

PCAP NEWS

February 2018

The PCAP newsletter aims to keep incarcerated artists, writers, and performers informed of what the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) is doing and how to be involved. If you know someone who would like to receive this newsletter, please have them write to us.

A Note from the Director

by Ashley Lucas

Happy New Year! We at PCAP know that the holidays can be a tough time of year for folks in prison, and we hope that all of you know that we were thinking of you during the recent holiday season, even though most of our programming goes on hiatus in late December and early January when the university is not in session. Now we're back in the PCAP office and in classrooms, and we're excited to start a new series of workshops, get ready for the publication of the tenth edition of the literary review, and host the 23rd Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners.

We on the PCAP staff are reaching out to special activities directors at the prisons located nearest to us, and we're starting our workshops as soon as we can get our new volunteers cleared to enter the facilities. This semester we will return to Women's Huron Valley, Cooper St., Cotton, Gus Harrison, FCI Milan, the Center for Forensic Psychiatry, and Thumb. We're also doing workshops with youth at the Washtenaw Youth Center and Lincoln and Calumet Centers. We're excited to continue our reentry programming at the Miller Manor public housing community in Ann Arbor.

Many of you in the MDOC may have had some delays in receiving mail from us recently because of the new mail policy. All University of Michigan correspondence is usually printed on letterhead that has the block M (the logo for our university) printed in yellow ink. Now that ink in any color besides blue or black is prohibited in the MDOC mail rooms, we received a fair amount of returned mail from things that we had sent you on university letterhead. We've solved this problem by printing all our communications to you in black and white, and if any mail we sent to you was returned to us, we're reprinting it in black and white and sending you those communications again. We're doing all we can to make sure that our correspondence with you is not interrupted, and we have official permission from the folks in Lansing to send you this newsletter and other official correspondence on behalf of our program.

That said, you should also know that we as volunteers are not allowed to engage in personal correspondence with individuals inside the MDOC. We can answer any of your questions about our programming, share news and resources with you, and give professional critiques of your creative writing and visual art. We welcome your letters and will respond to them in every professional capacity that we are able.

Please remember that if you are being released, we want to stay in touch with you and offer you reentry programming. No matter where you are paroling, we might know someone or a service provider who can help you. If you have an out date, write to us at the PCAP office before your release. After your release, reach out to us by mail, phone, email, or a visit to our campus when you are able to do so.

We have many exciting events coming up during this year's Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners, which will be on the University of Michigan campus from March 21 to April 4, 2018. Our keynote speaker this year is a dear friend of mine. For twenty years, Kerry Myers wrote for the critically acclaimed Angolite prison news magazine during his incarceration at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. Under his editorship, the magazine won the Thurgood Marshall Journalism Award, the PASS Award for Journalism from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, and three APEX Awards of Excellence for Magazine and Journal writing. Taking subjects like human trafficking; juvenile life without parole; aging, Alzheimer's, and dementia in prison; sentencing pardons and parole policy; and more, Myers guided the magazine as it became a resource for many top criminal justice and law programs in the country. In 2011 and 2012, he wrote a critically-acclaimed series on the history of women in the Louisiana penal system, from pre-Civil War to the present. Myers gained a sentence commutation in 2015, and since his release he has been a freelance journalist and has worked diligently for criminal justice reform in Louisiana. We are delighted to be hosting a talk by Myers in the Duderstadt Gallery on the evening of March 29th.

This year we have more guest speakers and performers than we have ever hosted during a single art show. Sixteen members of the Maine Inside Out theatre troupe will be here for a week in March. Maine Inside Out has no

A Note from the Director cont.

connection to the similarly named Inside Out Prison Exchange Program which provides many college classes inside prisons throughout the country. Rather, Maine Inside Out was founded by PCAP alumna Chiara Liberatore, who was a student of Buzz Alexander's in the 1990s. Liberatore and two other women founded Maine Inside Out in 2007 to provide theatre workshops to kids in the one juvenile detention center in the state of Maine. Now the group is a well-established nonprofit organization, and many of the young people who have come through the program are now out of detention and continuing to create theatre with a reintegration theatre company. That theatre troupe is coming to visit us and will perform on the Michigan campus on March 28th.

