

MONOGRAPHS

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INSIDE IMAGES

Art for A.R.T. (At-Risk Teens)

by Janet Jones, Utah Arts Council, Community/State Partnership Program

Untitled

by inmate Rodney W. Smith

*I was that
which others
did not want
to be*

*I went where others
feared to go
and did what others
failed to do*

*I asked nothing
from those who gave nothing
and reluctantly accepted the thought
of eternal loneliness, should I fail*

*I've seen the face of terror,
felt the stinging cold of fear,
and enjoyed the sweet taste
of a moment's love*

*I have cried, pained
and hoped
I have lived times
others would consider best forgotten*

*At least someday,
I will be able to say
that I was not proud*

As a representative of the Utah Arts Council's Community/State Partnership Program, I can attest to the fact that we make no distinctions when it comes to identifying an arts community. We pride ourselves in this philosophy to the extent that it accompanies our Mission Statement. To summarize Webster's definition, a community consists of "a group of people living in the same locality having common interests." That's enough for us.

I'm assuming that most of you have a general idea of what is involved in the daily life of an average, garden variety community development coordinator such as myself, but for those who may not, I'll briefly explain how we go about our business at the Utah Arts Council (UAC). The primary mission of our particular program is to use the arts both constructively and pragmatically as a tool for community and economic development. We hope that we're more imaginative and colorful than the words "average" and "garden variety" might convey and if we are, we believe that is reflective of our constituency. Following more time than we care to think about pecking away at our computer keyboards and organizing paperwork, we actually get out of our offices and into the field to work with and for real people! That's where the magic happens. That's the part of my job that gets its hooks into me and won't let go. I spend many a sleepless night tossing and turning over various individuals, ideas, problems, and challenges. The thing is, challenges have always been my weakness. Or perhaps they are my strength? Either way, I've never been one to turn away from them — often times to my own detriment.

As a Native New Englander who has spent considerable time living and working on both the east and west coasts, I don't think it would surprise anybody to know that I relocated to Utah with a few preconceived notions. I can honestly report that some of them were completely unfounded and others were right on. Yes, there is much in Utah which provokes me. There is much here to pique my interest and to push my buttons simultaneously. Working (and living) with the arts in Utah can be frustrating, interesting, exciting, and challenging. Clearly I am hooked.

In any case, this particular article will focus on one unique arts community located in

rural southeastern Utah. This community is comprised of a group of extraordinary individuals — known as Inside Images — presently incarcerated at the San Juan County (SJC) Jail in Monticello, a county-owned facility which contracts with the state of Utah to house state prisoners.

At any given time, Inside Images consists of about a dozen relatively young men. Of course, the older I become, the younger everybody else seems . . . not that I'm *that* old, mind you. We tried several times to get a good photo of the group to accompany this article but for some inexplicable reason, all the shots came out dark and out of focus. I'm here to tell you that these guys are neither of those things. Probably the best way to picture them is to think of your brothers, your friends, your neighbors — that's how I think of them. I've enjoyed a number of visits with the Inside Images group and I often have to remind myself that we're in a maximum security prison facility and that some of these guys are doing serious time.

We meet in the prison library which also serves as a classroom, computer room, and workout room. The most outstanding feature here is a huge wall mural depicting an eagle soaring through stormy skies — lightning bolts flashing from its talons. Upon closer inspection, the awesome creature appears to be suspended in flight, it's wings hovering wide over a beautiful mountain lake below. The significance of this incredible body of work is not lost on me. I get the message loud and clear. Navajo inmate Charlie Hutchins was the primary artist involved in this project with the help of another inmate who is no longer at this facility. In time, I came to learn that Charlie's artistic influence is considerable within this group as evidenced through the artwork accompanying this article. Inherent to his Navajo culture, he is talented, soft-spoken and strong-willed. Qualities incongruous to his surroundings. It cannot be easy for him here.

