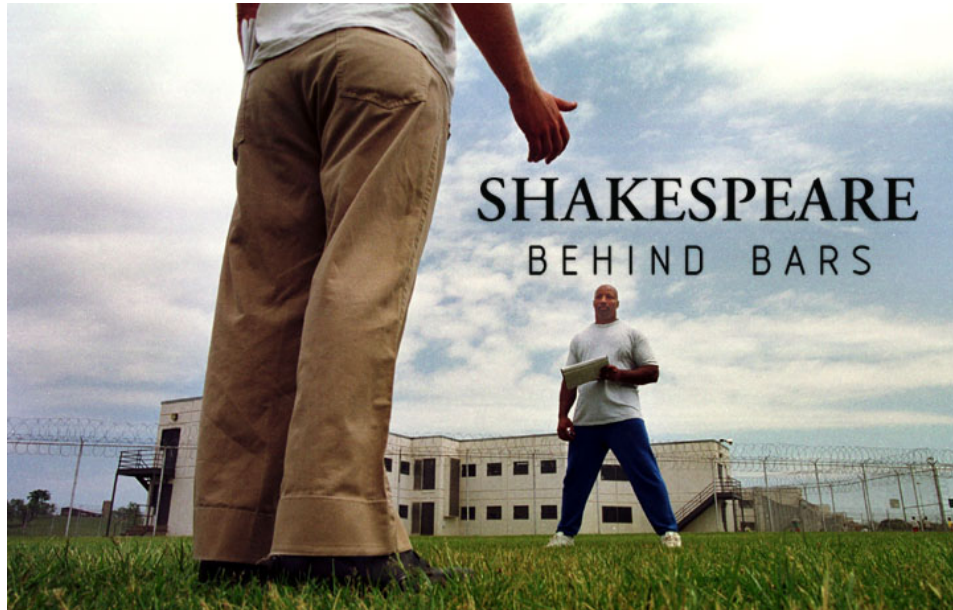


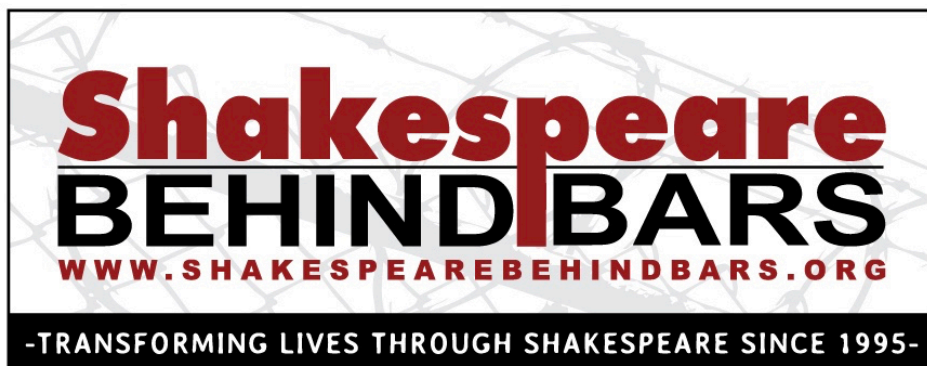
# Shakespeare Behind Bars: Circle of Truth



*Never underestimate the power of a few committed people  
to change the world.*

*Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.*

—Margaret Mead



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The **Mission** of Shakespeare Behind Bars is to offer theatrical encounters with personal and social issues to incarcerated, post-incarcerated, and at-risk communities, allowing them to develop life skills that will ensure their successful integration into society.

The **Vision** of Shakespeare Behind Bars is founded on the belief that all human beings are born inherently good. Although some convicted criminals have committed heinous crimes against other human beings, the inherent goodness still lives deep within them and can be called forth by immersing participants in the safety of a **Circle of Truth** and the creative process. Participation in the Shakespeare Behind Bars program can effectively change our world for the better by influencing one person at a time, awakening him or her to the power and the passion of the goodness that lives within all of us.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES** from building a **Circle of Truth** are allowing each participant the opportunity to 1) develop a lifelong passion for learning, especially those participants who are at high risk of not completing or continuing their education; 2) develop literacy skills (reading, writing, and oral communication), including those participants who are classified as learning disabled and/or developmentally challenged; 3) develop decision making, problem solving, and creative thinking skills; 4) develop empathy, compassion, and trust; 5) nurture a desire to help others; 6) increase self esteem and develop a positive self image; 7) take responsibility for the crime/s committed; 8) become a responsible member of a group, community, and family; 9) learn tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict; 10) relate the universal human themes contained in Shakespeare's works to themselves including their past experiences and choices, their present situation, and their future possibility, to the lives of other human beings, and to society at-large; 11) return to society as a contributing member.

Shakespeare Behind Bars offers participants the ability to hope and the courage to act despite their fears and the odds against them.

*I view myself as an artist who does healing work that is therapeutic.*

*I'm not a therapist who does healing work that is artistic.*

*I never forget the difference.*

—Curt L. Tofteland

*I've committed my life to assisting human beings move from trauma and shame into a state of being that embraces peace and wholeness.*

**Curt L. Tofteland** is the founder of the internationally acclaimed Shakespeare Behind Bars program. Since 1995, he has been working as a prison arts practitioner. He is a recognized authority on creating *Circles of Truth* with marginalized communities around the world. Shakespeare Behind Bars was documented in Philomath Films award-winning documentary which began its life at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival and traveled the world to 40+ film festivals winning 11 awards. He is a much sought after speaker and workshop leader having visited 80+ colleges, done four TEDx Talks, delivered keynotes at American conferences including the Shakespeare Association of America and the Modern Language Association, as well as internationally at Stratford, Canada; Rotterdam, Netherlands; Kolkata, India; Belfast, Northern Ireland; Warsaw, Poland; and Nassau, Bahamas. He is an oft published essayist writing about the transformative power of the arts to create more humanity. For the past twelve years, he has been training arts practitioners in the technique of becoming skilled facilitators in creating a *Circle of Truth*.

*The world is a place of tender beauty and injustices.*

— Charles Clyde Bowden

*“You do what with who?” . . . blue eyes brimming with a victim’s rage . . . a victim’s hurt . . . a victim’s stolen innocence . . . a victim’s cry for justice . . .*

*Breathing into a boundary-less pain weeping before me . . . knowing the flash point of anger has sparked . . . preparing to bear a shared burden . . .*

*“I do Shakespeare with the incarcerated.”*

*“What?” . . . words come stumbling out of a broken heart . . . “he killed my mother . . . my brother . . . my wife . . . he raped me . . . my girlfriend . . . my child . . . and you give him Shakespeare?!”*

*“Why?” . . . thoughts tumbling over and over each other . . . “he’s an animal . . . scum . . . a bastard . . . he deserves to rot in prison for the rest of his miserable life and then to burn in an eternity of endless fire!”*

*I am humbled before an abyss of unrequited justice. I know that in a forest of pain the timbers of hurt are often felled by an axe of justice, sharpened with a whetstone of revenge.*

*The victim's sorrow and grief rages through a forest of pain, craving revenge to ... get even ... make sense ... bring clarity ... create meaning ... issue comfort ... receive closure ... discover peace ... find justice.*

*But what is justice? And where does justice live? Does it live only in revenge? Or might it also live in mercy?*

Two images are presented to me:

Justice with her sword, holding the severed head of an offender; and Mercy, whom Caravaggio envisages as a woman visiting an imprisoned person, offering milk from her breast.

I believe that the duality of revenge and mercy lives in all human beings. Which pathway is chosen will make all the difference—but it need not make the difference for all time. Change can be made—again and again. The human being is built on the capacity to and for change.

*I leave my heart on the floor.  
It's the only place there's justice.  
If justice is ever to come.*

—Curt L. Tofteland

## **Philosophy**

Shakespeare Behind Bars was founded to assist the incarcerated in finding their authentic voices through an immersive experience in Art, Theatre, the collected works of William Shakespeare, and Original Writing.

Each circle member becomes a theatre artist who finds expression in Shakespeare for the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual, as a way of speaking for themselves the deepest and perhaps the most impermeable truths of their being.

Shakespeare writes on all four levels of being - **Cognitive, Emotional, Spiritual, and Metaphysical**. All depth of meaning is contained in these four arenas.

*What a piece of work is a man!  
how Noble in Reason?  
how infinite in faculty?  
in form and moving how express and admirable?  
in Action, how like an Angel?  
in apprehension, how like a God?  
the beauty of the world,  
the Paragon of Animals;  
and yet to me,  
what is this Quintessence of Dust?*

—Hamlet, II.2

## **Habilitation versus Rehabilitation**

It is important to note that I don't use the word, "rehabilitation" when referring to a prisoner's human transformation from who they were, to who they are, to who they wish to become.

An injured elbow can be rehabilitated to the condition it was prior to the injury.

You can't rehabilitate a human being to the human being they were prior to committing a crime, being caught, convicted, and sent to prison. They have lived many years through this process - sometimes most of a lifetime. To "rehabilitate" suggests somehow erasing those years. The years that have been full of pain and loneliness, often desperation, or perhaps even madness. But they are still minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, that have value because someone has lived them.

The word "habilitation" may sound peculiar, but I prefer this word because it represents the process of coming to live with the fact of those prior minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, in the ever-becoming version of a human being.

*Many of us spend our whole lives running from feeling  
with the mistaken belief that you cannot bear the pain.  
But you have already borne the pain.  
What you have not done is feel all you are beyond that pain.*

—Kahlil Gibran

## **Monsters are not born, they are made**

*If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds,  
and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them.  
But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.  
And who is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?*

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

If we assign “evil monster” to convicted criminals, we release them from their responsibility for their behavior.

