Incarceration and Creative Expression: Why prisons should increase access to art materials for incarcerated people
Laura Calhoun Washington and Lee University
This paper is dedicated to my former classmates at Augusta Correctional Center, who taught me that perseverance and hope can conquer any obstacle.

I. Introduction

The United States has the highest percentage of incarcerated people compared to any other country in the world, even compared to authoritarian nations where the average person might expect high rates of incarceration (ICPR, 2019). This illuminates a juxtaposition: one of the richest democracies in the modern world that prioritizes freedom and justice has the highest incarceration rate; moreover, it provides dismal opportunities within prison for those who are incarcerated. Prison was originally envisioned as a conduit for rehabilitation, meant to provide support services and programming to help incarcerated people become productive members of society. However, the reality is much more grim: prisons tend to focus on punishment and do little to catalyze personal improvement and reflection. The prison system is dehumanizing largely because it strips the individual identities and voices of each person it houses and refuses to invest in programs that support the personal growth of incarcerated people.

Understanding and conveying ideas about ourselves is something that makes us fundamentally human. Our identities are defined by the "cooperatively authored world" in which we live: the stories that we share and the people who listen to them shape us (Stauffer, 2015, p. 32) Studies have shown that the ability to express oneself promotes internal growth, human connection, empathy, and greater respect for one another. In carceral settings, where basic human rights are stripped away, creative expression is critical because it injects human dignity into a space where it does not exist otherwise and promotes rehabilitation for inmates. Providing greater accessibility to art materials and prioritizing creative expression within prison would benefit both incarcerated people and the prison system as a whole. I will add to the existing scholarship on this topic by analyzing contemporary examples of creative expression in prisons

and outlining ways to safely integrate arts programming into the Virginia Department of Corrections.

II. Literature Review

Widespread Benefits of Art

Access to art have been found beneficial in many contexts. In one study of hospital patients, just the presence of art pieces encouraged greater social interaction between patients. When the communal day room featured an art piece, patients were more likely overall to go out of their way to interact with others. Furthermore, patients reported greater feelings of comfort, safety, and protection in hospitals that showcased artwork. Researchers found that art has the potential to distract ill patients from their discomfort and pain, serving as a "positive distractor" (Nielsen, Fich, Roessler & Mullins, 2017).

Adults with anxiety who participate in art therapy have also seen positive results. In a study by Abbing, Baars, Van Haastrecht, and Ponstein (2019), art therapy was found to reduce the physical, behavioral, and cognitive symptoms of anxiety. It allowed for better emotional regulation, which is often difficult for adults with anxiety. In addition, improvements in emotional clarity, awareness, and emotional acceptance also occurred. Researchers also found that this therapy was useful in bolstering executive functioning, improving the ability to initiate activities, plan events and goals, and organize materials (Abbing, Baars, Van Haastrecht, & Ponstein, 2019).

Art has been used as a tool in social work since the beginning of the social work profession. Utilizing art allows the relationship with clients to deepen much quicker than otherwise because it removes the pressure to verbally express one's thoughts and feelings and allows it to be expressed visually (Huss, Sela-Amit & Flynn, 2019). Researchers have found that

creating art allows clients to exercise agency by taking ownership of artistic depictions while also encouraging self-reflection through critical thinking. Art projects have also proven successful at using symbols to mobilize behavioral changes in clients.

Effectiveness of Prison Programming

Incorporating programming into correctional facilities has been found to positively impact the lives of people who are incarcerated both during and after their prison sentence. In a report by the U.S. Department of Justice, researchers found both employment and educational programming were effective in reducing misconduct by inmates. Social support activities such as faith-based programming in prisons have also been found to improve outcomes (Duwe, 2017). Even programs that do not appear related to personal growth on the surface have a positive effect: in a study of inmates who participated in dog training programs, those who participated had lower infraction rates and less anxiety than people who did not (Flynn et al., 2020).

In terms of after prison outcomes, participants in prison educational programming have lower recidivism rates than those who did not (Duwe, 2017, Davis, et al., 2013). A meta-analysis of 50 long-term correctional education programs found that people who participated in educational programs while incarcerated also demonstrated higher rates of employment after release (David et al., 2013).

Effects of Arts-Based Programming in Prisons

Creative expression may at first seem like a luxury that people who have been convicted of crimes do not deserve. Upon further examination, however, creative expression can be seen as an important tool in rehabilitating incarcerated people. Art in carceral settings has been around at least since ancient Pompeii, where archaeologists have discovered graffiti remnants on prison walls (Olds, 2018). It is one of the most accessible forms of communication: whether a person is

illiterate or has an advanced degree, that person is able to participate in the creation and appreciation of art (Gussak, 2007).

Because visual art is such an accessible medium for people regardless of education level, it is an especially useful tool for art therapy in prisons. Inmates come from many different ethnic and racial groups who speak a variety of languages which makes communication more difficult (Ashley, 2016). Art removes barriers to self-expression by allowing people to convey complex thoughts and feelings non-verbally without physically admitting vulnerabilities in what can be a judgmental and dangerous space. A typical prison environment is not welcoming to displays of emotion or weakness, which can make working through past trauma or sharing feelings difficult and even dangerous, as some inmates will react to these displays of honesty with violence. According to a study by Gussak (2007), art therapy allows incarcerated people to be honest in ways they may otherwise avoid by "bypassing unconscious and conscious defenses" (p. 446). Gussak (2007) also found that incarcerated people showed a heightened acceptance of rules and compliance with correctional staff after art therapy. In a study of a creative writing program in the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, incarcerated people who participated in the program showed an increase in prosocial behaviors and reported a change in how they viewed themselves, moving away from an identity as criminal and toward one with positive social attributes (Blinn, 1995).

