

# Restorative Justice Higher Education The Interactive Cl

By Linda Keena



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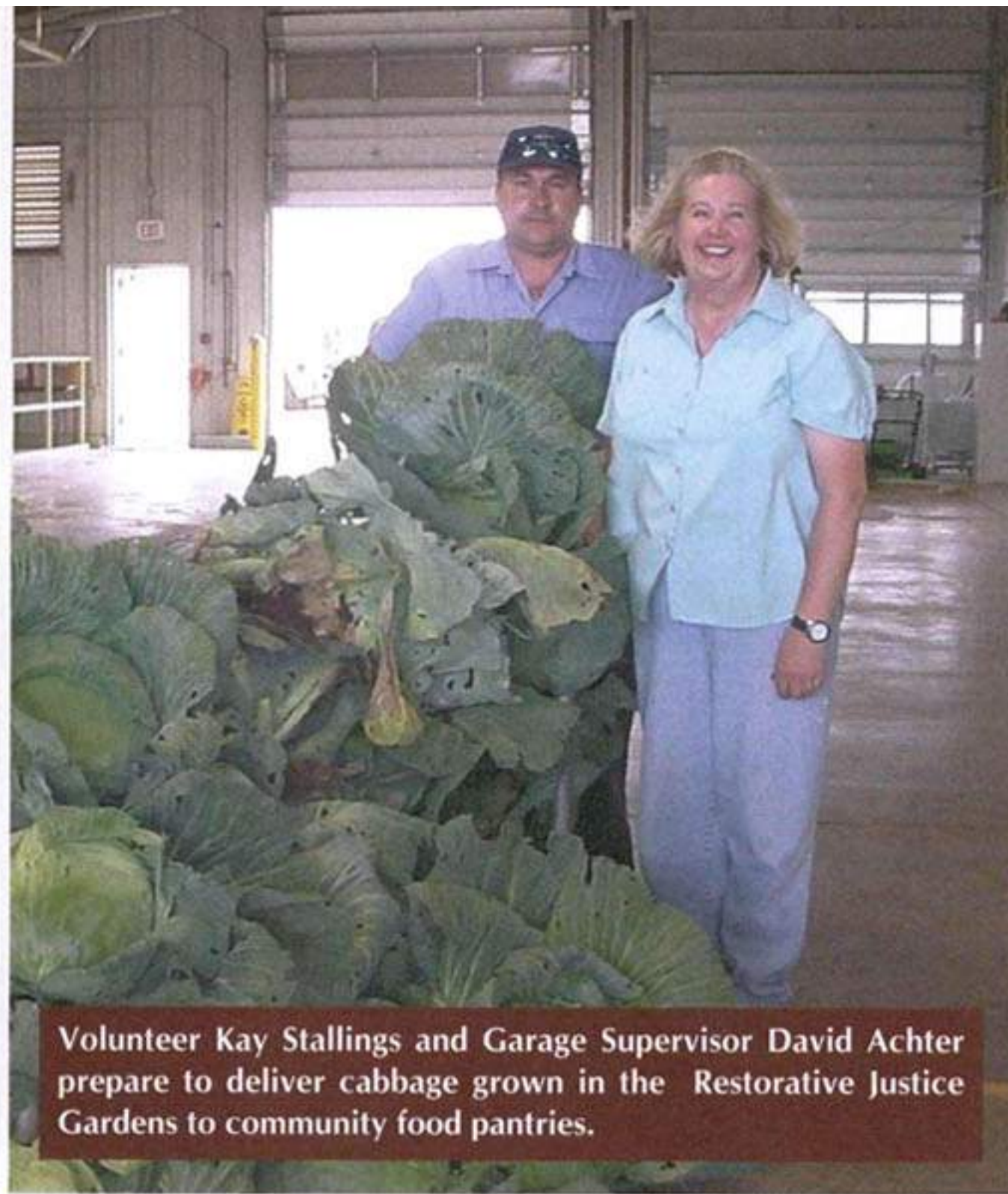
classroom

According to the Missouri Department of Corrections' 2013 Annual Report, the department's mission is to enhance public safety through efficient supervision and effective rehabilitative services of adult offenders. Since 97 percent of its incarcerated population will eventually be released back to the community, George A. Lombardi, director of the Missouri Department of Corrections, believes it is imperative that the rehabilitative programs offered by the department are successful. As the department strives toward a zero-recidivism rate, the programs that are in place have been proven to help reduce conduct violations, property damage and offender-on-offender assaults, as well as to teach offenders about compassion and the meaning of altruistic behavior.