If we see offenders as human beings, we open the opportunity to understanding how the “monster” was created.

Rather than saying, “What is wrong with you?”; we ask, “How did that happen?”; which opens the opportunity for story; within story, offenders unpack the narrative of their past.

*There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you.*

—Maya Angelou

## ***We Know What We Are, But Not What We May Be***

*If we do not transform our pain,  
we will most assuredly transmit it  
— usually to those closest to us —  
our family, our neighbors, our co-workers,  
and invariably, the most vulnerable,  
our children.*

—Richard Rohr

Children are born innocent and uncorrupted but some children are born into environments that are guilty and corrupt. As children age, they are shaped by the values of their birth environment, becoming mirrors of their childhood experiences. Penitentiaries, jails, and detention centers are the dumping ground and epicenter of trauma and shame in our world.

*Prisons dispose of the human being,  
not the crime.*

—Curt L. Tofteland

A high percentage of the prison population have experienced heart-breaking, life-shattering childhood experiences of intentionally inflicted trauma of willful abuse and conscious neglect.

For children who find themselves contained within the boundaries of institutional correction, their innate goodness lives within them.

Space must be created for that goodness to be called forth.

The Shakespeare Behind Bars ***Circle of Truth*** is a place where I as an “injured” human being can join in community with other “injured” human beings to explore what it means to be human. In the ***Circle of Truth*** Community, I don’t have to suffer alone. I can sit on the rim of the circle and simply be broken until I decide I am ready to begin my journey into wholeness.

*Wholeness does not mean perfection.  
It means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life.*

—Parker J. Palmer

**Shakespeare Behind Bars** was founded to assist the incarcerated in finding their authentic voices through an immersive experience in Shakespeare’s original language, complex themes, and multiple meanings.

Shakespeare writes on all four levels of being - **Cognitive, Emotional, Spiritual, and Metaphysical**. All depth of meaning is contained in these four arenas.

Each circle member becomes a theatre artist who finds expression in Shakespeare for the intellectual, the emotional, the physical, the spiritual, as a way of speaking for themselves the deepest and perhaps the most impermeable truths of their being.

*Not everything that is faced can be changed,  
but nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

— James Baldwin

## Circle of Truth

The **Circle of Truth** is a sanctuary of shared presence that traffics in truth.

—Curt L. Tofteland

*Do not seek the truth;  
only cease to cherish opinions.*

—Seng-ts'an

A circle can be created anywhere, in any life's pursuit, in business, in worship, in a book club, or in working with marginalized communities like Shakespeare Behind Bars.

When the **Circle of Truth** is created, any pursuit, passion, avocation, or pastime can be put into its center. For Shakespeare Behind Bars, it happens to be art, theatre, the collected works of William Shakespeare, and original writing.

Within the **Circle of Truth**, Shakespeare Behind Bars seeks to transform inmate offenders from who they were when they committed their crimes, to who they are in the present moment, to who they wish to become.

*Between stimulus and response,  
there is a space.  
In that space is our power to choose our response.  
In our response,  
lies our growth and freedom.*

—Viktor Frankl

The Shakespeare Behind Bars **Circle of Truth** is a shame and guilt free space where it's okay to not be okay. In the **Circle of Truth**, I, as an "injured" human being can join in community with other "injured" human beings to explore what it means to be human.

*Life will break you.  
Nobody can protect you from that,  
and living alone won't either,  
for solitude will also break you with its yearning.  
You have to love.  
You have to feel.*



*It is the reason you are here on earth.  
You are here to risk your heart.  
You are here to be swallowed up.  
And when it happens that you are broken,  
or betrayed,  
or left,  
or hurt,  
or death brushes near,  
let yourself sit by an apple tree  
and listen to the apples falling all around you in heaps,  
wasting their sweetness.  
Tell yourself you tasted as many as you could.*

— Louise Erdrich

In the ***Circle of Truth*** Community, I don't have to suffer alone. I can sit on the rim of the circle and simply be "injured" until I decide I am ready to begin my journey into wholeness.

*The world breaks everyone and afterward many are stronger at the broken places.  
But those that will not break it kills.  
It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially.  
If you are none of these,  
you can be sure it will kill you too  
but there will be no special hurry.*

— Ernest Hemingway

## **Circle of Truth**

I seek to create a ***Circle of Truth*** in which I learn to grieve for my losses and harms; to find language for my trauma and shame; to give voice to my suffering; to listen deeply to others; to find myself in another human being's story; to find the compassion I need for myself and others; to become the most empathic human being I can be.

The ***Circle of Truth*** is a fragile place to create - particularly in a prison, where there's often the least amount of trust possible - so little that trust is sometimes almost unfathomable. Trust must be earned, and even when it has been achieved there is the constant questioning of how deep it runs.

The Shakespeare Behind Bars participants must come to an understanding and agreement that the **Circle of Truth** is neutral ground: a place where they can come and remove their external mask to explore their deepest selves without the fear of being betrayed. This is a difficult achievement because often a prisoner's life is filled with the betrayal they received from others and that they have also committed.

*Only you can give yourself the gift of freedom.*

—Curt L. Tofteland

There's no fixing what's broken in others in the Shakespeare Behind Bars **Circle of Truth**. The circle is all about "me fixing what's broken in me." Each member participates in the **Circle of Truth** to work on and to fix themselves. We do not offer advice to someone who is struggling with an issue, but rather we offer our own personal stories which may assist the struggling member to find the answer to their own questions.

The goal of the **Circle of Truth** is for the participants to see each other as human beings first; to find the similarities rather than the differences; to look into each human being's heart and bypass the external features or beliefs or background.

*You can't make human beings see.  
You can only provide opportunities for human beings  
to learn to do their own seeing.*

—Curt L. Tofteland

Life in the *Circle of Truth* is living into "I."

I choose to:

- \* speak in the personal I rather than the collective we;
- \* embrace hope rather than expectation;
- \* labor to fix myself rather than to attempt to fix others;
- \* live in invitation rather than demand;
- \* share my personal story of suffering and shame rather than offering advice;
- \* be inclusive in my thinking rather than exclusive in my thoughts;
- \* offer non-judgement rather than condemnation;
- \* extend justice seasoned with mercy rather than justice motivated by revenge;
- \* seek deeper questions rather than superficial answers.

*Sitting in the **Circle of Truth**,  
there is always invitation, never invasion,  
always opportunity, never demand.*

—Curt L. Tofteland

*That which is false troubles the heart, but truth brings joyous tranquillity.*

—Rumi

## **Ten Guideposts for Wholehearted Living**

By

Brene' Brown

1. Cultivating Authenticity \* Letting Go of What Other People Think;
2. Cultivating Self-Compassion \* Letting Go of Perfectionism;
3. Cultivating Your Resilient Spirit \* Letting Go of Numbing and Powerlessness;
4. Cultivating Gratitude and Joy \* Letting go of Scarcity and Fear of the Dark;
5. Cultivating Intuition and Trusting Faith \* Letting Go of the Need for Certainty;
6. Cultivating Creativity \* Letting Go of Comparison;
7. Cultivating Play and Rest \* Letting Go of Exhaustion as a Status Symbol and Productivity as Self-Worth;
8. Cultivating Calm and Stillness \* Letting Go of Anxiety as a Lifestyle;
9. Cultivating Meaningful Work \* Letting Go of Self-Doubt and Supposed-To;
10. Cultivating Laughter, Song, and Dance \* Letting Go of Cool and Always in Control.

## 1. What kind of people sign up for the "Shakespeare Behind Bars" program?

Shakespeare Behind Bars is a completely voluntary program that inclusively and proactively enlists intentional strategies to remove barriers to access, participation, and the success of those who were historically or are currently systematically excluded or marginalized.

Shakespeare Behind Bars values diversity and practices inclusion within its program participants. For the continued advancement of the work of Shakespeare Behind Bars, we champion equal access and equity of opportunity through the intentional inclusion of all.

Shakespeare Behind Bars values diversity and inclusion across identity groups and professional levels. Identity groups include and are not limited to age, appearance, disability, ethnicity, gender (identity or expression), geographic location, nationality, professional level, race, religion, or sexual orientation.