In addition to these self-esteem benefits, art in prisons has also been found to have an economic benefit. Brewster (1983) analyzed the 20-year Arts-in-Corrections (AIC) program in the California Department of Corrections (CDOC) and estimated that the program had an overall benefit of \$228,522 while only costing the CDOC \$152,790. Additionally, 75 percent of Arts-in-Corrections participants in one facility had fewer disciplinary problems than their peers who did

not participate in the program, reflecting a reduction in administrative time that saved the CDOC \$77,406 (Brewster, 1983). Brewster went on to conduct a survey of 110 AIC participants and discovered positive outcomes from arts-based programming. Regardless of the length of time an inmate participated in AIC programming, over 60 percent of participants reported that art promoted their self-expression, happiness, and stress relief. Many also reported that arts courses also improved their decision making (Brewster, 2014). While these improvements may feel abstract, their presence is important. Prison is repetitive. Day in and day out, schedules remain the same. People who have been convicted of crimes are crammed into one building and forced to spend time together. The reality of prisons is hard to deal with: it can create or exacerbate mental illness and hardship, including depression, anxiety and stress (Collier, 2014). There is room for improvement within this research, as the abstractness of "happiness" makes it difficult to quantify. In a carceral environment especially, happiness is likely to increase incrementally as a result of any programming that breaks up the daily monotony.

Art therapy and art creation have been successful tools in supporting positive mental, emotional, and physical outcomes in a variety of settings. There is evidence outside of prisons that art has the power to positively impact a variety of groups, from hospital patients to adults with anxiety disorders. The literature also supports the use of programming in carceral settings as a means for positive change among incarcerated people: programming has been positively associated with fewer disciplinary infractions, lower recidivism rates, and higher employment after release. The outcomes of arts programming as a tool in prisons, however, is still relatively unexplored.

Beyond studying the benefits of arts-based programming in prisons as they relate to the prison system, such as decreased disciplinary actions, improved rule-following, or lower

recidivism rates, further research must consider the personal benefits of art creation on incarcerated people. To add to the research that exists, I will analyze recent case studies of creative expression efforts in prisons and explore the more broad, human benefits of sharing voice with the world in a system that, by nature of its current existence, silences individualism and isolates people.

III. Methodology

To analyze the ways in which creative expression in prisons affects the wellbeing of incarcerated people, I consulted primary and secondary sources detailing the reality of art creation in prison, inmates' desire to share their voices, and contemporary examples of creativity behind bars.

Using a commissary price list from Augusta Correctional Center, a medium-security prison in Craigsville, Virginia, I first outlined the literal cost of participating in creative expression in prison. A formerly incarcerated person mailed me the commissary list in 2017, and because of limited access to the prison, this was the most updated list I was able to retrieve.

Next, I used contemporary case studies to analyze how incarcerated people use creative expression as an outlet voice in prison. I selected the online news source *The Marshall Project's* Life Inside platform, the podcast *Ear Hustle*, and Washington and Lee University's *Unfreedom of Expression: Artworks from Augusta Correctional Center*. These case studies were chosen based on relevance and availability of source material. Finally, I consulted the operating procedures of the Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC) to sketch a logistical framework for easier access to art materials in prisons that respects the protocols of the VADOC. The offender property and recreation operating procedures were obtained on the VADOC

website, and the full list of approved art materials document was obtained through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request submitted to the VADOC.

During my analysis, I incorporated Washington and Lee's own *Unfreedom of Expression:*Artworks from Augusta Correctional Center exhibition in September 2018. As one of the founders of the art exhibition, I am intimately connected to the inner workings of the exhibition.

Because I am personally involved, there is potential for bias; however, I believe my association with the planning and execution of the exhibition provides insights critical to addressing the value of artistic expression in prisons. My interactions with the artists featured in the exhibition and knowledge of the bureaucratic processes required to organize it allow me to better understand the importance of artistic expression and potential reservations that prohibit art from being incorporated into prison.

For the purposes of this paper, I utilized qualitative data. Though quantitative research has been done about the effects of programs promoting creative expression in prisons, it fails to capture the full complexity of the effects of creative expression (Gussak, 2007; Duwe, 2017; Davis, et al., 2013; Brewster, 1983). It can be hard to write survey questions or conduct experiments that accurately reflect the impact of arts-related programming on incarcerated people without assuming a certain outcome or dehumanizing the participants to little more than their self-reported "happiness" score on a Likert-type scale. Qualitative data, including the words of people who have participated in creative programs in prison are more suited to understand the complexity of its effects. A direct quote humanizes someone in a way that a statistic or number cannot do, and in a paper dedicated to sharing the effects of creative expression on the desire for voice felt by many incarcerated people, is the most fitting tool. Unlike statistical analysis, qualitative data by means of case studies and individual stories may not be statistically

generalizable to a broader group, but they allow for a deep, nuanced understanding of an issue. In this case, they also serve to further dignify a marginalized group of people. Though these cases are not broadly applicable, sharing the voices of currently and formerly incarcerated people demonstrates a complexity that outweighs a desire for generalizability.

