

PCAP:
A Voice from the Landfill
Kinnari Jivani

landfill /1a'ndfil/ n. 1 a place where society's rejects are dumped to decompose, out of sight and silenced, etc. 2 a place where one could easily get buried and lost.

I live in a landfill known as prison.

In the United States most prisons are known as correctional facilities – the word corrections implying punishment and rehabilitation. But in most states, because of budget cuts, most of the educational and beneficial rehabilitation programs are cut off, and prisons have become human landfills or human warehouses.

The Pew Center on the States (2008) says that 1 in every 100 people in America are in prison (approximately 2.8 to 3 million people). With so many people living in concrete closets behind razor wire fences a big chunk of our individual and collective voice is silenced. Behind the metal doors loads of raw potential lie buried.

Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP), a non profit organization founded in 1990, recognizes the raw potential, and provides positive outlets for men and women incarcerated in Michigan through a multitude of art forms. PCAP also works with juvenile facilities and has a Linkage program for prisoners returning to the community. PCAP's administrators and volunteers through their dedication and selfless service, create a space for us to share our voice, vulnerability, visions and talents with the outside world.

When I first came to prison each day was like a thousand years long and I didn't know if I would make it to the next day. The pain that my actions caused to the other people haunted me and I didn't know how to continue to live on. Nine years later, I can testify how art has helped me cope with guilt, sorrow, frustration, shame and loss. How I sketched and wrote page after page trying to make sense of it all! How a mere pen, pencil, and paper kept me sane! My art became my meditation, my prayer, my savior. I would never have considered myself an artist or a writer, but PCAP changed that.

The first year I was in prison, a fellow prisoner urged me to submit my sketches to the art exhibition held by PCAP. My sketches were primitive and I was sure they would be rejected, but to my surprise the curators selected one of the sketches, vitalizing me to continue drawing. The next year I

experimented with color pencils and pastels, and the following year I tried paints. My artwork continued to improve. I also gathered up enough courage to sign up for a poetry writing workshop. English is not my first or second language and I was unsure of myself, my words and my ability to write something authentic that others would find worth reading. Once I joined the workshop I was relieved – the volunteers and the group members created the space that felt safe and nurturing. Every week we entered the workshop like it was a temple, carrying our unique offerings, unique experiences and styles. We wrote and shared our pain, fear, hopes and dreams. We inspired and challenged each other to rise to a new level. We called our group SOUL (Sisters of Unique Lyrics). In our writing sisterhood, I didn't just become a better writer but also a better person, and I will always be grateful.

A few months ago, I was moved to Huron Valley Correctional Facility, where I joined PCAP's art and theater workshops. The first is an energized space where we meet to create our own works. In "Sisters Within", the theater workshop, we sit in a circle sharing our intimate stories. We have taken risks and exposed our raw emotions. Now we are creating scenes based on our stories and making a play that in coming months we can perform in front of an audience. In the process we are reflecting, developing insights and growing.

As I write and paint, I continue to heal and explore myself. I wonder where I would be if I never had an opportunity to share my art, my voice – would I have become bitter for being forever despised by society? Would I have suffocated in these concrete closets and withered away into nothingness? Thank goodness for organizations like PCAP! Because of them my time in Prison has not been spent decomposing, instead I have blossomed. Through PCAP, my writings have been published. My art work has traveled to the National STOPMAX conference in Philadelphia and received an Environmental Service Award for artistic contribution to the United Nations' Wise World Environmental Day in California. Each year for two weeks my artwork hangs in the gallery at the Annual Art Exhibition at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, alongside the remarkable works of hundreds of men and women incarcerated across the state.

People from all roads of life come and view our works. They read our statements or pick up the anthologies of our writings, they hear our voices, see our painted emotions and thoughts, and perhaps for a moment they see us more than a litany of our worst acts; they see us as artists and writers,

and more than anything as human beings. And in those moments a bridge is built.

bridge /brij/ n. & v. • n. 1 a structure that connects one to another. b a layout that links lost voices from landfills back to mainstream.

PCAP is a bridge that helps prisoners rediscover and reconnect to themselves and to the community. I am blessed to have access to such a valued bridge.

REFERENCES

Pew Center on the States (2008) *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008*, Washington: The Pew Charitable Trusts – February. Retrieved from http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/8015PCTS_Prison08_FINAL_2-1-1_FORWEB.pdf.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kinnari Jivani was born and raised in India. She is fluent in Gujarati, Hindi and English. She has a B.S. In microbiology from the University of Mumbai. At the age of 20, she was arrested, then sentenced to 11 to 20 years of imprisonment in Michigan. Her earliest release date is in January 2001, after which she faces deportation. Since her incarceration she has been discovering and exploring her talent for painting and writing. Her artwork has been featured in the Michigan Bar Journal and the Artist Magazine. Her paintings have been shown in the Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners for many years and has consistently won first place awards. Her writings have been published in *The Change Agent*, a magazine for social change; *A Crack in the Concrete*, an anthology of poems; *Bhumika*, a feminist magazine; *The Project V-Day: Until the Violence Stops*, headed by Eve Ensler; and in the *Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing*, an anthology. She is a yoga instructor and volunteers weekly yogasana classes in the facility. She is now housed in the Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility in Michigan.