The **MISSION** of Shakespeare Behind Bars is to transform prisoners from:

### 1. who they were when they committed their crimes,

*I come from a place of abuse, addiction, anxiety, bullying, depression,  
isolation, loneliness, mistrust, shame, suicide, trauma, violence,  
and worthlessness.*

*To survive,  
I numbed my negative emotions.  
- turned my back on the devil -  
But in numbing those emotions,  
I numbed the positive ones as well.  
- turned my back on the angels too -  
I learned how not to feel anything.*

*There is a living death  
in becoming a feelingless/emotionless zombie  
wandering on the periphery of life  
carrying a broken heart.*

*To heal my heart,  
I journeyed deeply into my past  
to examine and understand  
how I grew into those hurt-filled experiences  
and took my place in that brutal world.*

*Now, I build a connection from my hurt to the trust.*

*I seek the compassion for myself  
that will allow me to discover the empathy  
to embrace the vulnerability  
and become fully human.*

*There is nothing more powerful than an act of love.  
There isn't anyone I can't love,  
once I've heard their authentic story.*

*My life's story is being written in chalk, not ink.*

## **2. to who they are in the present moment,**

*I am the archeologist of my inner world.  
I know that I often loathe in others  
what is most loathsome in myself.  
I know that I can't see outside myself  
what I don't find within myself.  
I dig into my past  
to sift through my mind (memory), my heart, and my soul  
— searching to understand  
how the place I came from influenced  
how I perceived the world  
and why I did the things I did  
that brought me to this current place and time.  
As an artist living in the present moment,  
I lean into questions,  
not answers,  
willing myself to delve ever more deeply into the question:  
What does it mean to be a Human Being?*

### 3. to whom they wish to become.

*In the Shakespeare Behind Bars **Circle Of Truth**  
I seek not to be remembered for the worst things I've done  
through introspection and finding words for my past to release  
into the **Circle Of Truth**  
I give my past momentum  
understanding where I came from  
what values were instilled in me as a child  
what experiences shaped me into who I was  
through giving my past momentum  
I come to understand why I am in my present situation  
and that my future is yet to be  
my past is but a portion of the whole that will not be completed until I die  
I live into the now  
through living in the now  
I explore who I wish to become  
I may say that I am not responsible for my trauma.  
But I am responsible for my healing.*

—Curt L. Tofteland

## Trauma

*Trauma happens to everyone,  
but the way you respond to it determines its impact on your brain and body.*

—Bessel van der Kolk

**Trauma** is often divided into:

1. **big-T trauma** - a major event such as rape, natural disasters, and major car accidents,
2. **little-t traumas** - an event with usually mild to moderate impact like the death of a pet, divorce, or an incident of bullying,
3. **big-C—Cumulative trauma** - when trauma is extended over time and possibly generations. Cumulative trauma results from long periods of repeated exposure to stressors without any hope of solution. These stressors can be instances of oppression, deprivation, or continual threat to one's safety or humanity, such as systemic racism, slavery, or incarceration.

—Carla J. Simmons

## Four Responses to Trauma

1. The **Fight Trauma Response** is self-preservation and for people using it, it doesn't matter who they hurt in the process. In some cases the fight response is helpful and healthy. For example, if a wild animal threatens you and you shoot or trap it, you have responded to a threat in an appropriate way. Similarly, if someone speaks to you in a condescending or abusive way, you might say, "I won't let you speak to me that way," which is a healthy fight response.
2. When the threat seems impossible to defeat in a fight, a person may default to leaving the situation entirely. That is the **Flight Trauma Response**. Flight can be either healthy or unhealthy.
3. Though not as common as fight and flight, the **Freeze Trauma Response** is one with which many people are familiar. In nature, you might recognize it as "playing possum" – a term that is used to describe an animal playing dead or asleep when threatened. When applied to people, an individual will pause instead of trying to fight the danger or run away.
4. **Fawning Trauma Response** is where a person develops people-pleasing behaviors to avoid conflict and to establish a sense of safety. In other words, the fawn trauma response is a type of coping mechanism that survivors of complex trauma adopt to "appease" their abusers.

*Trauma is a psychic wound that hardens you psychologically  
that then interferes with your ability to grow and develop.  
It pains you and now you're acting out of pain.  
It induces fear and now you're acting out of fear.  
Trauma is not what happens to you,  
it's what happens inside you as a result of what happened to you.  
Trauma is that scarring that makes you  
less flexible, more rigid,  
less feeling, and more defended.*

—Gabor Mate

Sometimes in exploring their personal stories, the Shakespeare Behind Bars participants uncover deeply rooted trauma that they suffered in their childhood or after experiencing or witnessing a terrifying event.

Digging into this trauma, the participants may discover that the root of their negative behavior which first brought them into conflict with society's laws (and eventually brought them to prison) is this unaddressed and unresolved trauma they endured in childhood or after experiencing or witnessing a terrifying event.

*When we get trauma-activated,  
and the adaptive child  
— the things you learned to do as a kid because of emotional neglect or violence —  
comes in and takes over.  
One of the bitter pills here is that the adaptive child  
doesn't want to reveal itself.  
It wants to preserve itself.  
It's about me, me, me.  
To suture its wounds and pretend they aren't there.  
The adaptive child sees the world as full of thorns and knives.  
Every encounter with "you" is a potential threat to "me."  
You-and-me consciousness is an adversarial world  
in which one loses and the other wins.  
It's a big power struggle.*

- Terrance Real

Uncovering the source of behavior is different from blaming one's action on past experiences - the former offers a mirror for why we are who we are and a chance to move toward who we can be; whereas blaming one's actions on a traumatic past assumes that one's current identity is at an end point.

In working in prisons for the past 28 years, I've discovered that trauma is trauma just as pain is pain. There is no comparable measurement tool of whose trauma is worse.

*To remain stable is to refrain from trying to separate yourself from a pain  
because you know that you cannot.  
Running away from fear is fear,  
fighting pain is pain,  
trying to be brave is being scared.  
If the mind is in pain,  
the mind is pain.  
The thinker has no other form than his thought.  
There is no escape.*



*But so long as you are not aware of the inseparability of thinker and thought,  
you will try to escape.*

– Alan W. Watts

We can't compare despair or anguish or grief. As unintegrated experiences, trauma is unique for every single person who suffers it. Our goal is to establish a state of social engagement rather than recalling past traumatic events.

*Sometimes at the bottom of the heart, you just can't get the words out.*

- Nathan Phillips

Often the trauma is so horrific, that a person may not have language to be able to share it. Compounding the challenge, there is deep shame attached to trauma because the sufferer believes they were the cause, or that they somehow deserve the trauma they suffered. These are deep wounds to the human psyche and they are as difficult to overcome as they are to integrate.

The first step is to address the shame attached to trauma that creates a secret world. In that hidden world, the trauma and attached shame must be kept buried. The sufferer believes that if the trauma/shame is revealed, they will be destroyed.

There's a great deal of research about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with soldiers. PTSD in soldiers has a long history dating back to the Greeks who explored the trauma of war in their theatrical plays. The Greek care centers were built near the theaters. Many human beings suffer some form of trauma in their lives, even in the best of homes, even in the best of situations. In the poorest sectors of our community, racism, poverty, domestic abuse, street violence, addiction, absent fathers, and many other related traumas get dumped on the most vulnerable populations.

Our prisons are filled with trauma victims who have learned to cope with their pain by traumatizing others. Their lives are deemed so repellent that they are often banished to the "Hole" (segregation unit) – when even a community of societal rejects is deemed unsafe in their presence.

*Hurt people, hurt people.*

—Anonymous

*As long as you make an identity for yourself out of pain, you cannot be free of it.*

—Eckhart Tolle

Trauma is mental injury not mental illness. There's no drug that will cure trauma. There's no addiction that will heal trauma. The only way to heal trauma is to be able to find the words to express it, giving it form and shape. Trauma is healed in increments, not all at one time. The trauma memory remains but not the response to the trauma.

The Greeks used drama to wrestle with the trauma of constant war by writing about the ravages of war and putting it on the stage for the audiences to bear witness. It was a cathartic experience that Aristotle wrote about in his *Poetics* and his view regarding the positive social function of the purgation of the emotions of pity and fear that are aroused in the viewer of a tragic play. Because the Greeks understood the mental and physical healing power of art, they built their medical care centers in the proximity of their theatres.

As time marched forward, the understanding of the mental and physical healing through art seems to be lost to where in Shakespeare's day, the Elizabethans built their theaters near their prisons.

## **Unbearable Truth**

In attempting to soften the harshness contained in the word, trauma, I use an alternative term: **Unbearable Truth**.

I want to assist the participants in understanding their Unbearable Truth and be equipped with the tools they need to find a way to shoulder the burden, and eventually lay it down.

*The hardest thing for a human being to do is deal with themselves,  
to introspectively confront their own emotional pain and trauma  
— so they can stop unjustly inflicting their trauma on others.*

—Jason Wilson

When I prepare to play a role, I begin to talk about my character's Unbearable Truth, or the trauma my character perpetrates on others; it crosses over into my own life and trauma. Eventually a miraculous thing may happen: a path toward healing opens, like the lifting of a fog. I am able to deal with my own Unbearable Truth in a healthier way:

to stop running from it and numbing it with addictions, or punching it back down through violence leveled at myself or others.

*If you never heal from what hurt you, you'll bleed on people who didn't cut you.*

—Tamara Kulish

When I experience trauma-/-shame and I don't have the language to express it, it lives on and turns to poison. It has a direct connection to what is manifested in my behavior. All efforts to submerge my hidden shame, fail. All efforts to ameliorate my hidden shame through numbing addictions, fail.

It is only through finding a means of expressing my inner wounds within a *Circle of Truth* that I can begin to heal.

I seek expression for my Unbearable Truth in Shakespeare's language through mastering the tools of analysis. In this process I need to truthfully express the depth of one of his characters, and I am able to apply those same analytical skills to my life story. In applying these skills to my life, within the ***Circle of Truth***, I find my vernacular language to express a selfhood that has been hidden. I learn to tell a story that is not one of obfuscation. I learn that my unique gift to the world is my own story: and that it is mine alone to tell. I use Shakespeare's characters as my fellow-sufferers in telling this story, and therefore I am not alone. I have these characters, these words; and my partners in the ***Circle of Truth***.

*I may say that I am not responsible for my trauma.*

*But I am responsible for my healing.*

*It is not what I expect from life*

*but rather what life expects from me.*

*I must stop questioning what the meaning of life is  
and contemplate what life is offering and asking of me.*

*I will look for my answer within these questions.*

— Curt L. Tofteland

## Four Questions

1. Who am I?
2. What do I love?
3. How will I live my life knowing I will die?
4. What is my gift to humankind?

## **2. How do the roles played by the prisoners relate to them?**

In the Shakespeare Behind Bars ***Circle of Truth***, there are no auditions for the roles in the Shakespeare play. Nor does the facilitator/director cast the roles.