IV. Analysis

In the current prison landscape, basic provisions are costly and access to art supplies is limited. When someone enters prison, they are promised a sanitary living space, clean clothing, and basic hygiene/bedding items for free (American Bar Association, 2011). Beyond these necessities and some meals provided by the prison, incarcerated people are left to purchase all other items through commissary, the prison store. Commissary may be provided by the state department of corrections or a private contractor, such as Keefe Supply Company. This is the only retail opportunity available to incarcerated people, meaning the organization has full reign over the types of items available for purchase and their prices. In a study of prisons in Illinois, Massachusetts, and Washington, inmates spent an average of \$947 on commissary purchases annually (Raher, 2018). About \$709, or 75%, of this total is spent on food to supplement the "small portions of unappealing food" that constitute a prison meal (Raher, 2018). Hygiene and health supplies make up the second largest percentage of spending, constituting about 10% of spending. With this much money gobbled up by basic necessities, purchasing art supplies is frequently off the table. This is especially true when considering the average wages earned by incarcerated people. According to the Prison Policy Initiative (Prison Wages Appendix, 2017), the hourly salary for an inmate in Virginia ranges from \$0.27 to \$0.45 per hour for a typical "non-industry job" (for example, janitorial work and food services). In an "industry job," the hourly wage range increases to between \$0.55 and \$0.80 per hour. This includes people working in factories that are owned by the Virginia Department of Corrections; often, these factories manufacture clothing and shoes worn by prisoners across the state. Inmates are limited to working 30 hours per week, so even at the highest hourly wage, an incarcerated person would make \$24 per week. At the lowest wage, this salary decreases to \$8.10.

Commissary prices do not reflect these lower wages. One package of Maruchan beef ramen in a Massachusetts commissary costs \$0.40 (Raher, 2018). Though that is less than the local retail price of \$0.59, it proportionally costs more: if an inmate makes the lowest possible hourly wage of \$0.27, purchasing the ramen is worth about 2 hours of work. If a person making the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour purchases the ramen from a convenience store, it is worth about 3 minutes of work. The cost of purchasing even basic necessities in prison is extremely high, leaving little money left over to purchase non-essential goods like art supplies. In a commissary list obtained from Augusta Correctional Center, a medium-security state prison in Virginia, in 2017, the extreme cost of art supplies is evident (See Appendix A). An eight-pack of fine tip Crayola markers cost \$5.97, more than 22 hours of work at the lowest hourly wage for a non-industry prison job. On Amazon, the same markers cost \$3.79 (Amazon, 2019).

Some incarcerated people choose to spend large amounts of their paycheck on art supplies. For others who deem the monetary cost too high, they find other ways to create art. An incarcerated person who wants to create may use nontraditional supplies that, if discovered, will result in disciplinary action. Joseph*1, a man I met while he was incarcerated at Augusta Correctional Center, wanted to draw – but he did not want to pay the \$4.70 for a drawing pad. Instead, he used a razor that he already had to cut off part of his bedsheet, given for free to everyone upon arrival at the prison. The bedsheet is owned by the Commonwealth of Virginia,

¹ All names with asterisks have been changed to protect identity.

so cutting it is considered destruction of state property. It is a felony for any prisoner in Virginia to "willfully break, cut or damage any building, furniture, fixture or fastening of such facility... [that would render] such facility less secure as a place of confinement" (Virginia Code §53.1-203). Though cutting a bedsheet to use as a canvas seems innocuous, it is viewed as a means of making the prison less secure – enough cut bedsheets could fashion a rope, for example, which would be a danger to the security of the prison. Still, these threats did not stop Joseph. In fact, he went a step further. Joseph is employed in a Department of Corrections (DOC) factory that makes inmate clothing. To make the edges of his canvas straight, he took his recently cut bedsheet to work and used the state-owned machines and thread to sew a hem on the edges – an offense punishable with being fired from his job. Another incarcerated artist who works in the DOC factory, Rodney*, often "borrows" thread from the factory to craft bracelets in his spare time, another fireable offense. Leo,* a formerly incarcerated artist and writer shared in an interview that he kept "a 2-inch pen, wrapped in paper and adhesive labels to make it less pliable" hidden in his sock because it was considered contraband in the facility where he was imprisoned (The Prison Arts Coalition, 2019). Knowing these risks, Joseph, Rodney, and others still pursue their unconventional art despite high costs, both in terms of potential consequences and unaffordable supplies.

The high commissary prices for supplies initially suggest that art in prison is a luxurious form of leisure in which almost no one would participate. Yet, people who are incarcerated still create art despite these monetary costs, risking high-level disciplinary infractions in the process. An already vulnerable population putting themselves further at risk to create illustrates that art is a critical means of expressing voice in prison; a marker of autonomy that is stripped from people in carceral settings so important that they put themselves at risk to reclaim it.

Leo,* a formerly incarcerated man who published a memoir about his experience during a ten-year prison sentence, said that "art has a vital role in lockdown:"

"It's funny, because I got housed with inmates who lamented over how much better the conditions were in prison, as opposed to county [jail], because they had access to art supplies. Being locked in a concrete cell for twenty-one hours a day, you get consumed by repetitive and irrational thoughts. It's important to get them out of your system, otherwise they eat you alive" (The Prison Arts Coalition, 2019).

Leo said that writing became a critical aspect of his daily routine when he realized "that words would ultimately set [him] free" (The Prison Arts Coalition, 2019). He documented many examples of other incarcerated people, like his cellmate, Roy,* who used visual art in a similar way. This phenomenon is evident in prisons across the country. Quinn,* a man incarcerated in San Quentin State Prison and currently enrolled in classes with the Prison University Project, was enlightened by his self-expression – "joy is the time I discovered I had a voice" (The Prison University Project, n.d.). In prison, creative tools are used to reclaim a voice that is oppressed and ignored. People who are incarcerated are looking to self-expression to lower the boundaries between people on the inside and outside, breaking down literal and theoretical barriers that transform "inmates" and "monsters" into "artists" and "people." Creative expression is uniquely accessible and humanizing; art can bridge even the widest gaps between language, race, location, or background. The online news outlet *The Marshall Project* illustrates the potential for creative outlets to serve as a link between incarceration and freedom by amplifying voice.