We also have fourteen folks from the PCAP Brazil Exchange Program coming to visit us. As some of you may have read in earlier issues of this newsletter, I take a group of Michigan students to Brazil for three weeks every summer as part of a theatre exchange program. We have partners at two universities there: UDESC in the city of Florianópolis and UniRio in Rio de Janeiro. Professors and students from both of those campuses will spend a week with us in Michigan, performing, visiting classes, attending art show events, and teaching us some of the wonderful ways that they use theatre for social change in their country. Folks from Maine Inside Out and our Brazilian exchange program will visit some of our PCAP workshops during the weeks that they are visiting us in March, so keep an eye out for visitors if you're in a workshop this semester!

My favorite part of the art show each year is a tradition we started a few years ago. We call it Family Day. We invite families and friends of currently incarcerated writers and artists involved with our literary journal and exhibition to come to the gallery and spend the day with us. We also invite all the folks we know who have come home from prison to join us, and we have a really lovely day together. At 11 AM we host a panel of formerly incarcerated artists who have been released since the last exhibition. Janie Paul, one of the founders of our art show and our senior curator, serves as moderator for the panel, and the artists tell us about what it means to them to be in the gallery for the first time after participating in the exhibition from behind the walls. They describe what it's like to create art in prison and answer questions from our audience.

At lunchtime we serve more pizza, salad, and cookies than you've ever seen to everyone in the gallery. (We on the PCAP staff call it the Leaning Tower of Pizza because the stack of empty pizza boxes at the end of lunch is so tall.) We have time to mingle in the gallery so that families, artists, children, the public, students, and all of us from PCAP can talk about the art with one another. At 4 PM we hold a reading from this year's Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing. The editors of the journal—my husband Phil Christman who teaches English at Michigan and Ryley Verde, one of our best students—introduce the event and welcome everyone. Then family members of currently incarcerated writers read the work that their loved ones have written. Writers who have come home in the last year read their own work. I cry through this event every single year because it means so much to me to hear spouses, parents, children, and friends of incarcerated writers reading the words their loved ones took so much care to write. Plenty of other folks cry at this reading, too, but we love being there together to honor those who have come home and those who we hope will come home soon.

Please encourage your families to join us this year on Sunday, March 25. Tell them that they should introduce themselves to the PCAP faculty, staff, and volunteers. We would love to know who they are, and one of us might have met or corresponded with you. It means a lot to many family members to get to meet someone who has interacted with their incarcerated loved one recently, and we love to help make those connections.

Thank you for all you do to enrich our lives at PCAP. We hope to see or hear from you soon.



Literary Review

One thing you hear a lot in the writing world is the phrase “write what you know.” People will sometimes clarify what they mean by this, which usually starts off pretty simple: write about experiences you know about, areas of life in which you’re already an expert. What they often don’t clarify is how to apply this to our own writing.

Writing what we know is a good thing to keep in mind at any stage of development as writers, but it’s particularly helpful when first starting out. If we’re writing about our own lived experiences, or things similar to them, the writing is going to come a lot more naturally. This could be in the form of any genre — nonfiction, of course, in the case of recounting specific memories we’ve actually experienced, but also fiction and poetry. We can go beyond telling our exact experiences and apply our own voices to other types of writing. If we’re using something familiar, even if it’s within the context of a fictional story, we’re still using “what we know” as a useful jumping-off point for our writing. It’s about bringing individual experiences into our writing. For instance, if a writing piece needs to convey anger, we can use our own personal experiences to more accurately describe the experience of being furious. We want our readers to be able to enter our world and our thoughts and to be able to understand our point of view.

There are also broader ways in which this advice can be applied. The term “what you know” can be factual — for instance, describing a certain place or the process of an action— but it can also be a lot more figurative than that. It ultimately boils down to using our own real experiences, and real emotions, to tell our stories in the way that only we can tell them. This is why it’s a useful line of thinking even after pushing past the initial barriers of writing, even once we’ve become comfortable and we feel more aware of what we can do and try within the space of a story or a poem. Writing is an art that involves being in tune with our own thoughts and emotions, as much as we can. Letting ourselves access our own ideas and feelings and transplant them convincingly into foreign characters and situations is often the mark of good writing, and a lot of the time, it’s that element — the fact that we’re writing what we know and what we’ve felt before — that will make the reader understand what is ultimately the most genuine about our writing.