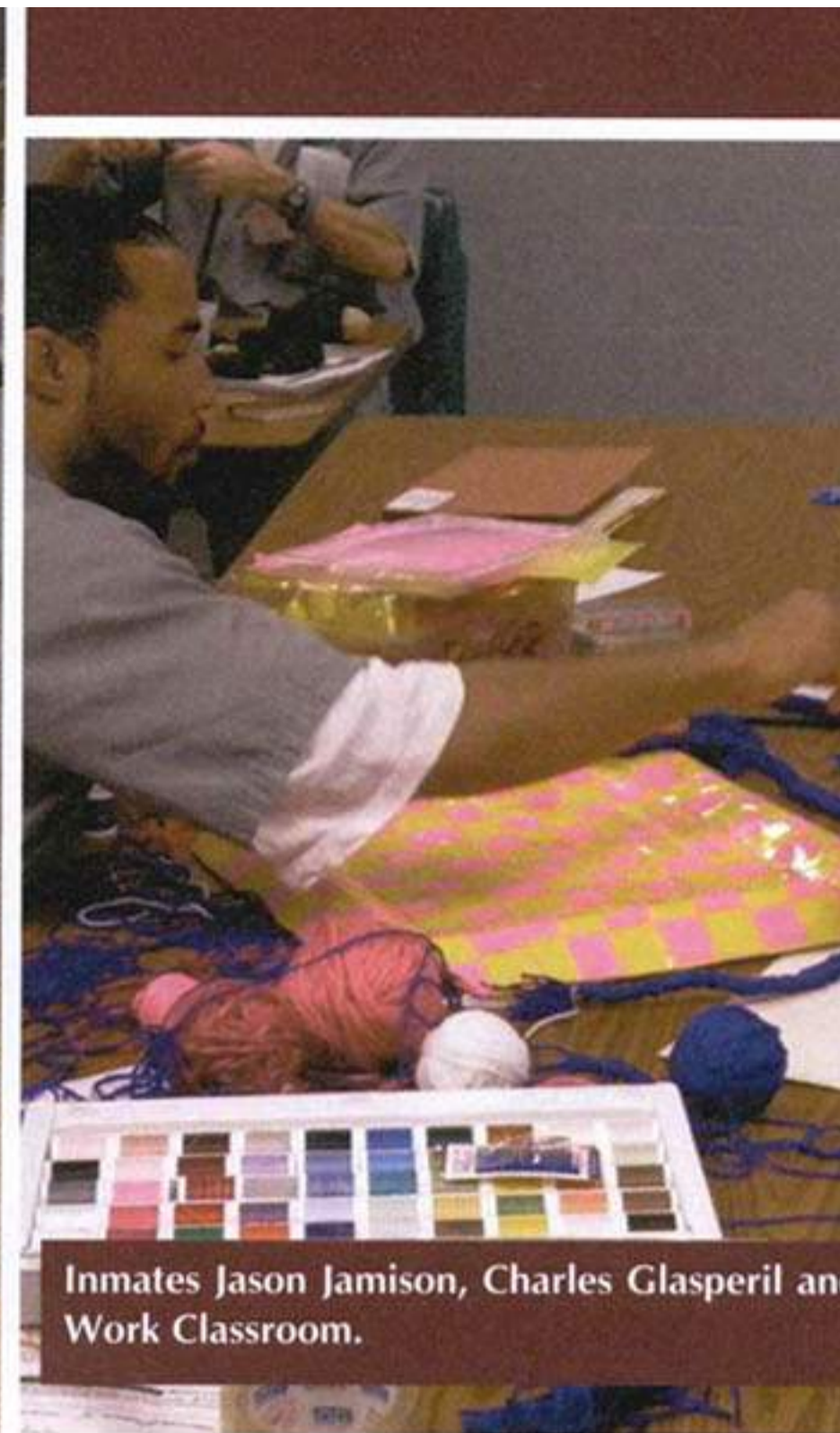
How exactly should the Missouri Division of Adult Institutions (DAI) strive to achieve its mission? Data reveals that educational programming is the best answer. In fact, research shows that participating in educational opportunities while incarcerated greatly reduces recidivism. According to Cathryn A. Chappell, education in prison results in "increased self-esteem, critical thinking and self-discipline. These personal gains combine to reduce the likelihood of a released [inmate] coming back into conflict with the law."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the "golden age of correctional education" has long since passed.