Instead, the participants choose which roles they would like to play.

Going around the circle, each participant shares which role they would like to play, how playing the role will be of benefit to them on their transformational life's journey, and how they think they will bring their personal truth to the role.

If more than one participant wants to play the same role, there is a deeper dialogue between those participants who listen with intention to each other and ask each other questions to arrive at the choice of who is going to play the role. Or the role is double or triple cast and the participants rehearse together and perform on different performances.

### **De-Harming The works of William Shakespeare: Grappling with Triggering Moments of Racism, Prejudice, Violence Against Women, Patriarchy, Misogyny, Appropriation, and Stereotypes.**

Penitentiaries are the dumping ground and epicenter of trauma and hurt in our world.

I founded Shakespeare Behind Bars to assist incarcerated people in finding their authentic voices through a deeply immersive experience with Shakespeare's original language, complex themes, and multiple meanings.

I have been working in prisons for 29 years. I'm a white, sis-gendered male. I work with 80% BIPOC and 10% LGBTQIAPK+ participants.

We produce almost exclusively Shakespeare.

We believe that there is no "whatever" in Shakespeare: there is only "what if?"

Each day in our work sessions, we ask ourselves, "Why Shakespeare now?" We engage Shakespeare's plays with questions that reflect our priorities, confusions, uncertainties,

and urgent concerns. We produce Shakespeare that is fully alive in this present moment and rich in meaning for ourselves and our contemporary audiences. We do not foist on our marginalized communities the host of negative western values that have accumulated around Shakespeare.

We are a collaborative creative collective, the members of which sit in a ***Circle of Truth***, with all participants being equal and empowered around the circle's rim.

What a ***Circle of Truth*** offers is the opportunity to explore what it means to be a human being – to travel into the depths of some of the most profoundly damaged, broken, isolated, and lonely places of an incarcerated mind.

Each member of the ***Circle of Truth*** seeks to discover the artist within who finds expression for the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and metaphysical as a way of speaking for themselves the deepest and most isolated truths of their being. Each participant gains the acting skills to analyze the text, explore the backstory, embody the character, and, slowly but steadily, gain an opportunity to express a part of their inner self that has previously been inaccessible and inexpressible.

The ***Circle of Truth*** is an alternative to the circular image of harm [that hurt people hurt people].

The ***Circle of Truth*** values non-judgement, responsibility, hope, and grace, where nothing that is named is shamed.

In our work we don't put Shakespeare on a pedestal, we do not treat Shakespeare as universal, top dog, precious; nor do we think Shakespeare is godlike or holy. We are not "bardolators" but instead we are "localizers."

Shakespeare is our collaborator. He's a member of our ensemble. We use the First Folio edition coupled with a lexicon.

Our actors cast themselves. The men play the female characters.

When we encounter activating moments — as an ensemble we interrogate Shakespeare's language and we collectively come to an agreement on how we will live each controversial moment in performance.

### **3. Is the English that is spoken day-to-day by prisoners good enough to fully comprehend the complexity of Shakespeare's plays?**

Some of the Shakespeare Behind Bars participants have learning challenges that manifest themselves in dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, low reading skills, English as a second language, and/or illiteracy.

These challenges may hinder the participants but the challenges do not stop the participants from comprehending the works of William Shakespeare and fully participating in the process.

Within the ***Circle of Truth***, there are participants who have cognitive and emotional challenges.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

I use **Emotional Intelligence** (otherwise known as emotional quotient or EQ) is the ability to understand, use, and manage emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges, and defuse conflict.

According to Daniel Goleman, an American psychologist, who helped to popularize emotional intelligence, there are five key elements to it:

1. Self-awareness,
2. Self-regulation,
3. Motivation,
4. Empathy,
5. Social skills.

### **Multiple Intelligences**

I use **Multiple Intelligences** refers to a theory describing the different ways students learn and acquire information.

According to Howard Gardner, an American developmental psychologist, there are eight types of Human Intelligences:

1. Logical-mathematical
2. Linguistic
3. Spatial
4. Musical
5. Bodily-kinesthetic
6. Intrapersonal
7. Interpersonal
8. Naturalistic

## **Human Agency**

I use **Human Agency** to influence a human's functioning and the course of events caused by their actions. Albert Bandura, a cognitive social psychologist, describes **Four Functions Through Which Human Agency is Exercised**.

- 1. Intentionality** - humans form intentions that include action plans and strategies for realizing them.
- 2. Forethought** - humans set themselves goals and foresee likely outcomes of prospective actions to guide and motivate their efforts anticipatorily.
- 3. Self-Reactiveness** - . humans are not only planners and fore-thinkers, but they are also self-regulators.
- 4. Self-Reflectiveness** - humans are not only agents, but they are self-examiners of their own functioning.

Through **Functional Self-Awareness**, humans reflect on their:

1. personal efficacy
2. the soundness of their thoughts and actions
3. the meaning of their pursuits
4. making corrective adjustments if necessary

## **Agentic Learning Perspective**

Agentic learning is defined by self-directed actions aimed at personal growth and development based on self-chosen goals.

- 1. Self-organization**
- 2. Proactive**
- 3. Self-reflection**
- 4. Self-regulation**

#### 4. Do you feel content with what you are doing?

In the United States, the national average for recidivism rate\* (a prisoner's relapse into criminal behavior, often after the prisoner receives sanctions or undergo intervention for a previous crime.) in 2022 was 68%.

The Shakespeare Behind Bars program has a 6% recidivism rate over the past twenty-eight years.

#### Four Human Truths

5. Human beings are social creatures who need **Community**. Unless a person has serious mental health challenges that lead them to isolation, a human being must have a community to which they (we) belong. Belonging to a group is an essential human need. Incarcerated populations are made up of humans who are not merely pushed to the periphery of society, but are removed from society with the understanding that communities don't want or need them and can function more safely without them. Prisoners are literally crammed into spaces where, as outliers, they are herded through their daily lives. The experience of imprisonment takes away external freedom, internal freedom, loved ones, monetary and material possessions, and the freedom to move at will. Removed from a society that no longer has to acknowledge the prisoners except as a statistic, which prisoners experience as abandonment, a state that Shakespeare suggests again and again to be perhaps the most intense threat to the intactness of a human being. Abandonment constitutes a denial of identity and an erosion of self. In order to survive behind bars, prisoners must find a new community. What they do as a part of this community is key to their capacity either to shift and change, or to drive deeper into denial, degradation, and despair.

*There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you.*

—Maya Angelou

2. Human beings are narrative creatures who need **Story**. We must be able to share our personal stories with others. And when we hear, "One upon a time..." we lean in. The brain wants a story: it can hang onto a story far more readily than through a list of facts. Even or especially with mental health challenges, a human being must own their story and possess the tools to be able to tell it.



Rather than asking, “Why did I do this or that?” or “What’s wrong with me?,” ask, “How did that happen?” It’s the “how” in that question that creates story. And story allows me to make sense of my life.

When hearing another human being’s story, there are two experiences that happen.

The first is in personally recognizing the biographical events in the story. This recognition may be a “You, too?”

The second experience is: “Oh, I don’t have the same background as you do. I didn’t have that traumatic experience, but your story spoke to me.” Allowing, compassion and empathy to manifest themselves. Another person’s story is biography, a form of sharing, and it need not be factually accurate to be emotionally true - it’s truth is its expression of self.

Sharing my personal stories, intertwined with the stories of the Shakespearean characters I portray, I come to understand that it is only me who can “fix” myself and only I have the power to transform my life story from who I was in the past into who I am in the present moment into who I wish to become.

The only fixing in the **Circle of Truth**, is the fixing of me. I can’t make other human beings see. But I can provide an opportunity, within the **Circle of Truth**, for other human beings to do their own seeing.

*The only way to handle danger (fear) is to face it.  
If you start getting frightened of it  
then you make it worse  
because you project onto it  
all kinds of bogies and threats  
which don’t exist in it at all.  
Whenever you meet a ghost,  
don’t run away.  
Because the ghost will capture the substance of your fear  
and materialise itself out of your own substance.  
It will kill you eventually  
because it will take over all your own vitality.  
So,  
then,*

*whenever confronted with a ghost  
walk straight into it.  
And it will disappear.*

— Alan Watts

3. Human beings can change our behavior if we change our thinking. To change thinking and behavior, a particular skill is essential: the ability to **Reflect** on what has transpired in the past.

All children are born innocent and uncorrupted but some children are born into environments that are guilty and corrupt. As children age, they are shaped by the values of the environment they were born into, becoming mirrors of their childhood experiences. For children who find themselves contained within the boundaries of correction, their innate goodness lives deep within them. Space must be created for their innate goodness to be called forth.

Human beings must be able to reflect on our past to understand how the particular environment into which we were born affected our thinking and shaped us into who we became.

Once a human being unpacks their past and understands how it shaped their thinking and behavior, they come to understand who they were and why they did the things they did. They must take responsibility for past negative behaviors. Once they do this, they understand that they do not have to be defined solely by their worst actions, but rather they have the opportunity to “live into” who it is they wish to become.

*We are meaning-making machines wired for survival.  
Anytime something bad happens,  
we scramble to make up a story,  
and our brain does not care if the story is right or wrong,  
and most likely,  
it is wrong.*

—Brene’ Brown

*People all say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life.  
I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking.  
I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive  
so that our life experiences*

*on the purely physical plane  
will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality,  
so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.*

—Joseph Campbell

4. Human beings need **Meaning** in their lives. Meaning brings hope. Without a sense of purpose, humans can descend into the abyss of despair. Human beings' primary driving force in life is not the acquisition of fortune, or fame, nor even the pursuit of happiness, but rather making meaning. Above all else, we are driven to understand the purpose of our life and the reason that we are as we perceive ourselves to be.