We use our experiences as references, but how do we refine our voice or start writing the descriptions? The best advice I’ve ever received was this: you are owed nothing as a writer. No reader MUST read our writings, and it’s our job to make every word count. How do we do this? How do we create original thoughts and images? It’s about pushing past the cliche. Cliches are overused phrases, like “only time will tell” or “brave as a lion.” We can describe these things in more interesting detail that is attentive to the specific characters and situation. For instance, the phrase “brave as a lion” is brief and somewhat generic. One way to add flavor, dimension, and credibility to the statement would be to reference a brave deed that a character once accomplished because then the reader could better picture the character and see for themselves why that person is brave.

Since we know what we’re writing better than anybody, we are automatically able to picture and understand what’s going on. Getting rid of cliches and replacing them with richer phrases is a great place to start in terms of bringing the reader to the writer’s level in terms of this understanding. However, there is a lot more out there to try and to consider thinking about, at any stage of one’s writing process or career. Check out the following list for some ideas.

Tactics to Try Out:

- Eliminate cliche or overused phrases
- Give a character a revealing personality trait based on yourself or someone you know
- Think of a story from your life that resonates with you emotionally. Then write a new story that uses completely different details, a new plot, and new characters, but still convincingly captures that emotion

Exhibition News

Thank you to everyone who submitted artwork for the 23rd Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners. We continue to be impressed by your creativity, exploration of techniques, and the diversity of themes explored in your art.

Artwork is juried into the show in a two-part process. First, curators lead selection visits to all MDOC facilities and choose work for further consideration. The curator team meets again for a "second pass" to review all artwork and make final decisions. Our curators held this meeting in January. Artists, if your artwork was chosen during the selection visit, at least one of your pieces will be on display in the gallery. Some pieces were cut during the second pass. These will be sent to the contact person indicated on artist's submission form.

PCAP has a new exhibit space at the Detroit Street Filling Station, a restaurant in Ann Arbor with ties to Youth Justice Fund. Youth Justice Fund is a nonprofit organization that assists returning citizens, sentenced as youth to a term of imprisonment, with services and resources necessary to ensure human dignity and full participation in their communities. We are excited to bring work by PCAP artists to a new venue. The first exhibit features eight digital prints, a preview of the Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners. We hope to attract new visitors to the gallery with this sneak peek of the show.



PCAP preview exhibit at Detroit Street Filling Station. Photo credit: Detroit Street Filling Station.

Call for Writing

The Prison Creative Arts Project is accepting submissions of creative writing—fiction, poetry, essays, or memoir) of up to 4,500 words (ten typed pages) for The Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing. The next pieces selected will appear in Volume 11, appearing in 2019. Writers are notified 8-10 weeks after submissions are received.

Submissions will be received at this address throughout the year.

PCAP at LSA Residential College

ATTN: Phil Christman

1801 East Quadrangle

701 E. University Ave.

Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1245

Please submit the following information with your written work:

- Your legal name (so we can communicate with you by mail);
- Your name or pen name as you'd like it to appear in the journal, if that's different than your legal name;
- Your MDOC or BOP ID number;
- Your current address;
- A short paragraph about yourself/your writing that will be published alongside any accepted piece.

Thank you for your outstanding pieces of writing that you have submitted thus far. We strongly encourage you to continue in this creative process and send us any and all of your work.

Calendar

January - February 2018

Final selection for *23rd Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners*

Preview exhibit of *23rd Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners* at Detroit St. Filling Station, Ann Arbor

Weekly creative arts workshops

Rolling submissions for *Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing*, vol. 11

March - April 2018

23rd Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners, March 21 - April 4, Duderstadt Center Gallery

Weekly creative arts workshops

Book release and readings from *The Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing*, vol. 10

Rolling submissions for *The Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing*, vol. 11

Linkage Project workshop day (April, date TBD, Detroit)

About PCAP

Mission Statement

The Prison Creative Arts Project brings those impacted by the justice system and the University of Michigan community into artistic collaboration for mutual learning and growth.

Contact Us

PCAP at University of Michigan
1801 East Quadrangle
701 E. University Ave.
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1245
pcapinfo@umich.edu
www.prisonarts.org

PCAP Faculty

Ashley Lucas, Director
Phil Christman, Kathy Kelly, Sarah Messer,
Isaac Wingfield

PCAP Staff

El Chen, Graham Hamilton, Mary Heinen,
Vanessa Mayesky

Annual Exhibition Curators

Janie Paul, Lead Curator
Reuben Kenyatta, Charlie Michaels, Ariana
Wescott, Isaac Wingfield, Jason Wright