsible citizens.

### **Moving Forward**

Jail is supposed to be a punishment for the bad choices people have made in society. Incarceration is designed to be difficult; that's why it's called *hard* time. The goal? To make people never want to return. However, just confining people to miserable conditions doesn't seem to be working if we consider the high recidivism rates in the United States.

In contrast, the various programs offered through The Sanctuary have been essential tools in keeping us sane and motivating us to become better and more productive citizens as opposed to more slick criminals. It was The Sanctuary and the people within it that changed our views and gave us new perspectives on our life situations. We graduated from feeling like a pariah to feeling like an empowered student with opportunities and a future. The success we found in The Sanctuary gives us hope that we can carry that success with us when we're released. This is where healing begins.

The Sanctuary has allowed us to come to terms with our incarceration and use it to better ourselves instead of engaging in more self-destructive behavior. It's offered us opportunities within these walls that many of us were never given on the outside such as writing this article; it gives us confidence that we have a voice, that it is valuable, and that we want to use it.

*\*Author's note: At the time of publication, two of the three co-authors have been released.*

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