*In the Shakespeare Behind Bars Circle of Truth,  
I create meaning in my life by making meaning through purpose-filled actions that are  
in service to others.*

— Curt L. Tofteland

*The true meaning of life is to plant trees,  
under whose shade you do not expect to sit.*

—Nelson Henderson

## **Pedagogy and Practice**

*Shakespeare Behind Bars is a rehearsal for life.*

— Curt L. Tofteland

I use **Art, Theater**, the collected works of **William Shakespeare**, and **Original Writing** to help participants discover and define what it means to be a human being.

*The emotional response to tragedy can be expressed in art.*

*Art doesn't provide the answer.*

*Art provides the question.*

*That question leads to more questions.*

*The answer to tragedy is living into life's questions.*

— Curt L. Tofteland

1. I use **Art**, art is an expressive vehicle for communication; because art defies easy classification; and art is ephemeral, eternal, and resides in the inner sanctums of a

human being's consciousness. I believe all human beings have an artist dwelling deep within, even though their expression may not come forth in a formalized classical art form. Being an artist means you keep seeking the deeper truth. The artistic process of continually questioning is a hunger that is never totally satisfied. The exploration of our inner world is often a conundrum wrapped in an enigma. The artistic self can hold these polarities in the same space.

*Theatre allows human beings to explore a "self" (the familiar) within another and the "other" (the unfamiliar) within a self.*

— Curt L. Tofteland

2. I use **Theater**, because theatre is the closest art form to real human behavior in real time. Theatre offers a synthesized life that is reflected to an audience from the stage. As Hamlet says, "Hold the mirror up to nature." What he means is two-fold. It's holding the mirror up to the human nature/behavior that's within Hamlet, as well as holding the mirror up to society's nature/behavior. Theatre provides a bridge that crosses boundaries of conflict. Theatre calls forth sympathy, compassion, and empathy allowing human beings the possibility of understanding another's point of view and peacefully resolving diametrically opposite opinions that require a compromise. Each participant gains the skills as an actor to analyze the text, to explore the backstory, to embody the character, and slowly but steadily to express a part of their self that has been inexpressible, inaccessible.

*I want to be in relationship,  
not in performance.*

—Curt L. Tofteland

## **Purpose of Drama and Theatre Arts**

1. Theatre artists rely on intuition, curiosity, and critical inquiry.
2. Theatre artists work to discover different ways of communicating meaning.
3. Theatre artists refine their work and practice their craft through rehearsal.
4. Theatre artists allow awareness of interrelationships between self and others to influence and inform their work.
5. Theatre artists make strong choices to effectively convey meaning.
6. Theatre artists develop personal processes and skills for a performance or design.
7. Theatre artists share and present stories, ideas and envisioned worlds to explore the human experience.

8. Theatre artists reflect to understand the impact of drama processes and theatre experiences.
9. Theatre artists' interpretations of drama/theatre work are influenced by personal experiences and aesthetics.
10. Theatre artists apply criteria to investigate, explore and assess drama and theatre work.
11. Theatre artists critically inquire into the ways others have thought about and created drama processes and productions to inform their own work.

*Learning how to be in relationship with myself,  
assists me in being in relationship with others.*

—Curt L. Tofteland

By analyzing my character's emotions, motivations, behaviors, and creating a rich back-story, I must talk about my character in great depth. This allows me to become comfortable talking about myself in greater depth.

*Shakespeare is a tool for training people to change the world.*

—Chris Anthony

*The poet, as such, does not think thoughts;  
they make them;  
though it may be for us to think the thoughts which they have made.  
The meanings here discussed are not insisted on by the poetry;  
they emerge only to a sensitive and listening enquiry.  
They are rather suggested than said.  
But that is no reason why we,  
with due care,  
should not proceed to say them:  
it is out business to day them.*

—G. Wilson Knight

3. I use **Shakespeare** because any trauma that a human being has experienced, is addressed somewhere in his plays. When the human being doesn't have language for their trauma, Shakespeare has language for it. As I begins to explore Shakespeare's language, I discover that it is articulate and deeply expressive, provocative of reflection. I begin going back in my own life history. I begin filling in my life's gaps. What I can't find in my biography, I may find in my dramatic imagination.

Shakespeare plays are the richest sources of insights about human nature and psychology. He writes on all four levels of being - cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and metaphysical. All depth of meaning is contained in these four arenas.

As a circle member, I become a theatre artist who finds expression in Shakespeare for the intellectual, the emotional, the physical, the spiritual, as a way of speaking for myself on the deepest and perhaps the most impermeable truths of my being.

I understand that my training as an actor can symbiotically train me to do deeply reflective personal work. In exploring Shakespeare's characters, I explore my own character because in learning about a character, I discover both a profound personal recognition, as well as the capacity to find empathy for "another."

4. I use **Original Writing/Expressive Journaling** because writing in my journal:

- \* is an act of mental health, healing, confidence, grace, humility, all the positive virtues;
- \* regulates my feelings;
- \* helps me work through my thoughts and emotions;
- \* teaches me to express what I'm going through;
- \* gives me creative control, free choice, and free will in a world of correction;
- \* develops my self-expression and self-reflection;
- \* promotes my self-authorship by realizing that I am the author of my story;
- \* I realize I am in charge of the outcome of my life.

*Only one who devotes himself to a cause  
with his whole strength and soul  
can be a true 'proficiency'.  
For this reason 'proficiency' demands all of a person.*

– Albert Einstein

## **Precepts for Developing Personal Awareness**

Because life can quickly change direction, I need:

- the courage to go through something I have never gone through;
- a desire to engage;
- an ability to be present;
- the strength to be in the moment;
- a willingness to risk;

- a willingness to be vulnerable;
- a willingness to ask deep questions;
- the courage to tell the whole truth.

### **Personal GIVE and GET Contract**

In the first meeting of the ***Circle of Truth***, each participant writes on a single page in their journal their answer to the following two questions:

1. **“What do you want to GET out of participating in this program?”**
2. **“What is the personal gift you will GIVE to this program.”**

Going around the circle each participant reveals what they want to get.

Going around the circle each participant reveals what they are going to give.

## **5. What advice would you give to someone who is going to play a role of an administrator or a facilitator for arts in correction?**

If you are a volunteer administrator or facilitator for an arts in corrections, the number one thing to remember is that you are a guest in the prison's house. Make sure you know what the rules and regulations of the facility are and do not violate them.

### **Performing New Lives: Reflections on Prison Theatre in the United States**

Jonathan Shailor, Editor  
University of Wisconsin-Parkside

Jessica Kingsley Publishers  
New York, London

Chapter 14.

### **The Keeper of the Keys: Building a Successful Relationship with the Warden**

By  
Curt L. Tofteland  
Founder & Producing Artistic Director  
Shakespeare Behind Bars

*A prison is a place where good may be done by infinite labor,  
and evil may be done automatically with no effort.*

--Sir Alexander Patterson

To be successful, artists who are committed to creating and sustaining a prison arts program must fully understand the correctional culture into which they are entering and how to navigate the treacherous institutional terrain behind the razor wire.

This chapter will document my journey into the Shakespeare Behind Bars (SBB) program at the Luther Luckett Correction Complex (LLCC) in LaGrange, Kentucky.

After a brief discussion of the project's history, and the perspective and process that has evolved over the course of that time, I will focus on the importance of understanding



and working with certain aspects of correctional culture, in particular: Department of Corrections (DOC) hierarchy, rules and regulations, and other institutional constraints.

The closing paragraphs are devoted to my personal philosophy of artist facilitation.

It is my hope that by sharing my twenty-eight years of experience working in corrections, you will find insights to be used to make your prison arts program a success.

## **Historical Context**

### **Humble Beginnings**

Shakespeare Behind Bars grew out of an established program titled Books Behind Bars created in 1991 by Dr. Curt Bergstrand, Professor of Sociology at Bellarmine University.

The Books Behind Bars program was literature-based and brought together a group of Jefferson County Public middle school students and a group of select Luther Lockett Correctional Complex prisoners, to discuss a common book, at first, a novel by S.E. Hinton (author of *The Outsiders*, *Rumble Fish*, and other novels where the protagonists and antagonists are juveniles).

In 1991, I read an article about the Books Behind Bars program in The Courier Journal newspaper. At the time, I was the Producing Artistic Director of Kentucky Shakespeare (<https://kyshakespeare.com/>) located in Louisville, Kentucky.

Kentucky Shakespeare is the oldest, free, professional, independently operated Shakespeare Festival in North America. Programming includes not only free performances in an inner city outdoor amphitheater, but also education programs that are developmentally appropriate for kindergarten through high school students, as well as professional development opportunities for teachers.

I invited Dr. Bergstrand to lunch to meet him and to hear more about his work in the prison. I was curious to learn more about the Books Behind Bars program and its success with students. At the conclusion of the lunch, Dr. Bergstrand and I formed a partnership that would, in the spring of the year - around the April 23 birthday of William Shakespeare - include the study of a play by Shakespeare and the staging of a scene selected from the play by the students and prisoners.

In the summer of 1992, my teaching partner, Kate Breen, a career high school educator with a specific passion for Shakespeare, and I trained Dr. Bergstrand, Dr. Julie Barto, psychologist at Luther Luckett, and two teachers from Western Middle School in using performance techniques during our annual teacher-training institute *From the Page to the Stage: Teaching Shakespeare in the Classroom*.