The members of Inside Images are subject to change for reasons both good and not so good such as parole, transfer, disciplinary action, etc., but such is the reality of their situation and they deal with it admirably. I think we can all identify with the fact that change is probably the only constant in most of our lives. I also want to make the point here that if I cannot personally identify every member of Inside Images, past and present, I believe that each deserves individual recognition and I hope that will be conveyed throughout this article. However, I think the guys would be the first to tell you that this whole thing is about "the group" — not about any one individual. I



happen to know that they've worked hard to arrive at and maintain this philosophy. Through trial and error, they've evolved enough as individuals to recognize the value in group consensus and collaboration for the greater good — the larger picture. For this, I admire and applaud them. How many of us with the "outside

advantage" (excuse the pun) experience a similar struggle day after day? These guys are not only doing so under trying circumstances, they're doing it well.

Speaking of the larger picture, let me backtrack a bit to explain how this group got started. The San Juan County Jail is a fairly new and relatively small facility which opened in 1989. In the spring of that same year, Blue Mountain Academy (BMA) began with a strictly academic focus under the direction of a remarkable woman by the name of Tauna DeGraw and with the assistance of academic tutor and VISTA volunteer, Stacey Haas. By that fall, Tauna decided that the arts would be a valuable addition to round out BMA's educational programming. Eventually, Inside Images was created within BMA and art classes were offered to inmates twice weekly.

To understand how things progressed from that point is to understand Tauna DeGraw and Jail Commander, Lt. Bill Christensen. One of several hats worn by Tauna is that of adult education coordinator for the San Juan County School District.

Among many things, she is the (amazingly young-looking) single parent of six children, an innovative educator of at-risk teens, and a recipient of Monticello's highly regarded Public Service Award. She's not likely to mention any of this though. Nor is she likely to let on that, more often than not, her personal checks cover supplies for Inside Images' art projects. I hear such things from Lt. Christensen. These two extraordinary individuals not only share a partnership in the success of programs at this facility — they understand and respect one another's responsibilities within the correctional system and within their community.

Monticello is a small, beautiful town surrounded by the Blue Mountains in very rural southeastern Utah. Understandably, this community had concerns about the prospect of a maximum security prison in its midst. And I do mean in its midst. The San Juan County Jail is located in the Public Safety Building which also serves as the county courthouse and is located right smack in the center of town. Lt. Christensen shoulders the dual responsibility of (the prison) portraying an acceptable image within the community and at the same time, maintaining a low profile. This can't be an easy job, but you'd never know it by him. The Christensen family goes back a long way in Monticello and in law enforcement. Clearly Lt. Bill Christensen is comfortable with his work. He knows his community well and he understands the prison facility for which he is responsible. I found him to be pleasant, informative, and refreshingly candid. He appears open to innovative programming efforts and seems willing to try almost anything if it will improve inmates' self-esteem. Contrary to what they might think, these inmates have a great ally in Lt. Christensen, but he's no pushover. He also acknowledges that the system is seriously lacking in terms of rehabilitation programs. As corrections officials see it, the fiscal reality is that a choice has to be made between security and rehabilitation and security gets top priority. One can certainly understand Lt. Christensen's appreciation of Tauna DeGraw and the San Juan County School District for their programming efforts.

Three "levels" of progression are required of inmates before they can become eligible for parole consideration. They must advance through therapeutic offerings such as Impulse Control and Alcoholics Anonymous. A source of frustration to some is that in order to advance at all, they must "program" whether or not the focus applies to them directly. Academic involvement is looked upon favorably, as is becoming a trustee. Paying jobs are available to trustees in culinary services, laundry maintenance, janitorial services, and school record-keeping — to note typical examples.



Inmates here are allowed free mail access (a constitutional right), five postage-paid envelopes weekly, unlimited phone calls, and the management of their own money. Regular visiting hours are available for eligible inmates as well. As prisons go, it doesn't seem too terrible here. At first glance, one would hardly even suspect that this is a maximum security facility. It's bright and clean with an exceptionally personable staff and I've yet to enter the lobby without friendly smiles of welcome. Still . . . I know I'm walking out again. It makes a big difference.