By the account of T.A. Ryan and Kimberly A. McCabe, it was during the 1970s that educational programs, such as adult basic education and general education development, were widely utilized.<sup>2</sup> The Pell Grant program allowed inmates access to college while incarcerated, but in 1994, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act was signed into law, prohibiting incarcerated individuals from receiving Pell Grant funding. College programs in prison were discontinued, and funding for educational programs has been continually cut to save taxpayers' money. As a result, private programs have begun to bring the educational programs back to offenders through nonprofit outreach and volunteer services. The Ford Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation and similar funding sources are in place, and they provide some resources for the incarcerated population to take both vocational and college classes that are designed to prepare them for reentry into the community.

With limited funding available, DAI relies heavily on Volunteers in Corrections (VIC) to provide educational opportunities to incarcerated adults. Through the services of VIC, inmates' passage through educational programming evolved from a simple adult basic education, vocational programs and/or higher education experience into a reformatory process.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, they promote educational programs that



Volunteer Kay Stallings and Garage Supervisor David Achter prepare to deliver cabbage grown in the Restorative Justice Gardens to community food pantries.



Inmates Jason Jamison, Charles Gasperil and others work in the Restorative Justice Work Classroom.

encourage inmates to proceed beyond memorizing facts and passing certification expectations to examining their lives through a restorative lens.

## The Restorative Justice Organization

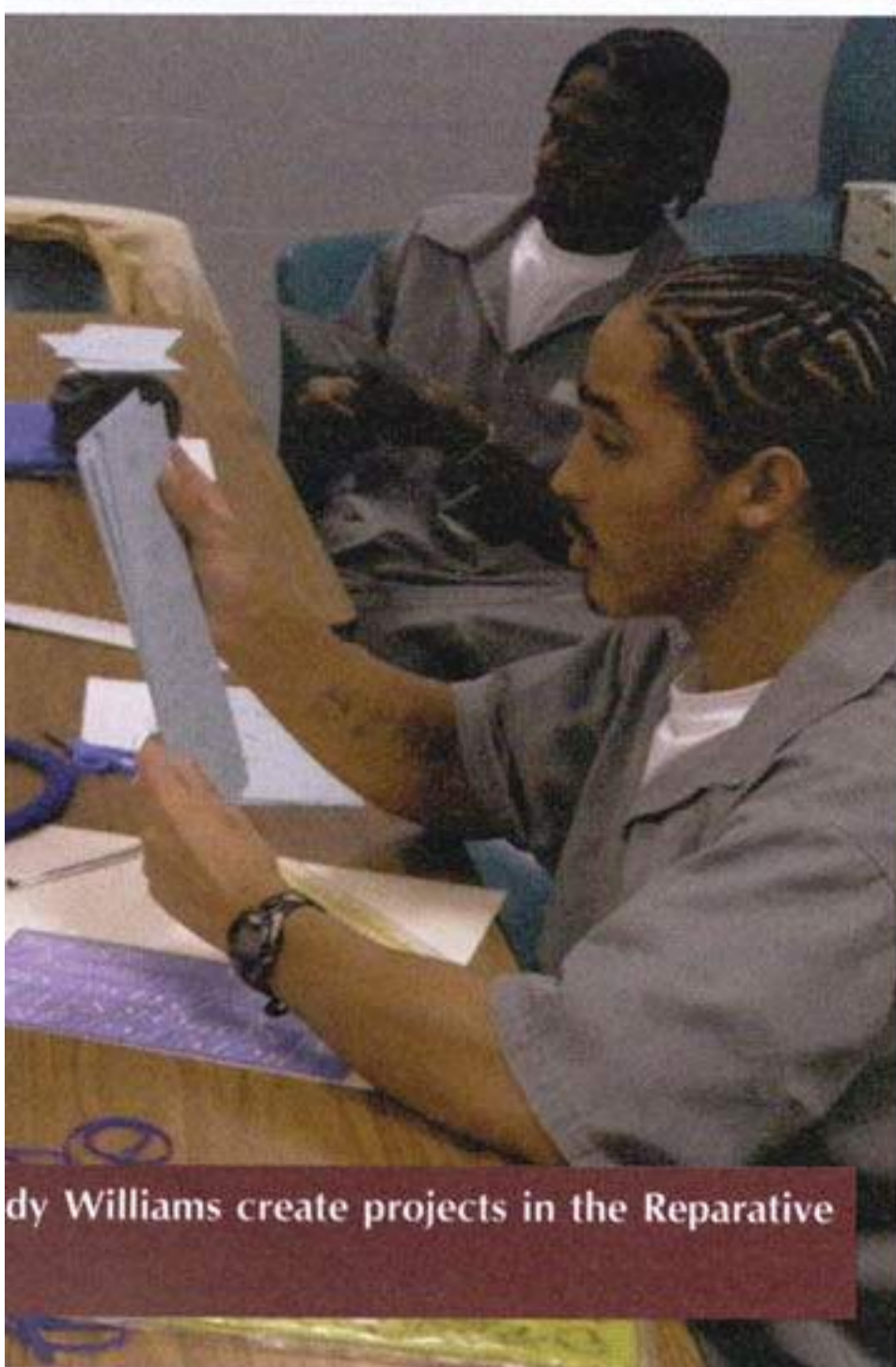
The Restorative Justice Organization (RJO) at the Southeast Missouri Correctional Center is an association comprised of approximately 21 inmates committed to promoting victim reparation and offender rehabilitation. Motivated by a desire to stimulate accountability among the 1,500 maximum-security inmates, RJO was developed with goals of providing avenues for inmates to interact with victims and community members in restorative and reintegration activities, as well as to modify the values and culture of the prison environment toward a restorative model. Initially, the inmates wanted to communicate directly with their victims to address the damage they have caused. Institutional rules and regulations, however, prohibit direct or indirect contact with their victims. As a result, the administration and RJO developed ways to educate inmates about how to become accountable for their actions and to respond to victims with sincere understanding and concern.