Shakespeare became a component of the Books Behind Bars program in the spring of 1993 and my role as a trainer/facilitator ended.

However, two years later, I received a call from Dr. Bergstrand requesting that I work with a group of teachers, students, and prisoners to develop a deeper level of understanding of bringing Shakespeare to life through performance.

I agreed to teach a proficiency class to two groups in two prisons. One group was studying *Macbeth* at the Kentucky Correctional Institute for Women (KCIW) in Pee Wee Valley, Kentucky, and the second group was studying *Romeo and Juliet* at Luther Luckett.

*The undiscovered Country.*

-- Hamlet, III.1

Although nervous about entering a prison, I was excited about the experience and the insights I would gain. The proficiency class at KCIW was a success. Working with the students and the female prisoners invigorated me. Not long after the first proficiency class, I began my association with the Luther Luckett Correctional Complex.

I was delighted to see that Dr. Julie Barto, our Page to the Stage graduate, was introducing LLCC prisoners to Shakespeare. Julie, an undergraduate English literature major, was a confirmed Bard-o-phile with a passion for the theatre. She was working directly with a group of prisoners on the death scene of Mercutio and Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*. This was the scene the prisoners selected to study, rehearse, and perform. Rehearsing with them, I was stunned by their level of interest and their openness to the artistic process. We had truly entered an “undiscovered country.” When the end of the session arrived, I felt the prisoners and I had just begun to scratch the surface of the scene. I had a strong desire to continue the work, and I asked Julie if it would be possible for me to return; she agreed to be my sponsor. When I came back, the work with the prisoners continued to deepen. Again, I requested Julie’s permission to return.

After several more visits, it became apparent that the prisoners and I were developing a bond of trust. With Julie's approval, I told the prisoners that because I was donating my services, I would return until they wasted my time. At this writing, I have been returning for twenty-eight years, and the prisoners have yet to waste my time. Thus began my journey into the Shakespeare Behind Bars program.

If this beginning sounds haphazard, it was. I fell into the opportunity. I did not create this program with an agenda, or goals, or outcomes, or even a timeline. I was simply engaged in the process and the pleasure of getting together to work with the prisoners on the exploration of Shakespeare's works.

The procedure was simple. I would arrive at Luther Luckett at an appointed date and hour. Julie would meet me at the security desk and escort me to her office near the visitors' room. Once there, Julie would phone the Captain's Office requesting an announcement to be made to the yard population asking the Shakespeare Behind Bars participants to come to the visitors' room.

When the prisoners arrived, we warmed up with several creative exercises. Following the warm-ups, I asked one simple question, "Who wants to work?" A prisoner would volunteer and we would begin.

## **Perspective and Process**

When an artist goes into a prison to develop a program such as Shakespeare Behind Bars, he or she is the keeper of the keys – not to the outside world, but to the inside world.

Our laboratory is the correctional institution. Our work is the exploration of the transformational journey inward. Our belief is that if you educate the human mind without educating the human heart, you have only educated half the human being. Educating the human heart opens the soul for transformation and allows the human being to step from the shadow of negative behavior into the light of positive behavior.

Shakespeare Behind Bars offers the keys to the human heart. Through the process of theatre and the works of William Shakespeare, the prisoners discover who they are and who they are meant to be by opening themselves to an artistic experience.

We focus on a prisoner's selection, examination, memorization, rehearsal, and performance of soliloquies and scenes drawn from Shakespeare's plays, as well as from his sonnets. With each stage of the work, there is reflection. Who is this character? Why does he feel as he does? What prompts his actions? What does that have to do with me? We always engaged in reflection on how the words resonated within the prisoner's mind, heart, and soul. We examined the common elements of humanity that Shakespeare reveals and uncovered the emotions that drive human behavior. Often a piece became very personal. Before long, we came to use and understand the phrase, "Why did this piece pick you?"

There is an irony to the fact that while under lock and key, the SBB prisoners are able to discover a kind of personal and spiritual freedom through Shakespeare. In exploring the motives of characters, they have gained insight into their own motives; in recognizing the cause and effect within the arc of a scene, they have analyzed the consequences of their own choices. Shakespeare has been a key for them to open a door into the power of language, the beauty of art, and the mysteries of the human heart.

*To be or not to be, that is the Question.*

—Hamlet, III.1

It is important to understand that my twenty-eight year tenure with the Shakespeare Behind Bars program has not always been smooth. I do not have an institutional record free of mistakes. I have broken institutional rules and regulations - never intentionally nor maliciously but rather from ignorance. And ignorance is not an excuse once I was acquainted with my error. I have followed a simple personal policy of taking responsibility for my mistakes without excuse or argument followed by correcting my error/s.

I have used my mistakes as a platform upon which to build, to inform my way of being in this undiscovered country. This approach has allowed me to continue the Shakespeare Behind Bars program at the Luther Luckett Correctional Complex for over twenty-eight years. Yet even after my long tenure, I continue to face institutional challenges, which must be dealt with on an ongoing basis.

What follows are the insights I have had which I believe have contributed to the successful establishment and facilitation of the Shakespeare Behind Bars program. I offer these insights to those who wish to establish and facilitate their own arts program in a correctional institution.

## **DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS (DOC)**

### **Hierarchy**

*Suit the word to the action,  
The action to the word.*

—Hamlet, III.2

It is essential to respect the structural boundaries of the correctional system. In the Commonwealth of Kentucky, this specific hierarchy functions in close parallel with the military model. An artist will put his or her program into peril without understanding and following the chain of command.

Generally, within the Kentucky Department of Corrections, the artist reports to the correctional staff member (sponsor) who is the direct supervisor of the artist's program. The sponsor reports to both the deputy warden of programs and the deputy warden of security, both of whom report to the warden, who reports to a Deputy Commissioner at the Department of Corrections (DOC), who reports to the Commissioner of the DOC, who reports to the Governor.

As in the military, correctional institutions do not react well to leaping ahead of the next link in the chain of command. One can move to the next link in the chain of command only after the supervisor has given the green light. You will note later in this chapter that I always work to develop a strong relationship with the warden of the institution.

Although this is the case, it is also important to note that I do not leap frog over the correctional staff to go directly to the warden to gain approval of something I believe the program needs.

Hence, I have developed a strong relationship with the staff sponsor to whom I report, as well as the deputy wardens (programs and security), to whom the staff sponsor reports. It is my job to make sure they know who I am, what I am doing, and what my agenda is.

## **DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS (DOC)**

### **Rules and Regulations**

*Ay, there's the rub.*

—Hamlet , III.1

It is important to know and understand the mission of the department of corrections if you would like to establish an arts program. Tie all of your work with the prisoner to the mission statement so that you will reveal how your program supports that mission.

The Kentucky Department of Corrections' mission statement reads as follows:

*To protect the citizens of the Commonwealth and to provide a safe, secure and humane environment for staff and offenders in carrying out the mandates of the legislative and judicial processes: and, to provide opportunities for offenders to acquire skills which facilitate non-criminal behavior.*

Note that the prime directive of a correctional institution is security. One can never create any situation that does not embrace the role and responsibility of security. All behavior has to be centered on the prime directive of corrections.

As artists, we are driven to bend the rules. We chafe at the idea of control over our creative process. Prisons, on the other hand, are all about control. Prisons create massive amounts of rules and regulations. To me, there appears to be an unspoken belief in corrections that because prisoners are in prison for breaking laws, there must be even more rules and regulations inside the wire than outside for the inmates to learn and obey. By intent, this is remedial, and through this strict regulatory process, the department of corrections believes it drills into the inmates the desire to accommodate the laws once they are released back into society.

If an arts program is going to survive, the strongest piece of advice that I can give the facilitator is never to forget that, as an artist running an outside program, you are a guest in the correctional institution. Do not be the kind of guest who demands, but rather one who requests. You must be a colleague with the correctional institution's staff. You and your program must support the institution and live within its world. It is the artist's responsibility to know the institution's rules and regulations. Do not interpret the correctional institution's rules and regulations as you see them through your eyes, but rather ask the appropriate correctional staff person to be the interpreter. The arts program must be connected to the mission of the DOC. I connected my Shakespeare Behind Bars program to the latter part of the statement . . . "to provide opportunities for offenders to acquire skills which facilitate non-criminal behavior."

There is nothing that can be done about the crime for which the prisoner was convicted, but there is a great deal that can be done to prepare the inmate to successfully inhabit incarceration and, upon release, successfully reenter and inhabit society.

Over time, I have set specific goals for Shakespeare Behind Bars that not only embrace the correctional institution's mission, but also focus on the prisoners' successful reentry into society. This drama-in-education approach offers participants the opportunity for 'safe' encounters with complex issues. This approach encourages the development of interpersonal life skills that will contribute to the prisoners' long-term success.

Each participant in the Shakespeare Behind Bars program is allowed the opportunity to:

1. learn tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict;
2. develop empathy, compassion, and trust;
3. nurture a desire to help others;
4. develop a passion for learning, especially those participants who are at high risk of not completing their education;
5. develop literacy skills (reading, writing, and oral communication), including those participants who are classified as learning disabled and/or developmentally challenged;
6. develop decision-making, problem solving, and creative thinking skills;
7. develop a positive self-image and increase self-esteem;
8. relate the universal human themes contained in Shakespeare's works to themselves (their past experiences, their present situation, and their future possibility), to other human beings and to society at-large;
9. take responsibility for the crime(s) they have committed;
10. become a responsible member of a family, group, and/or community; and
11. return to society as a contributing member.