Okay, I've tried to lay some informative groundwork. So how did the Utah Arts Council become involved here you might ask? Over the past year or so, several UAC programs have been collaborating in southeastern Utah's San Juan County as the result of needs expressed at an Arts Town Meeting held in the area. San Juan County is an extremely beautiful and historically significant, yet economically depressed rural area. It is also home to a large population of Utah's

Native American constituents, primarily Navajo and Ute — which in my mind automatically means wonderful art and arts opportunities. I jumped at the chance to become involved, as did some of my colleagues. The situation in SJC is ripe for the Community/State Partnership program in terms of community and economic development. Add Arts in Education and Visual Arts collaborative programming to the mix and clearly, we have high hopes for true partnership here — in every sense of the word.

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Through our ensuing fieldwork, we became acquainted with Ruthellen Pollan, an art instructor for the College of Eastern Utah's (CEU) San Juan Campus located in Blanding, just south of Monticello. Through CEU, Tauna DeGraw had arranged for Pollan to teach an art class at Blue Mountain Academy and she was so impressed with the prisoners' artwork, she suggested that we stop by the San Juan County Jail for a visit the next time we were in the Monticello area. We did.

The rest, as they say, is programming history. I wish we could take credit for what has transpired since our first visit but the truth is that the guys themselves came up with everything and Tauna DeGraw has consistently made things happen for them with the full support of Lt. Christensen. Our initial move as the Utah Arts Council was to personally adopt this artsy band of inmates for Christmas. Since they didn't have much in the way of materials, we took up a collection and were able to purchase a fair selection of art supplies, which were immediately rushed to Monticello in time for Christmas with notes of encouragement from all of us. We got a great letter of thanks back from the guys informing us that they had decided to organize themselves into an official arts group. The letter was typed on their own personally designed letterhead reflecting their new name, Inside Images. It was a proud day for all of us. The next step was to include Inside Images on our list of community arts councils and to get them on the UAC mailing list as part of our arts network. We're very big on networking in this state, especially since so many rural Utah communities experience geographic and economic isolation. The Inside Images group can certainly relate to many forms of isolation.

Thanks to Jean Irwin, the UAC's Arts in Education (AIE) Program Coordinator, and her considerable grant writing skills, the National Endowment for the Arts has answered our prayers with an "underserved communities" grant. These funds will allow us to expand our efforts, not only statewide, but in San Juan County with its large Native American population and with groups like Inside Images. Though our AIE program regularly provides Utah prisons with artist residencies, we have learned through trial and error that *continuity* is an important issue for men and women in prisons. Our AIE program has been working in prisons for some time and we have learned much through their efforts. Utah writer Patricia McConnel is responsible for *Voices from Within*, a wonderful and moving anthology of writings by incarcerated women. It was following this project that we learned the absolute importance of continuity. McConnel, a former inmate herself, worked with these women for several

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weeks, encouraging them to tap their deepest emotions; yet when the residency was over, they felt lost. The women were devastated and became terribly depressed. Our lesson has been two-fold: Not only do we recognize the emotional power of art, we know that we cannot simply *let it go* once it has become part of our lives, our existence.

Mindful of continuity, AIE artists will be targeting specific incarcerated artists such as those of Inside Images. They will work one-on-one with them, teaching them the skills and techniques necessary to act as art instructors to their fellow inmates. Irwin and DeGraw are ready to roll — the first van load of AIE artists was scheduled to leave Salt Lake City in early September for Monticello, where they will work with community residents as well. Another healthy link through the arts will continue to be strengthened between the prison and its community.

We'd also like to see inmate representation on underserved grants panels, to help them understand the grants process since we intend to arrange some grant writing seminars for prison populations, as well. Within Utah's corrections system, as it now stands, most facilities are fully dependent upon outside donations of art materials. Let's face it, most incarcerated individuals will be released back into society one day and the arts have proven to be a valuable tool for them. Some may learn or have learned already that art can be a healthy form of emotional release — others may opt for trying to make an honest living through the arts. After all, that's what most of us reading this article are doing, right? So, we'll never get rich but at least most of us care about what we do. Hell, some of us are even proud of what we do.