## The Interactive Classroom

In order to advance this commitment, in 2012, the warden of the Southeast Missouri Correctional Center granted permission for a professor at an institution of higher learning to voluntarily facilitate

restorative seminar-type classes to RJO members. The professor was also teaching a restorative justice (RJ) course as an elective in her university's criminal justice major curriculum. Administrators believed the educational classes in RJ would provide the foundation for participating inmates to model restorative processes and practice skill development.

The interactive classes were merely an introduction to RJ. Resources about teaching RJ have been accumulated and published by RJOnline, an affiliate of Prison Fellowship International. Howard Zehr's *Little Book of Restorative Justice* was the assigned textbook. The books were purchased by community members and provided to RJO participants. In addition, inmates were supplied with and required to read scholarly journal articles on RJ to learn the research and explore problems in the RJ field. A portion of the class time was spent analyzing the cultural customs of RJ practices, as well as differences in definitions and strategies for practices, with significant focus on accepting accountability and making amends. Each seminar was facilitated in an RJ circle format, lasted two-and-a-half hours and was taught approximately once every four months. There was no final exam after each seminar. Inmates were asked to reflect on their learning experience of RJ, and a final circle meeting was held to conclude each session. Since the sessions have commenced, the RJ seminars, facilitated by the volunteer professor, have become part of the education culture of the RJO inmates.



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Students from the Department of Legal Studies at the University of Mississippi listen to a presentation by RJO inmates.

## Students and Offenders Learn Together

In an effort to provide RJO members an opportunity to interact with community members, each semester, the professor has brought her students who are enrolled in an RJ course to the prison for a field trip. The meeting is important for both the students and inmates to implement their RJ skills and share their knowledge, different perspectives and life experiences. The interactions link higher education and a restorative experience by not only making the inmates aware of their abilities to positively impact the community around them, but also by nurturing their acceptances of accountability and desires to make amends.