If an artist is planning to create an arts program in a prison, a good relationship with the warden of the correctional institution is essential. The warden controls the key to the gateway between an outside arts program and access to the inmates. Without the support of the warden, no level of success can be achieved.

## Warden Relations

*Here's a knocking indeed: if a man were  
Porter of Hell Gate, he should have old turning the Key.  
Knock, Knock, Knock.*

—Porter, Macbeth , II.3

As an institutional outsider, it is important to comprehend the full scope of a warden's job.

The warden of a correctional institution is like the mayor or city manager of a small community. The warden's daily concerns involve balancing a difficult budget of resources, both human and material. Roughly 85% of a prison's budget is for personnel.

At the Kentucky State Reformatory in LaGrange, Kentucky, Warden Larry Chandler sits at the helm of a staff that numbers 636 and an inmate population of 2,004, with an annual operating budget that currently tops \$50,000,000.00 and is growing larger with each passing fiscal year.

It is easy to see that wardens do not have time in their day to manage problems stemming from outside programs. To gain the warden's support, the facilitator of the arts program must understand how a correctional institution functions and where their program fits into that hierarchical structure. The arts program must be seamless. The feedback from the correctional staff that surrounds the arts program to the warden must be positive or at the very least mixed.

*And Flights of angels.*

—Hamlet, V.2

Along the way, there have been many "angels" who have stepped forth to help the Shakespeare Behind Bars program stay alive and well. Without these partners, the program would have perished long ago. Dr. Bergstrand and Dr. Barto were the early foundation builders. The next construction partners were the wardens, without whose support we would never have survived. Building relationships is essential for surviving in a correctional institution.



## **Warden Steve Berry**

### **September 1994 - April 1998**

Warden Berry was Shakespeare Behind Bars first warden. He was supportive of my coming into the institution with the oversight provided by Dr. Barto from the Mental Health Department. It is important to note that I was allowed into the prison to work with prisoners because Julie was my supervisor. Each time I visited the prison, Julie wrote the memo to receive approval from the Deputy Warden and the Warden for my admittance into the prison.

It was Warden Berry's respect for Dr. Barto that allowed me access to the prison. I am not sure Warden Berry would have allowed me access to the prisoners if I had not had Julie's support.

On March 2, 2008, Warden Berry wrote this reflection of Shakespeare Behind Bars:

"I like the program because it gave interested participants opportunities completely outside the traditional programs available in prison. Shakespeare was a great psychologist and his work contains insights into anger, love, revenge, power, and greed - the emotions that led to incarceration for many of the men. Not only did it introduce men to the greatest literature in the English language, it also showed that they could participate at a level and in an activity outside the normal course of prison training. It increased their self-esteem. It also taught them to work together and share their selves with others."

Warden Berry continues his reflection about me:

"As for trusting Curt as program director, he already had a proven track record of responsible behavior and working within institutional rules. Even the more conservative custody staff acknowledged that he was good at maintaining boundaries and worked well with the participants. Also, he was dedicated. Many programs in prisons end when the founders lose interest or simply become exhausted. Curt kept coming back for more."

Warden Berry wrote this about Philomath Films award winning documentary, Shakespeare Behind Bars:

“I have seen the documentary on the program and thought it was tremendous. We in Kentucky are often viewed as a small, poor state. I am happy the word has spread that in some areas, we are very innovative.”

Many years later, I found out that Warden Berry was taking heat from the wardens of other Kentucky correctional institutions for allowing me to begin the Shakespeare Behind Bars program at Luther Lockett.

It was Warden Larry Chandler who stepped forth to support Warden Berry’s decision to allow the creation of Shakespeare Behind Bars. Warden Chandler had been thinking of creating a class based on the Great Books at his prison. Later in this chapter, you will see how this early connection with Warden Chandler blossomed into a fruitful relationship that continues to this day.

The idea to share the work through performance with the rest of the prison yard came from the SBB participants. I supported the request and Dr. Barto approached Warden Berry for permission.

I felt very fortunate to be under the wing of Dr. Barto. She smoothed the natural frictional rub between the rules and regulations of the correctional institution and the free flow process of the Shakespeare Behind Bars program.

Nothing, however, remains the same, and change soon came when Warden Berry departed, followed shortly thereafter by the departure of my good friend and colleague Dr. Julie Barto.

Suddenly, Shakespeare Behind Bars was sponsor-less and then homeless. I no longer had a point person within Luther Lockett who could help me continue the program. At that point, I told the SBB participants that I would be doing everything I could to get back to them. Their job was to continue to do the work in my absence. This was done to keep the community together and to show the institutional leadership that SBB was a strong program even without a leader/facilitator, a correctional sponsor, or even a dedicated space. The SBB participants continued to work together on the recreational field, in the bullpen, and in their housing units.

With Warden Berry’s departure from Luther Lockett, came an interim warden who served while the search for a permanent warden was undertaken by the Department of Corrections.

I made the conscious decision not to approach the interim warden for permission to return to the SBB program, but to wait until the permanent warden was in place. I didn't want to run the risk of being turned down by the interim warden or being granted permission only to be denied access by the incoming permanent warden.

### **Warden Robert Conley September 1998 - February 1999**

When Warden Conley was installed as the permanent warden at Luther Lockett, the staff knew little about him because he came from Tennessee. I did some research and discovered that he was a former teacher and educator.

I gave Warden Conley a month to get settled at Luther Lockett before I requested a meeting with him to discuss the SBB program. I was happily surprised when a meeting was quickly granted. I went to the meeting well prepared with testimonials from the Luther Lockett staff and the SBB participants, as well as the positive media coverage we had received for the program.

Knowing Warden Conley was an educator, I used vocabulary that supported the educational aspects of the SBB program. One of the strongest connections I noted with Warden Conley was the development of reading skills.

Working with Shakespeare's original language, participants sometimes struggle, but that very process of figuring out what a word, or a line, or a passage means strengthens reading skills, speaking skills, and self-confidence.

Warden Conley suggested that I file the necessary paperwork with the Kentucky Department of Corrections to allow the Shakespeare Behind Bars program to become an official DOC volunteer program. This would solidify the relationship between SBB and the DOC and allow me access, as a certified volunteer, to return to Luther Lockett and the SBB program.

What we then required was a staff sponsor, an official employee of the department of corrections, who would be the liaison between the program and the leadership of Luther Lockett. With the staff sponsor in place, we restarted the SBB program.

Change, however, was upon us once again when Warden Conley departed and a new warden was sought to replace him.

I did not have much opportunity to get to know Warden Conley because he was with the institution for such a short time. I am, however, deeply indebted to him for paving the way for the SBB program to continue. Warden Conley is considered one of the angels upon whose wings SBB has been supported.

### **Warden Larry Chandler March 1999 - December 2003**

One day, I walked into Luther Luckett and through security to be met on the inside by a distinguished looking man who introduced himself as Larry Chandler, the new warden of Luther Luckett.

When I began to introduce myself, Warden Chandler told me he knew who I was and all about the Shakespeare Behind Bars program. It seems Warden Chandler had known about the SBB program almost from its beginning through Warden Berry. In fact, Warden Chandler had a great appreciation for programs such as SBB. He believed it was programs, and not punishment that changed the human heart. Warden Chandler further stated, with a twinkle in his eye, that I would soon come know more deeply, that SBB was the reason he had come to LLCC. He told me that he had tried to begin a Great Books program at his previous prison but could not get it off the ground. So, he came to Luther Luckett to learn how SBB worked. [Warden Chandler went on to found his Great Books program a few years later at the Kentucky State Reformatory.]

Thus began a long and fruitful partnership with Warden Chandler. It was under his leadership that Shakespeare Behind Bars was allowed the opportunity for local, regional, national, and international media exposure.

Warden Chandler was the reason Philomath Films, a Los Angeles based film company, was allowed the opportunity to make the award-winning documentary, Shakespeare Behind Bars - which has gone on to 40+ film festivals around the world, capturing 11 awards. It was also Warden Chandler's idea to tour our annual Shakespeare production to other prisons throughout the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

In the Shakespeare Behind Bars documentary we hear Warden Chandler say, "I am a warden who hates prisons." Warden Chandler is an innovator. He and I worked well together because of our deep respect for each other and our mutual belief in the power of programs to turn on the light of understanding in the incarcerated population.

On March 11, 2008, Warden Chandler wrote these words about the Shakespeare Behind Bars program:

“I was aware of Shakespeare Behind Bars before I arrived at Luther Luckett Correctional Complex (LLCC) in March 1999. As I made my rounds throughout the institution, I asked staff what was right, what was wrong, and what was needed. There were many issues that people were concerned about, and it was apparent from some of the informal conversations that there were some concerns about the Shakespeare Behind Bars program. The inmates had too much freedom and they were being given special treatment. Having been involved in some unpopular programming at other institutions, I knew there would be a certain number of the staff at Luther Luckett that felt this way.”

Warden Chandler continues with these reflections:

“When I first met Curt Tofteland it was readily apparent why staff felt that maybe the program was a bit liberal. Curt stands about six feet, four inches, long ginger colored hair and dresses in an eclectic style. His appearance is in direct conflict to the spit and polish Correctional Officers, who follow a military model. I knew for the program to survive, I would have to pay some attention. I started stopping in the Shakespeare Behind Bars rehearsals after we changed the staff sponsor. We found a caseworker that was very enthusiastic about the Shakespeare Behind Bars program; that’s how Karen Heath was selected. I started stopping by and letting staff see me drop in on rehearsals. I also talked to the inmates and staff on the yard about Shakespeare Behind Bars. I would also brag about the program in Department Head meetings, and our newsletters. Slowly the attention to Shakespeare Behind Bars became positive.