The Marshall Project

The Marshall Project is a nonprofit news organization that "seeks to create and sustain a sense of national urgency about the U.S. criminal justice system" (The Marshall Project, n.d.). While the organization employs full-time reporters to write about the criminal justice system, it

also publishes original essays from "people who live or work in the criminal justice system" weekly, through its "Life Inside" project (Life Inside, n.d.). Life Inside allows incarcerated people to share their personal experiences in the criminal justice system with a broad audience, and the essay topics range from a man getting into a fight over phone privileges to a discussion of what freedom really means (Gaston, 2020; Lennon, 2019). Since the Life Inside project began in 2014, hundreds of essays by currently or formerly incarcerated people have been published to the site, and the articles present evidence of the incredible self-reflection that the incarcerated people who write them experience. In addition, many of the articles recount creative expression and arts-based programming behind prison walls. In "I'm in Prison – And on HBO," Carter (2019) tells the story of his audition for the HBO film "O.G.," about a man about to be released from prison. Carter said that the 15 weeks he spent filming "were the greatest experience of [his] life, save for the birth of [his] son" (Carter, 2019). Another article, "Penitentiary Rock," (White, 2018), tells the story of a college radio station that became a favorite among inmates on death row for playing heavy metal music and accepting song requests via letter or collect call.

The persistent success of *The Marshall Project's* Life Inside demonstrates a strong desire among incarcerated people to make their voices heard. The organization requires an iterative editing process before the pieces are published, and for many incarcerated people who can only communicate via letter, this process could take several weeks (Life Inside, n.d.). Despite the time and dedication it demands, Life Inside has been published every week for six years. Furthermore, the recurrence of essays about experiences with creative expression in prison illustrates the impact of arts-based programming on incarcerated people: when something creative happens, it is important enough to share with the world. Naradzay (2018) wrote an article for *The Marshall Project* about how learning to play the violin in prison helped him learn to communicate his

inner feelings productively to find healing. Piccolo (2018) captured the impact of creative expression in prison when he described his experience as an audience member during an all-male prison production of *Death of a Salesman*:

"When I think about it, there really wasn't anything about this situation that should have been memorable.... Except that it was beautiful and miraculous. Everything in that room, and everyone, was shining, just for a moment" (Piccolo, 2018)

When sharing in the arts, everything and everyone was shining. The poignant account by Piccolo reiterates the profound impact that creative expression in prison can have on incarcerated people: sharing moments as a collective humanity, finding healing amidst sorrow, or connecting with the outside world. Each of these moments was powerful enough to write and share with others.

Ear Hustle

San Quentin State Prison is known for its range of opportunities for inmates, from mattress manufacturing jobs to gardening to a media lab that supports audio and video recording and editing (San Quentin State Prison, n.d.; PBS, 2017). People incarcerated at San Quentin have used the media lab as a means of sharing their voice with the outside world through *Ear Hustle*, a podcast recorded, edited, and produced inside the prison.

Ear Hustle was co-founded by Earlonne Woods and Antwan Franklin, two men serving time. Nigel Poor, a visual artist who volunteers at the prison, cohosts the podcast with Woods and another inmate, Rashaan "New York" Thomas (About, n.d.). In their first episode, Woods explained that Ear Hustle would "lift the veil of secrecy" about what it's like to be incarcerated by allowing listeners to "hear directly from the guys doing the time," expanding the voice of incarcerated people (Poor and Woods, 2017). Sharing the realities of prison is the primary purpose of Ear Hustle, but the way that Poor and Woods approach this goal is instrumental to

their success: they use interviews. Each episode of the podcast features stories told by the incarcerated men who experienced them. Woods shares his stories during episodes, but the podcast does not rely on one narrator – it explicitly centers the voices of incarcerated men with the intention to make them heard. The use of *Ear Hustle* to share unheard voices is especially apparent in the episode *Inside Music*, dedicated to the musicians of San Quentin. In the episode, Poor and Thomas interview a variety of musicians and feature their original compositions, lamenting the fact that "most of their music isn't heard except inside" despite the desire of all the musicians to take their work outside of prison (Poor and Thomas, 2019). This platform further expanded opportunities for musicians incarcerated at San Quentin through a partnership with the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) in New York City. The Met commissioned a musical composition in partnership with Ear Hustle. Thirty men had the opportunity to share their work with representatives from the Met and nine of them were selected to create original music for the event – something unheard of prior to this experience (Thomas and Poor, 2019). This partnership would not have been possible without Ear Hustle's existence, and the episode dedicated to music shared the collaboration and the voices of the men who contributed to it in a way that popular media failed to do.

When it comes to the criminal justice system, the voices of the people who have experienced it are systematically excluded from the conversation – both through disenfranchisement during incarceration and after in many states, and through bureaucratic red tape that makes getting video cameras or tape recorders behind bars a challenge. Amplifying voice is important to the *Ear Hustle* team in an obvious yet often implicit way. Each episode features interviews with other incarcerated people, providing an outlet for their voices to enter the outside world. Poor, as a woman who has not been incarcerated, often shares the ways in

which spending time with the men incarcerated at San Quentin changed her worldview. Woods and Williams co-founded the podcast because they wanted to be heard and lacked another outlet that would allow their voices to expand beyond carceral walls. On *The Marshall Project's* Life Inside, Rashaan Thomas described the impact of his role as a co-host and co-producer of the podcast.

"I've heard it said that there can be no communication until we sit together as equals. Working for Ear Hustle feels like that. In most prisons I've been to, it didn't feel like I could work with society to accomplish anything... But now I feel like a productive member of both the inside and outside community" (Thomas, 2019).