In the past three years, RJO has operated a “reparative work classroom.” For the average onlooker, it may appear that the inmates, who meet in a designated classroom every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, are simply working on craft projects. The college students, however, readily recognize that the group is engaged in a process similar to peacemaking circles, where offenders speak one at a time and address a wide range of issues regarding their crimes. According to Daniel W. Van Ness and Karen Heetderks Strong, the focus of a circle is to “find an approach that leads to a constructive outcome in which the needs of the victim and community are understood and addressed with the needs and obligations of the offender.”<sup>4</sup> While working on various craft projects, inmates conduct restorative dialogue. The reparative work classroom provides offenders the opportunity to make amends, establishes a

voice and enables shared responsibility in identifying constructive resolutions, addressing underlying causes of criminal behavior while building a sense of community around shared restorative values. Recognizing the harm crime has on children and the elderly, two of the most vulnerable groups in society, tangible initiatives completed in the reparative work classroom include:

- Coloring books: Coloring books are designed, bound and distributed to children’s hospitals to help children relax, have fun and create something that is unique to them;
- Bookmarks: To encourage reading, bookmarks are crafted for students at public and private schools. Bookmarks are produced in a variety of materials with a multitude of designs and styles and reflect the inmates’ desires to start new chapters in their lives;
- Bingo cards: In addition to traditional bingo cards, inmates design bingo-styled game cards to teach reading, math, geography, science or music and help students and teachers get to know each other. Bingo cards are distributed to public and private schools and elder centers; and
- Greeting cards: Because card-making is becoming increasingly popular, inmates produce greeting cards and distribute them to centers for the elderly. Elderly residents are able to give homemade cards to friends and family.

While on the field trip, the college students also visit the Restorative Justice Gardens. RJO operates a community garden, which embodies the institution's core mission of teaching offenders empathy and unselfish behavior. Inmates donate what they have grown to area food pantries, shelters, churches, non-profit organizations and schools, satisfying a sense of community and establishing a connection to the local environment. The food aids Missouri families who have been relying increasingly on food pantries to help cope with the challenges faced in today's economy.

Through the aforementioned activities, visiting university students observe how RJO has successfully attempted to make amends or express remorse to the outside community. While those activities continue, RJO has recently focused on modifying the culture of the prison environment toward a restorative model. Furthermore, university students learn that despite ongoing attempts by prison administrators to ensure a safe prison environment, anecdotal evidence suggests that many inmates are victimized. In addition to sexual assaults, inmates are all too often pushed, grabbed, shoved or threatened with shanks. Inmates also fear bodily harm from stalking-type behaviors, such as inmates sending unsolicited written communications or vandalizing their property. In response to one of the RJO inmates, who explained in a reflective journal entry that the organization's goal is "to promote less victimization in the lives of each participant, as well as the communities in which they reside," restorative programming has been implemented and a campaign to encourage participation has begun.

## Benefits of a Restorative Model

Both the university students and RJO inmates recognize there are many benefits to offering RJ programs to inmates. Victim impact panels, for example, provide important opportunities for restorative experiences for offenders through in-class or panel presentations. The victim-led reparation approach allows victims' voices to be represented through other victims or victim advocate groups. These programs can assist inmates in acknowledging the harm that is inflicted on inmates and developing empathy for victims.<sup>5</sup> As part of the field trip, RJO inmates demonstrated another type of RJ programming: awareness classes. These classes are taught by inmate facilitators or correctional staff. The courses focus on offender sensitivity to the effects the crime had on the victim. The motivation behind the development of these classes was the recognition that many offenders were completely unaware of and indifferent to the impact their behavior has on victims and their

prison community. Finally, RJO has demonstrated that drama therapy, victim-focused theater and drama techniques promote the inmates' concepts of accountability. Drama therapy helps inmates address real-life relationships and social situations through drama. According to the National Association for Drama Therapy, research has shown drama therapy has a positive impact on participating offenders' ability to acknowledge consequences of their actions, decrease violence and increase empathy.<sup>6</sup>

The interaction between students and offenders (resulting from previous interaction of the professor with offenders) was the key to a simple educational experience into a transformative learning progression. It provided a first-hand experience of how offenders think, feel and behave. Most prison trips are perfunctory and point out buildings and features while providing little understanding of what goes on inside and how it affects behavior. By enabling the university students to participate in RJO activities, such as awareness classes and victim impact panels, the opportunities to learn and understand grew exponentially. At the conclusion of the field trip, both RJO inmates and students were given an opportunity to submit written evaluations. The reports were consistently positive. The participating inmates believed the interaction with the university professor and students was profoundly influential by providing them with an adaptive teaching strategy that focused on their own transformation through higher education and community involvement. A significant number of RJO inmates remarked that they learned the concepts of RJ better by "showcasing [their] programs," "sharing [their] learning experiences" and "being motivated by the university students."