Meanwhile, back to the progression of Inside Images. Feeling a renewed sense of purpose, Tauna DeGraw began organizing shows to exhibit Inside Images' artwork at venues such as the SJC Library and Monticello High School. The art shows helped to build an interactive bridge between the community and these incarcerated artists. Both elementary and high school students were assigned to critique the artwork as part of the educational process and the inmates were delighted with the students' questions and responses. Their art sold very well and even though many of the guys admit that they initially got involved in the art classes "just to keep busy" and because they are required to "program" — something was happening here. They also realized that through sales of their artwork, they would be able to buy more art supplies. Pragmatism aside, art for art's sake had begun to take hold.

"Other benefits came to light for them through their art, such as the realization that this was a safe release for their emotions. With recognition for their efforts, they began to feel more pride and responsibility."

With Jewell Bess as their newly elected president, Inside Images began to take themselves more seriously. Other benefits came to light for them through their art, such as the realization that this was a safe release for their emotions. With recognition for their efforts, they began to feel more pride and responsibility. The prison allowed them exhibit space in the entrance lobby from which to sell their artwork — another source of income to support their program. They also began to take their relationship to the outside world more seriously. Jewell was one of two inmates chosen by prison officials to participate in SJC's Drug & Alcohol Awareness Week. They visited five schools and spoke with students in assembly settings. It was clear that Jewell had experienced the feeling of having helped some of these kids. Inside Images hopes to be allowed more of this kind of interaction with troubled kids. They feel they can make a worthwhile contribution to their community. They're ready to give something back — to make amends. Who could be more effective than these guys?

Charlie Hutchins, who for quite awhile has been generously sharing his artistic skills and techniques with fellow inmates (not to mention his wall mural) had the inspiration to create the Art for A.R.T. program which now sponsors "at-risk teens" through sales of Inside Images' artwork. It seemed a natural link between Tauna DeGraw's work on the outside and the inmates' work on the inside. It also makes this group feel like they are contributing to their community and helping some kids in the process. Most recently, Inside Images saw to it that members of Monticello High School's Hispanic Club were able to attend a conference focusing on gang issues held in Salt Lake City. Of 20 students, nine were eligible to make the trip based on their grades, yet there were some whose families could not afford to send them. Inside Images' Art for A.R.T. program donated the necessary funds to ensure that all eligible students were able to attend the conference.

These guys have found art to be a positive tool of influence for themselves and others. Charlie hopes to expand toward more diverse programs that will encompass Native American pride in culture. There is much conflict on the reservation between young Navajos who struggle with their own culture and the Anglo ways. Understandably, this troubles him. He tries to describe his frustration with being locked-up. "It's like watching someone in trouble from behind glass that you cannot break through," he says. I ask him if incarceration has helped him in terms of dealing with his own turmoil. Would he be as aware of such things were he on the outside or might he be caught up in daily life, taking his freedom for granted? He says "there's a difference

between believing and knowing. I think I can help people to know and recognize that difference." Incarceration has taught him much. Hopefully, he will be released soon.

*"We're just a bunch of guys
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back. Crime is a dead end.
Everybody comes to a
crossroads in their life at
some point. If we can
reach kids young enough,
hopefully we can help them
to make better choices
about which road to take."*

In fact, I cannot complete this *MONOGRAPH* without sharing a unique encounter I experienced on my way to visit Charlie and the others in Monticello one day. I usually schedule as much business as I can handle when I go to San Juan County because it's a good six-hour drive from my office in Salt Lake City (and I drive fast). At any rate, on this particular trip, I had completed meetings in Bluff and Mexican Hat and decided to spend the night in Blanding. That way, I'd be headed back north for a meeting scheduled with Inside Images in Monticello the next morning. Following a good night's sleep, I headed my trusty state motor pool car north on the main road when an intense hailstorm erupted out of nowhere, complete with thunder and lightning. I mean, this stuff was pelting down with a fury. I could barely see to drive when I spotted a woman up ahead on the side of the road; one arm covering her head and the other with hitching thumb extended — clearly in need of a ride and shelter from the storm. When she got in the car, I could see that she was Navajo and we chatted awhile about some people we knew in common. I mentioned that I was headed to Monticello to visit some of the guys in the jail there and when I asked her if by chance she knew Charlie Hutchins, she said, "Oh sure, Charlie's my cousin." I won't share our entire conversation, but I *loved* that encounter. It would be considered quite unusual anyplace else, but not so in San Juan County. I think it speaks volumes about that community and the culture that prevails there. Needless to say, I was delighted to be able to relay family greetings to Charlie.