Thus, the impact of voice is made clear: a podcast that describes daily life inside of prisons has captivated a wide audience and inspired empathy, compassion, and community engagement for those experiencing incarceration. This creative outlet provides a voice for incarcerated men to reconnect with the outside world and feel as though they are making a real impact. Many others are able to find and hone new skillsets that could improve their employability once they leave prison. For Earlonne Woods, the podcast helped catalyze his life after prison. In 2018, a little over one year after the first episode of the podcast was available online, he had his 31-year to life sentence commuted by the Governor of California (Poor and Woods, 2018). When Poor asked Woods about his commutation, he said that the decision could be related to *Ear Hustle*:

"There's a lot of people around me that got commuted that had nothing to do with Ear Hustle, so I think it was more of my rehabilitation and all the stuff that I put in my commutation packet – *Ear Hustle* being one of them" (Poor and Woods, 2019).

The Governors' staff also told Woods that they loved Ear Hustle and listened to it often. Former Governor of California Jerry Brown, though not a listener himself, told *Ear Hustle* that the podcast is important because it begins to break down the "isolated, very separated" nature of

prisons (Poor and Woods, 2019). While it was not the only reason Woods' sentence was commuted, its impact was apparent: even someone who had never listened to the podcast understood the power of voice it exudes. The fact that *Ear Hustle* features the voices of so many unheard men is the very thing that makes it popular among people incarcerated at San Quentin and outside listeners. The creative guidance of co-hosts Nigel Poor, Rashaan Thomas, and Earlonne Woods combined with the actual voices of incarcerated people offers a rawness that is both entertaining and informative. This podcast is one example of the ways in which creative projects are uniquely suited to provide an outlet for voice in prison. *Ear Hustle* has won a plethora of awards because it is so *human*. With careful attention to storytelling, its interviewees have the opportunity to speak with a dignity that is not usually afforded to inmates and would not exist without it.

Unfreedom of Expression: Artworks from Augusta Correctional Center

As an undergraduate student at Washington and Lee University, I spent time working with people who are incarcerated at Augusta Correctional Center (ACC), a level three medium-security state prison in Virginia. In 2017, I took an inside-outside course at ACC, comprised of ten students from Washington and Lee and ten students from ACC. For the course, we used a thick, softbound textbook with a plain white cover to meet prison regulations. One of my classmates, George*, had decorated the entire cover of his textbook with an intricate, spiraling design. When I commented on how impressive it was, George told me that it was nothing compared to his long-term work and the work of his peers. The next day, George brought a cardboard box full of artwork to show me. It was filled with tiny, colorful sculptures of characters from the movie *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, made from wetted toilet paper and colored with dye from markers; an embroidered handkerchief made from a bedsheet, and printed

photos of pieces of artwork too large to carry, including one painting commissioned by a correctional officer depicting the man and his son (see Appendix B). In a message sent via JPay's paid email system, which cost George \$0.25, he explained the utility of art as a means of increasing access to voice for people incarcerated at ACC:

"I believe this could potentially be a very useful means of bridging the divide between the community and the prison. I feel it could be instrumental in bringing awareness to the community of the humanity of those behind bars rather than some unknown criminals that need to be feared" (G. Smith,* personal communication, May 11, 2017).

From the beginning, George's goal was clear: creative expression was a tool that could serve to reclaim his dignity as a person, not an inmate, by allowing him to *speak*. Though he could not directly communicate with people on the outside to explain himself, he could use art to express his humanity. Showcasing art, according to George, could change the way that people on the outside viewed people on the inside just by allowing the former to be heard. This particular correspondence and the many conversations that followed exposed an important viewpoint worth exploring. George articulated that he and his artistic peers used art to speak up about themselves and to speak out in spite of their incarceration:

"In prison... my art serves as a defiance to deprivation of liberty. Rage against the dying of the light so to speak. It is a means of freedom when freedom doesn't exist. It is way to express yourself when you have no one to listen to you. It is a declaration of compassion when none can be found. Whether a symphony of sadness or a canvas of eternal hope and joy, art allows an unobstructed voice to speak from the deepest recesses of your soul. It provides an avenue by which you're able to identify yourself and express yourself to others. For me, art is the exposure of truth in its purest form, *unsoiled by explanation or reasoning*." (G. Smith,* personal communication, May 11, 2017).

For George* and many of his incarcerated peers, art is a form of *truth*. It is using your own voice to express your own story. Sal*, during a speech presentation for our course, explained that his only identity in prison is his inmate number. His greatest wish while incarcerated was to be seen as human. He said he felt most human when he was able to share his voice, as he was doing then with his speech. Another one of my classmates, Hugo*, talked about the practical implications of voice for his life in prison in one of our shared journal entries. Without voice people on the outside will never understand the real issues that happen inside prisons. Hugo argued that "society knows [about our problems] and just brush the problems off as us just complaining to just complain? (H. Brown,* personal communication, April 27, 2017). Whether for reclaiming dignity or for achieving better conditions in prison, a desire to both speak and be heard was universal among my classmates. With this voice in mind, in collaboration with George, the principal of the education department at ACC, and Washington and Lee, the *Unfreedom of Expression: Artworks from Augusta Correctional Center* was created. The first installment of the bi-annual exhibition was in 2018, and much of the submitted artwork showcases voice.

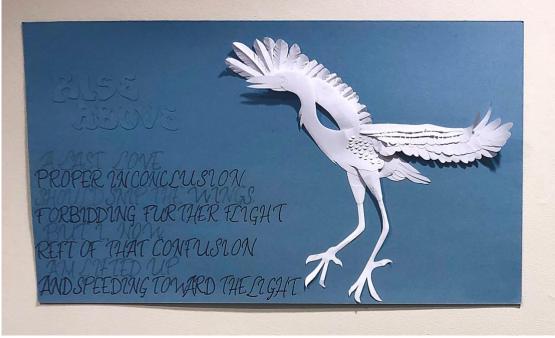


Figure 1: Hugo's piece, RISE ABOVE, pictured in the Unfreedom of Expression exhibition.