RJO inmates and university students' interactions also promoted the understanding of RJ. Furthermore, by participating in an interactive classroom, the university students were exposed to internships and careers in corrections, which could create a pool of candidates with a better understanding of what is being done in correctional programming and what needs are still unmet. These students are the administrators of the future. For instance, in a written evaluation, one student wrote, "I noticed that my attitude had changed ... I saw them as people who want to repair some harm they have caused." Likewise, a student commented, "I noticed how much respect the inmates and administrators give each other to promote learning and to help them give back to the community." Finally, a student said the experience had caused her to "abandon an emphasis in law enforcement to pursue a career in correctional administration."

## Conclusion

Through these initiatives, RJO has been exploring the meaning and practical application of RJ principles with community members at a maximum-security prison. RJO is committed to actively involving offenders prior to and during program development. Offenders take leadership in identifying their needs and obligations, and determine how to meet those needs and fulfill those obligations while in prison. RJO inmates have found the empathy, established structure and developed practical and feasible ways to promote victim reparation within their communities. This exemplifies how institutions of higher education, collaborating with prison officials, can transform an inmate from a hurtful offender to a caring, compassionate citizen.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Chappell, C. 2004. Post-secondary correctional education and recidivism: A meta-analysis of research conducted 1990-1999. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 55(2):148-169. Ashland, Ohio: Correctional Education Association.

<sup>2</sup> Ryan, T.A. and K.A. McCabe. 1994. Mandatory versus voluntary prison education and academic achievement. *The Prison Journal*, 74(4):450-461. Washington, D.C.: Sage Publications.

<sup>3</sup> Keena, L. 2009. Faith-based volunteers in local jails: The inaugural test of servant-leadership. *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, 5(1):209-221. Hanover, Pa.: The Sheridan Press.

<sup>4</sup> Van Ness, D.W. and K.H. Strong. 2015. *Restoring justice: An introduction to restorative justice*. Waltham, Mass.: Anderson Publishing.

<sup>5</sup> Moriarty, L.J. and R.A. Jerin. 2007. *Current issues in victimology research*. Durham, N.C.: California Academic Press.

<sup>6</sup> National Association for Drama Therapy. 2010. *Drama therapy in corrections/forensics settings*. Retrieved from [www.nadt.org/upload/file/FSForensic.pdf](http://www.nadt.org/upload/file/FSForensic.pdf).



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## Father-Daughter Dance in an Indiana Prison Strengthens Family Bond

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other IDOC facilities offer visitation with family and friends, CVC at IREF is unique in that fathers are permitted to meet with their children in a child-friendly environment, where they can spend quality time talking, reading, playing games, participating in crafts and getting to know each other. CVC at IREF is one of the only programs of this extent to exist within IDOC. Inmates participating in CVC must complete a program called Inside Out Dads and other mandatory programming prior to participating in special visits.

Inside Out Dads focuses on bridging the gap between incarcerated fathers and their children while the father is still incarcerated, as well as increasing the proportion of children growing up with involved, responsible and committed fathers. The 12-week, evidence-based program teaches inmates new communication skills and gives them the perspectives of other fathers who are facing similar challenges. Inside Out Dads was designed by the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI), which was founded in 1994 to confront the most consequential social problem of widespread father absence in the lives of children. An independent study by Rutgers University revealed that the Inside Out Dads curriculum provided by NFI proved effective in building

fathers' knowledge and confidence in being fathers, even while incarcerated, according to an NFI press release. IDOC began employing NFI programs, such as Inside Out Dads, in correctional facilities across the state as a means of decreasing the likelihood of offenders returning to prison. In the state, offenders graduating from the program returned to prison at a rate lower than the national average.

## Conclusion

Liz Johnson, program director of the Parole and Reentry Services Division for IDOC, summed up the IREF program. "Just seeing the children and their dads enjoy activities that build a bond that may not have been there before is just awesome to me," Johnson said. "If we want the community to give our guys a second chance and believe they can become great dads and successful citizens, we have to show them as staff that we believe in what we are doing, and show the men that we are here to guide and show them an alternative way of handling situations." All of the inmates who attended the dance were participants of FED and had completed the Inside Out Dads program.

*Gaylie R. Cotton is the public information officer at the Indianapolis Reentry Educational Facility.*