

A Day of Hope: a Report from the Alabama Art for Justice Forum

By Leasa Brock

The day began with a cool breeze and overcast sky that let us know fall had arrived at Auburn University. Upon entering the elegant Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art, staff members of the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project welcomed everyone to the Alabama Art for Justice Forum. It was warm and inviting. We were here to discuss challenges and opportunities of improving participation and access to arts and education. Representatives from higher education, corrections, advocates, policy makers and interested members from the community came from Alabama, California, New York, Tennessee, Florida and elsewhere.

I was honored to be here by invitation from Kyes Stevens, founder and director of the Alabama Prison Arts +Education Project. I came to know her when I was incarcerated at Julia Tutwiler prison in Wetumpka, AL. Her group APAEP came into the prison with classes for prisoners. I was lucky enough to get a spot in the class and it was an amazing experience. It combined writing and some movement exercises. It brought me closer to my classmates. We developed trust and friendship – something not found in prison. I have since gotten out of there and continue to correspond and follow her and the program through social media. I came to the forum to listen and maybe get involved with her work.

I was excited to be here and felt a little out of place with these notable people.

The APAEP hosted the forum with partners such as the Art for Justice Fund, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, The Quentin Hancock Fund, and the Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art and the Auburn College of Architecture, Design and Construction. It was also made possible by the California Lawyers for the Arts through their groundbreaking national project funded by the Arts for Justice Fund, which is administered by the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Philanthropic Advisors.

Opening remarks by Stevens acknowledged the diverse and talented group in attendance and she thanked her staff and others for bringing the forum together. She encouraged forum attendees to listen, feel free to ask questions and give personal comments after each session. Taffye Benson Clayton, inaugural Vice President and Associate Provost for Inclusion and Diversity at Auburn, welcomed everyone to the campus and made clear that Auburn University supports and will continue to be at the center of efforts for arts for justice in Alabama.

Moderator Mark Wilson, Coordinator of Community and Civic Engagement in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn, began the first session by introducing Barb Bondy, a visual artist and Professor of Art in the Art & Art History department at Auburn University and the artist Sonia Turley-Landers of Panama City, Florida.

Bondy has taught 12 classes for APAEP. She told of her experiences in prison classrooms and the changes and transformations she witnesses as students gain the ability to express their own ideas. She said that there is a spark of confidence to learn and create that carries over into her own experiences as a teacher.

Sonia Turley-Landers, a former APAEP student at Tutwiler said the program is a ‘light’ in the darkness. It helped her gain confidence and positivity. She thinks art, poetry, and English classes in prison change and build trust among prisoners. She said the opportunity to take these classes affected her day to day behavior for the better because she didn’t want to jeopardize her chance to go to class. Reciting a poem she wrote in a class, she said she believes that education is a great equalizer. She is now a sought-after artist in Panama City, Florida.

A Q &A was then moderated by Wilson. The audience asked about the non-grading aspect of the classes in prisons and the possibility of a community art show.

Th next session was moderated by Joan R. Harrell, a lecturer and the Diversity Coordinator for the College of Liberal Arts School at Auburn University. She introduced Carol Potok, Director of Aid to Inmate Mothers, and Al Head, director of the Alabama State Council on the Arts. Potok has been with Aid to Inmate Mothers for 21 of the 31 years it has existed. She discussed her program and said she has seen a healing effect that the ADAEP classes have on students. She believes the classes help mothers connect with each other.

Al Head said arts and education for inmates is an investment for the future. He said he has learned a lot through years of working with Kyes Stevens at APAEP and with programs for youthful offenders. He said the programs help make our communities safer in the long run. We all agree. He referenced Birmingham’s “Studio by the Tracks.” and recommended partnerships with any and all groups to help reach out.

Next, successful Tennessee artist Omari Booker talked about his experience with art education programs in Tennessee. He gave his story and journey through slides of his artwork. The presentation was lovely – murals, mixed media and paintings that addressed his belief in art in justice. The Q & A moderated by Harrell included discussion of college courses in prison and opening doors for ex-offenders in transition.

An introduction to the round table luncheon discussions was made by Alma Robinson, executive director for the California Lawyers for the Arts, a co-sponsor of the Forum. It was a pleasure and honor to meet Ms. Robinson. She is a dynamic person who believes deeply in arts and education in justice. She was so welcoming and warm as she encouraged attendees to sit at the table with topics they needed to know more about.

Lunch table topics were:

Art and College Education

What Policies Can Shift for Reform

Juvenile Justice

Re-entry for the Incarcerated

Arts on the Inside

Restorative Justice

Program Evaluation

Art as Pathway for Change for Alabama

Need vs. Public Perception for arts/education for incarcerated people.

Facilitators were Shaelyn Smith, Frank Knaack, Kate Owens-Murphy, Jeremy Sherer, Connie Kohler, Frankie Lanaan, Donna Russell, and Kyes Stevens.

After a beautifully catered luncheon and lots of good conversation, the next session was concerned with ‘National Perspectives on Making Change’ and was moderated by Donna Russell, Executive Director of the Alabama Alliance for Arts Education.

Included was Terrell Blount, Program Associate at the Vera Institute of Justice in New York City. Blount discussed the national push to provide ‘Second Chance’ Pell grants for prisoners. He emphasized expanding education in prison through Pell grants. His presentation was very factual and showed the number of colleges across the nation that already have classes for the incarcerated to be around 65. He said Vera Institute seeks to increase those numbers through APEAP and others groups. Ending his talk, he said he hoped the day inspired the audience to create new solutions, and remain active in helping our nation, state and communities.

Alma Robinson then discussed the outreach way to set up programs for the incarcerated through state and national resources. She was very passionate about the subject. She told the audience to seek out partnerships as well. She encouraged everyone to communicate with their state representatives and make them aware of the programs for incarcerated. She encouraged all to “make a pitch” and highlighted some of her work through the forum. It was very inspiring.

Dena Dickerson spoke next. She is the director of Offender Alumni Association in Birmingham, Al. She said the APAEP classes helped empower her and others to change and help others. She now works to engage ex-offenders to contribute to their community much the way she did. She is a great inspiration.

At closing remarks, Kyes Stevens encouraged everyone and expressed hopefulness that the day inspired the audience to consider and create new solutions.

I’m so glad to have been part of it!

After the conference, Leasa Brock worked with project consultant Jacqueline Trescott to complete this article, which was originally posted as a blog on the website of the Justice Arts Coalition: <https://thejusticeartscoalition.org/tag/justice/>