Hugo* submitted two pieces to *The Unfreedom of Expression*, including the paper sculpture pictured in Figure 1. Maya Angelou's poem "Recovery" is written next to a large, white paper crane:

"A last love
Proper in conclusion
Should snip the wings
Forbidding further flight
But I, now
Reft of that confusion,
Am lifted up
And speeding toward the light" (Angelou, 2015)

Though he attributed the poem to Angelou in his artist's statement beside the piece, Hugo said he "named this artwork 'RISE ABOVE,' because there are many obstacles that are presented in life, but with a positive attitude and/or outlook on most situations, we can overcome anything set before us" (H. Brown,* artist statement). Voice is very literally centered in this piece, with almost half of the artwork covered in words, but it is symbolically centered, too. The focus on flight in both the poem and image of the crane illustrate a desire for freedom from the

confines of prison. Though Hugo recognizes that his thirty-year sentence holds him physically hostage, creating artwork was a way to allow his voice and message to reach beyond the walls of the correctional center and into the broader community. The paper crane is poised to fly but has not yet taken off; Hugo, in the same way, is prepared for flight via this artwork. Though this artwork does not allow him physical freedom, it allows his voice and message to reach beyond the walls of the correctional center and into the broader community. In many ways, this calculated expression of voice *is* his flight.

Hugo told me he created this piece solely for this exhibition. When considering the implications of artwork as a means of amplifying voice, this fact is important. In the context of a public art exhibition, it was not enough to show an image of a bird; rather, he chose to ground the symbol with meaningful words. Synthesizing Angelou's poem with his own title, he took public ownership of a lesson that he deemed important enough to share with others. It is evident that the creation of this artwork was not thoughtless – it was meant to carry Hugo's words to a broader audience.

Many of the materials used to make this piece, including poster board and scissors, are contraband at Augusta Correctional Center (VADOC - Operating Procedure 802.1, 2018; See Appendix E). If discovered, Hugo could have received a high-level punishment and, ultimately, additional time on his sentence. That risk, however, does not inspire fear in this case. The poster board is not just an illicit material, but the foundation of a message that he desired to spread. This paper sculpture is telling the world that Hugo's wings are not clipped, and that by its existence, he is able to find a bit of the freedom he desires.

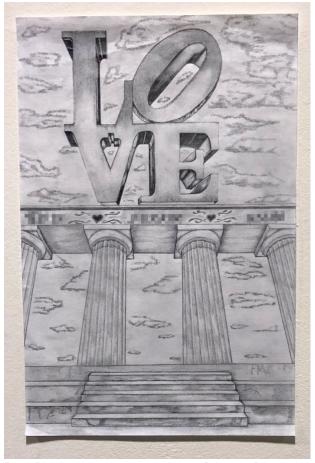


Figure 2: "LOVE" by Eli, pictured hanging in the Unfreedom of Expression exhibition.

"I think people need / to show more love / to each other, and / to the world.

Love / It's a strong word / that's why it needs / a strong base like / the Golden Ratio / to build on.

Love It's a Beautiful Thing" (E. Sampson,* artist statement).

In the same way that Hugo took ownership of his spin on Maya Angelou's poem, Eli* takes ownership over the message of love depicted in this pencil drawing. Though they are blurred in the above image due to privacy and safety concerns, a focal point of this piece is the inclusion of Eli's full name and inmate number between the tops of the columns and below the LOVE statue. By elevating his own name in this image, Eli is asserting both his autonomy and self-worth. The motif of love in the image and artist statement reiterate that Eli's perspective that love promotes empathy which, in turn, promotes an improved world. This piece is not amateur. It

is thoughtful and calculated in its messaging, illustrating Eli's purposeful desire to showcase his voice and take ownership of a positive message in a system that stripped him of his identity.

HOPE – EVER – LASTING



Figure 3: Geronimo and Rob's piece, HOPE - EVER - LASTING, pictured hanging in the Unfreedom of Expression Exhibition

This piece was built around the voice of Geronimo*. The text describes Geronimo's personal battle with darkness and depression throughout his life, but ends with a description of his relentless pursuit of hope and survival in an uncertain future:

"My life to so many may not look so hard, but one thing I can promise and that's that I bet you couldn't walk a mile in my shoes, one thing is for certain and that is, that I must never give up and give in to all the madness, for the strength I receive from above keeps pushing me to keep on fighting in the fire" (Figure 2).

In the interest of expressing themselves accurately, Geronimo and Rob collectively created this artwork, with Rob adding the illustration based on Geronimo's words. A desire to be

heard inspired a collaboration between two people who may be assumed both by the DOC and the public as uncooperative or unable to work with others.

The collaborative nature of the piece and combination of story and visual art allowed visitors to the exhibition to connect with and better understand the history and context of one incarcerated person, which could inspire empathy and engender greater respect for those in prison. This combination also illustrates the value of art beyond building a bridge between society and prison: self-expression as a tool for working through problems in life. The full text of this piece (see Appendix C) depicts a calculated journey through sadness with the goal of positivity. Crafting this piece likely provided some therapeutic benefit to Geronimo by providing him an opportunity to speak about his past trauma in a way that made him feel heard. According to Psychology Today (Art Therapy, 2016), art therapy allows people of all ages to explore their emotions, manage addiction, cope with stress, and improve symptoms of anxiety and depression, among other potential benefits. Though this piece was not made for the purposes of art therapy, its subject matter suggests similar benefits.