I recall one day I was walking by the visiting room where the inmates rehearsed and was startled to witness a sword fight. I made a mental note that I was going to have to entertain some complaints about allowing inmates to have wooden swords and have a sword fight in the visiting room. I was not disappointed. There were several complaints some public and some private, some hostile and some humorous.

I was supportive of the program and Curt’s approach. Curt selected only inmates that the SBB members endorsed. The inmates selected knew that they had to behave in order to stay in the program. I also deferred to Curt’s judgment regarding any outside press or publicity. When Philomath Films starting filming, we again had a spike in people who thought we were giving too much attention and too many privileges to a few inmates. But before the year was out and before the filming had been completed, staff became

proud of the program and began to take ownership of SBB. I was surprised at some of the staff that attended the live performance and the comments to the SBB inmates afterwards. The intensity of the play was certainly a surprise to me even though I had watched many of the rehearsals.

I believe Curt was the difference in the program. I jokingly said that if Curt was teaching crocheting it would be a positive and successful program. On the other hand, it regrettably impacted only a few inmates in the institution. The primary reasons that I suggested that we take the show on the road to other prisons was to show other inmates in other institutions what could be done by a few hard-nosed inmates who had a lot of time, a lot of pride, and a lot of ability. Certainly the documentary has proven that. It is a positive method of getting the message out to society that stereotyping inmates is a dangerous proposition, and hopefully to help widen the door, so that when inmates do come back to society, they can be successful.”

Warden Chandler’s recommendations for someone to bring programs in the prison are:

1. Understand the mission of the prison, and understand the necessity for security. “One of the things I always appreciated about Curt, is he did understand the security of the institution. He didn’t always agree, but he never argued about it, and he never tried to intervene with the rules and regulations of the inmates. That is number one. You will not get your foot in the door unless you know that.”

2. Have a specific reason for your program and describe what you hope to be specific outcomes when you talk to a warden. Nothing will turn a warden off more quickly than "I just think I can help and the inmates will like it." prisoners like ice cream, but it does not always help. I have seen programs come and go over the years. Well intentioned, well meaning people come to prison with programs every year, building hope in inmates only to have those hopes fade when things don't work quite the way they envisioned. Be specific, explain what you hope to accomplish and do not fear showing compassion, most wardens got where they are with some measure of compassion. Once your foot is in the door, be consistent, be accountable, be honest and above all else, be in for the long term.

“Most wardens would like to have this in a written format. Also list the participants, and understand that those participants are going to be scrutinized closely. Understand that you are a guest in the facility. Also understand not everybody may embrace your dedication and your sincerity. Understand the bureaucrat will always throw you a curve;

be prepared for that, and don't get upset but try to give them what they like. Many wardens who endorse programs cannot control a correctional officer on another shift who may not understand or know what is going on. So just understand the process of fixing things and who fixes things once you get into the facility.

Other than that, don't do anything without the warden's knowledge and express permission, and you will be successful. Be persistent, have perseverance, have patience, and most of all understand the importance of what you are doing for the inmate population."

I say with complete honesty and gratitude that the Shakespeare Behind Bars documentary would never have been made without Warden Larry Chandler at the helm of Luther Luckett. I have met many good correctional people, but there is only one Larry Chandler. It was he who dared to take a risk when all those about him thought him insane. Larry is driven to make a difference and he does every day of his professional life.

### **Warden Tom Dailey** **June 2004 – December 2008**

I met correctional officer Tom Dailey when I began the Shakespeare Behind Bars program at the Luther Luckett Correctional Complex in 1995. He was a first shift Correctional Captain at the time. We didn't have much interaction, but I was always impressed with Tom's professionalism.

Years later, when we took our production of *The Tempest* on its first tour to other prisons, I met Tom again at the Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women (KCIW) where he was a Deputy Warden of Security. He was very enthusiastic about the Shakespeare Behind Bars performance for the KCIW prisoners

When Warden Chandler made his decision to leave Luther Luckett for the warden position of the Kentucky State Reformatory, I was glad that Tom Dailey took his place.

Warden Dailey was very supportive of the Shakespeare Behind Bars program. He was a very different warden than his predecessors, but that is to be expected. It is my job to adapt to the new warden's style, and not their job to adapt to mine. We developed a very good working relationship and Warden Dailey has supported our productions and our tours. He impacted the continued growth of SBB by being a strong advocate for bringing

students (both high school and college) to experience an SBB rehearsal followed by a talkback with the inmates.

On February 28, 2008, Warden Dailey wrote these words about Shakespeare Behind Bars:

“As far as my personal views and observations of the Shakespeare Behind Bars Program, in regards to my position as a Warden of a Correctional Institution, I must say that the program, from the beginning, has given me a very positive belief that a man can change with the right intervention, tools, and programs.

I have witnessed inmates, by role-playing the writings of Shakespeare, actually search their own souls, relate their life experiences to the characters they play, and behold the outcome and results of bad human behavior.

I have literally witnessed inmates participating in Shakespeare Behind Bars change. Some have changed their antisocial behaviors. Some have exhibited more positive interaction with staff and generally become more social overall.

The inmates participating in SBB have maintained clear conduct, which lightens the workload on security staff.

I would suggest that readers simply do not take my word as opinion of the Shakespeare Behind Bars Program, but rent or buy the SBB DVD. Everyone I have spoken with concerning the film has come away stimulated.”

Warden Dailey continues:

“I cannot mention the Shakespeare Behind Bars Program without mentioning Curt Tofteland.

Utilizing volunteers for prison programs can become problematic. Security issues always arise concerning policy requirements, guidelines, rules, contraband introduction, trust, and so on. We, as prison administrators, must remain cautious and even suspicious when allowing lay outsiders into our world.



Mr. Tofteland has been a see through window from the beginning. He has illustrated a genuine heart for the inmates he has supervised, taught, and worked with through Shakespeare Behind Bars.

After 24 years of working in this business of evil, lies and deception, it becomes easy to detect sincerity and Mr. Tofteland is genuine. He has restored hope in me by observing his work with inmates and witnessing the performance. His conversations and drive are inspiring and comforting for the soul. These attributes have solidified the longevity of the program.

It is, and remains a pleasure to be a part of Shakespeare Behind Bars.”

Change and transformation are not just about the prisoners who participate in the Shakespeare Behind Bars program. They are also about the correctional administrators, staff, and officers who work with the prisoners.

Over the years, I have seen correctional staff who were nay sayers about the program awaken to the power of the Shakespeare Behind Bars program because they have seen a manifested change in the prisoners who participate in the SBB program. Some of the correctional staff that were our strongest critics now attend SBB performances and bring their spouses with them.

## **Artist Facilitations Integrity, Dedication, and Professionalism**

It is important to understand that when beginning a program in a correctional institution that you are in it for the long haul. Do not start a program unless you are committed to continuing it for several years. When I started the Shakespeare Behind Bars program at the Luther Luckett Correctional Complex, it became very apparent that if I were going to build trust among the prisoners, I had to let them know that I was committed to them. For many of the prisoners, trust had been violated early in their lives. They had been abandoned or violated by family members. This early damage had shaped their lives, and if I were going to make any headway, I had to gain their trust.

Directly connected to that goal was the commitment I was going to give them. Thus, the commitment I made in my own mind, if I were allowed to continue the program, was ten years.

An artist who begins a program that will only last a few weeks or a few months, does more damage when they depart because this is yet another abandonment for the prisoners.

What follows is a summation of what I believe an artist should do and what they should not do when creating, facilitating, and sustaining an arts program in a correctional institution.

## **DO**

- align your program with the correctional institution's vision and values;
- follow correctional rules and regulations as if you were an prisoner;
- engage all levels of correctional staff with respect even when it is not returned;
- reach out beyond your program to engage others in the institution who are or will become allies;
- draw attention to the success of your program through the eyes of the correctional institution;
- channel attention away from yourself and onto the prisoners;
- document requests;
- prove you are trustworthy;
- be transparent in your agenda;
- be committed to the work for the long haul;
- be prepared, professional, and organized;
- be the solver of and not the creator of problems;
- be whole brain thinkers
- left-brain directed for the institution
- right-brain directed for the prisoners;
- be a good listener;
- be a role model for the correctional staff and the prisoners;
- be a candle around which the prisoners are drawn;
- recognize that each day in the institution is a gift to be earned and not a right to be taken.
- recognize that there is always a new day dawning in corrections. Even within the same administration of a prison, rules, regulations, and decisions are forever blowing in the wind. The past is past and not prologue.

## **DO NOT**

- fall prey to the institutional politics, bitching, and complaining;
- take anything for granted;
- get personally involved with the prisoners other than from a professional standpoint;
- become complacent just because nothing appears to be happening.

## **Living Lightly Final Thoughts**

Living lightly in corrections, with the inmates, and in life is a way of being and doing that has proven successful for me.

The visionary architect, Frank Lloyd Wright provides another definition of living lightly. Wright believed in designing houses that were in harmony with their environmental surroundings and said, “No house should ever be on a hill or on anything. It should be of the hill. Belonging to it. Hill and house should live together each the happier for the other.”

I was raised on the North Dakota prairie. Each winter, we would have fierce snowstorms that would whip the snow into large snow banks along the fence lines of my rural community. As a child, I would walk lightly on these snow banks without cracking the crusty layer of snow that separated me from the soft snow beneath. I would consider my adventure a success, if I could travel the breadth of several snow banks without leaving any footprints behind me.

To be successful, an arts program in a correctional facility must appear to belong to the existing prison programming and the facilitator must walk softly and silently without leaving footprints.

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