As for the rest of the Inside Images guys — I'm afraid that if I try to name them all, I'll inadvertently leave somebody out, so let me just relay the main messages they hope to convey to young people out there. They say this: "We're just a bunch of guys trying to find our way back. Crime is a dead end. Everybody comes to a crossroads in their life at some point. If we can reach kids young enough, hopefully we can help them to make better choices about which road to take."

Most acknowledge that drugs and alcohol played a large part in their lack of good judgement. They also warn against kids getting in with the wrong crowd — being impressed with plastic people and status symbols. When I ask for the top three items on their "DO" list, they say (1) stay in school, (2) get involved in the arts or sports (not necessarily in that order), and (3) find a good woman or NO woman . . . we all

crack-up laughing at that one.

We're beginning to wind down this particular visit now and the group's sense of humor (which undoubtedly gets them through plenty) is gaining momentum. They tell me with great affection that Tauna is like the older sister they *never* wanted — that she keeps a "stupid stick" (she calls it a stupid *board*) in the locker with which to keep them in line. If they lose a bet with her, she makes them pay with chocolate bars and push-ups. Clearly they are crazy about her and the feeling seems to be mutual. On a more serious and telling note, the guys say that Tauna has taught them greater respect for women. What I see before me is a group of sensitive, caring individuals who have gained a greater respect for just about everything, including — and perhaps most importantly — themselves. ▼

About the Author:

A native New Englander, Janet Jones has put her communications background to work through arts administration, public affairs and marketing. Prior to joining the Utah Arts Council's Community/State Partnership Program, Jones was program coordinator for Northeastern University's nuArts Contemporary Performance Series in Boston, Mass., and also spent considerable time as a public affairs representative for the National Park Service in Yosemite, Calif. Jones is an ardent supporter of unique communities and all art forms, particularly Native American. She is very much involved with tribal artisans indigenous to Utah and the entire Four Corners area.

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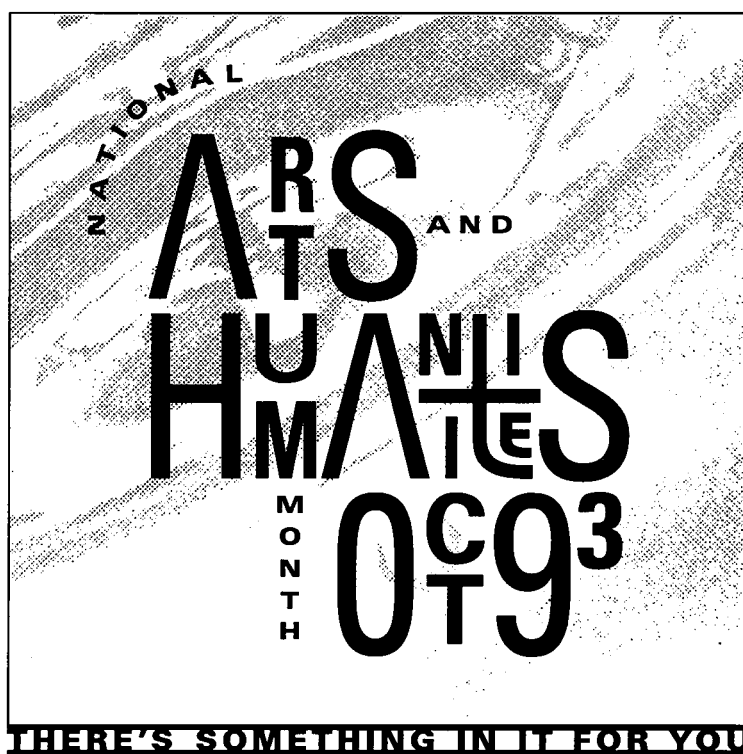
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