V. Logistics: Integrating Art and Security in the VADOC

People incarcerated within the Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC) have access to art materials if they purchase them through commissary. According to a prison official within the VADOC, incarcerated people may also have access to materials sporadically when a unit manager, case manager, or mental health therapist decides to organize art time within the unit. However, these designated art times, according to the source, are incredibly infrequent. The benefits that come from creative expression can only be realized if incarcerated people are given consistent and free access to art materials. Arts programs must be regimented and prioritized within the VADOC. The existence of sporadic art-based programing speaks to the ability of the

VADOC to provide equitable access to art materials on a consistent basis in a way that both benefits DOC staff and incarcerated people.

According to the VADOC's Operating Procedure 841.6, Recreation Programs, incarcerated people "shall be allowed to construct hobby, craft, and art projects using only items available for purchase from the institution commissary as authorized" by the DOC. Depending on the security level of the facility, different types of art supplies are available for purchase. In maximum-security prisons (levels five and six), only a pen and sketch pads are allowed; in work centers and minimum-security prisons (levels W and two), incarcerated people have access to a much wider range of supplies, including scissors, paints, and canvas (Operating Procedure 841.6, 2017 – see Appendix F). These regulations ensure the safety and security of the facility, incarcerated people, and correctional officers, and should remain in place. Accessibility of the approved arts and crafts items, however, should be improved. The VADOC should implement dedicated arts and crafts time into its schedule at least three times per week. During this time, the VADOC should provide the use of a supervised common area to allow independent or group art creation. Participation is voluntary, but all incarcerated people, regardless of disciplinary history, will be allowed to participate. To guarantee equitable access to materials, the VADOC should supply some art materials for general use, eliminating the need to spend exorbitant amounts of one's salary to create art. These art supplies should include a minimum of drawing/sketch paper and a pen for correctional facilities at all security levels, and for lower level facilities, should expand to include pencils, erasers, paint pads and paint. Art supplies should be counted and evaluated by correctional officers at the beginning and end of each dedicated art session to ensure that all materials remain in the VADOC's possession. In addition, incarcerated people who participate in arts and crafts time should be allowed to store up to three pieces of artwork in

their cells at any time. In addition, the VADOC should recruit volunteers specifically engaged in creative endeavors to provide programming for incarcerated people. Recruiting volunteers would remove some of the burden to provide art materials from the Department of Corrections and incorporate a wider breadth of opportunities for creative expression.

New regulations providing increased access to art supplies may be challenging to implement within the regimented correctional system, but the benefits of the programs far outweigh the challenges that arise. Dedicated arts and crafts time will require correctional officers to alter the daily inmate schedule that exists and ensure that there is a carefully staffed common area during art creation times. It will also require additional diligence on behalf of correctional officers to ensure that the art supplies are not used inappropriately, as weapons, or are stolen from the common area. However, this integration could easily become part of the recreational time that the VADOC already, which can include both physical and leisure activities, making the transition to arts and crafts time smoother (VADOC - Operating Procedure 841.6, 2017).

The benefits correctional officers are likely to experience outweigh these logistical challenges. As expressed by researchers such as Blinn (1995), art can have positive effects on the ways that incarcerated people interact with the world around them by encouraging prosocial behaviors. Because incarcerated people who exhibit positive social attitudes are less likely to have disciplinary infractions or engage in physical altercations with other incarcerated people or correctional officers, the implementation of arts time would benefit prison staff. This reiterates the importance of allowing all people, regardless of past disciplinary history, to participate: there is potential for an improvement in behavior no matter the current record of an incarcerated person.

The cost of supplying art materials is also important to consider, but their benefits are likely to outweigh the cost. Paint, paper, pencils and other basic supplies are marginal expenses for an organization as large as the VADOC, and if the California Arts-in-Corrections program is any indication, they may actually provide long-term economic benefit. The California Department of Correction saw more than \$77,000 in administrative savings due to a decrease in disciplinary infractions (Brewster, 1983). This evidence indicates that purchasing art supplies for incarcerated people is likely to provide substantial savings for the VADOC in the future.

VI. Conclusion

Creative expression within prison walls serves to benefit incarcerated people and the prison system as a whole. Arts-based programming has proven to be both beneficial in reducing disciplinary infractions among incarcerated people and an economically savvy choice that could save a state Department of Corrections money in the future. Beyond these logistical benefits, creative expression serves as a crucial expression of voice for incarcerated people whose voices have been otherwise stripped from them. Despite the steep cost of art supplies and the danger of disciplinary infractions associated with contraband art supplies, incarcerated people continue to create. Contemporary examples of creative expression in prisons such as the podcast *Ear Hustle*, The Marshall Project's "Life Inside," and The Unfreedom of Expression: Artworks from Augusta Correctional Center exhibition illustrate the ways in which the arts are uniquely suited to allow incarcerated people to express themselves and reclaim their dignity. In the United States where mass incarceration remains a growing problem, creative expression within prisons may even serve as a tool to combat high recidivism rates and overincarceration. Though further research is needed to quantify other potential benefits of arts-based programming in prisons, the fact that incarcerated people prioritize creative expression and view it as a positive influence in

their lives suggests that correctional facilities should prioritize making art materials more accessible.

Prisons are discouraging places, and within them, art serves as a beacon of hope. Like Hugo's* paper crane, the late-night radio station that takes requests by collect calls and letters, and the prison music that made it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, creative expression behind bars begins the challenging task of dismantling the divide between "inmates" and "people." It heals and connects; cultivates joy and manifests understanding. Most of all, art in prison is about humanity: telling a story in a way that transcends barriers and highlights the c we all share. In the words of Eli*, art is love; exactly the kind of love that we need for one another.

Appendix A: Augusta Correctional Center Commissary List, obtained via a formerly incarcerated person. Art supplies are highlighted

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Appendix B: A portrait of a correctional officer and his son, painted by a man incarcerated at Augusta Correctional Center. Faces have been blurred for the safety and privacy of the subjects.



Appendix C: The full text of HOPE – EVER – LASTING by Geronimo and Rob.

As I sit here imprisoned by the laws of the land, depression, anger, and thoughts of suicide long ago sat in. I can't believe this is where I'm at, as feelings of self pity surface, knowing I'm alone for this ride, only to be surrounded by demons and enemies that are lurking and building up pride, with my spirt broken, I'm left with no one to trust. Blinded by all the anger and rage that dwells within, I became engulfed by the darkness, but I keep trying to hold up even though I was doomed from the start, I begin searching for answers, only to come out lost and confused, with no one or nothing to lean on. I'm filled with thoughts & fantasies of ending it all, as the war within ever my soul and life becomes overwhelming, as all the evil in the world keeps spinning and twirling around us and rambling confusion into my minded holding me down, it roars like a line, cunning and bold, with no truth to the lies told about me. Maybe there is no life to behold. Especially not a life where darkness isn't coming at me from all around at 100 miles an hour, so I must keep on trying to fight pass [sic] all the doubt of an uncertain future and what is awaiting me, cause if I don't my should will become devastated by the real enemy behind all the cans in my life, that one too many times has forced my back against the wall, to the point where I could feel his form leaving scars so deep, that even time cannot erase. So I keep seeking and yearning for a way to find Hope, that was lost long ago. I must press on learning to discern what's real and true, and become eager for the knowledge about what's right, as I keep roaming to find a path beyond all the giant mountains before me, I become lost in the darkness that has always surrounded my life causing me to keep jumping through hopeless promises of a better tomorrow. I keep ducking and trying to hide from all the evil and lies that have consumed my life, leaving me frustrated by deceptions that always arise, filled with confusion and distressed by so much waster time. My life to so many may not look so hard, but one thing I can promise and that's that I bet you couldn't walk a mile in my shoes, one thing is for certain and that is, that I must never give up and give in to all the madness, for the strength I receive from above keeps pushing me to keep on fighting in the fire. Dispite [sic] all the hate and enemies that surround me, I keep standing tall and brave in the flames, for I won't be burned and through the darkness and night surround me, I going to keep my sword sharpened and sleep with my armor, cause I'm ready to stand and fight.

Appendix E: Full List of items considered Contraband by the Virginia Department of Corrections. Obtained from the Virginia Department of Corrections Website. Excerpted from Operating Procedure 802.1, Offender Property.

Contraband - An item forbidden for entry, possession, or removal from a Department of Corrections facility; an item in the possession of, or accessible to, an offender that has not been specifically issued to, or authorized for possession by the offender; or has not been obtained by the offender in accordance with operating procedures. Contraband items (for offenders) may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- State or personal property of any type not specifically authorized for possession or use by an offender
- State or personal property in the possession of, or used by, an offender that has not been properly received, acquired by or issued to the offender in accordance with operating procedures State or personal property, regardless of how acquired, that has been modified or altered without written authorization
- Any knife, tool, instrument, firearm, explosive, bodily fluid or waste, or other object that an offender might make, possess, collect, hide, or have in their possession for the purpose of escaping, circumventing security procedures, or inflicting death or bodily injury
- Any drug, chemical compound, or controlled substance that has not been issued to an
 offender by a proper authority; or if authorized, is accumulated beyond prescribed
 amounts or expiration dates
- Moneys or other negotiable instruments, whether cash, checks, money orders, lottery tickets, credit/debit/phone cards, etc., in the possession of an offender except where specifically authorized
- Any correspondence, documents, drawings, jewelry, symbols, or property of any type that contains or indicates gang identifiers, language, or information
- Property of any type (including cassette tapes, compact disks, pictures, or written material of any type) regardless of how acquired that violates the criteria that govern offender incoming publications
- Unauthorized electronic equipment including, but not limited to cell phones, palm pilots, pagers, electronic games, etc. and any enabling components such as chargers, power cords, batteries, connectors/adapters, etc.
- Tobacco and tobacco related products

Appendix F: Full list of approved arts and crafts items within the Virginia DOC. Obtained via a FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) request to the Virginia Department of Corrections, Operating Procedure 841.6, Attachment 1.



Effective Date: May 1, 2017
Operating Procedure 841.6 Attachment 1

Approved Arts and Crafts Items

Item and Authorized Security Level	
Art Pad 14"x17"	
Card Stock Paper Dials	
Colored Chalk	
Clock Inserts	1
Clock Movements	
Felt (No Blue, Black, or Gray)	Security Level W - 2
Glue Stick, Washable	Facilities, only
Plastic Canvas	1
Scissors	
Stumps & Tortillions	
Styrene Dials	
Yarn (No Blue, Black, or Gray)	
Acrylic Pad	
Acrylic Paint	1
Art Gum Eraser	
Beveled Pink Eraser	
Cardstock	
Charcoal Pad	
Charcoal Pencil	
Chipboard	
Color Markers	
Color Pencils	
Construction Paper	
Craft Sticks	
Drawing Pad	
Graphic Pencils	
Kneaded Eraser	Security Level W - 3
Magic Rub Eraser	Facilities, only.
NuPastels	
Origami Paper	
Paint Brushes	
Paint Pad	
Pencil Sharpener	
Plastic Hook	
Ruler	
Sketch Pad	
Smooth Board Pad	
Tracing Pad	
Watercolor Paint Set	
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Graphic Pencils	Facilities.
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Sketch Pad	Security Level 5-6
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