

W O R D S

# UNCAGED



Monthly Newsletter

December 2019

## THE BIRTH OF THE PPF - *Duncan Martinez*

The Honor Yard here at the California State Prison, Los Angeles County, started in November 2000, and I arrived in January 2001 – just a few months after inception. It was still new, still struggling to find what it really was, and, it was about half full of full of men that did not want to be here. An odd environment. In California, prison is about segregation, violence, and a form of stoicism where feeling is seen as weakness. It is a hard place. The Honor Yard was about something completely different: you had to promise not to be a bad guy, to respect and even work with men of other races, and to try to be something more than another thug. Essentially, it was about a complete change in culture, espousing things that many were convinced would get us stabbed if it failed. You have to do to survive in California's prisons. Show no weakness. A good friend of mine, Chris, is a perfect example of this. When he arrived, he looked like he was about heavy stakes.

But, it was about something so amazing that many of us thought it worth the risk: to see this come to fruition, to really see an oasis appear in the desolation of prison ... to be able to live in a world where knives did not rule all.

Most yards are defined by toughness, stoicism, a walk and manner that evidenced exactly that. New men would arrive here with the prison walk, carry themselves like they didn't care, like a knife was the next decision, because this is what he arrived, he looked like he was about to go off on everyone. In months that façade was gone, and he was much better – not totally the man I know today, but better. The changes of a place like this happen slowly as people come to grips with trusting the idea of letting the old go. As they negotiate new identities, many of the men are doing so for the first time in their adult lives. This process is delicate, dangerous even. That uncaring glare is a safety net, comforting in that it works – it keeps you from being a victim. To shed it and try to be something different is scary and admitting that is even scarier. The culture here still works to help new men adjust, but at the start there were difficulties simply because it was new.

There were no programs back then, not really. That sort of thing came later. And, it all would have come crashing down around us if not for a few older men who understood, who really saw what it would take to make the changes that happened here. They

knew that the younger men were the key, that getting them to buy in was everything: if the youngsters could see an endgame to all of this, then it could really thrive. I was fortunate to be taken along for the ride. One of my mentors helped me to see what it would take, how to affect the right types of change. Men in prison can be stubborn, and there are a bunch of rules, so how to get kids to break them without care? How to get them to buy in? It took humility, selflessness, and a lot of work. Much of what I did I did through sports, mostly softball and volleyball. Prison sports are just like everything else inside: you play with your own. That's it. Our softball team, which was built on hard work, doing it right, and team, was the first on the yard to be a mixed race team. A bunch of people stayed away, but we pushed forward. It was just as necessary that we espoused hard work as integration, just as important that we were about doing it right and team: these were the lessons that the young men needed to learn to make a place like this work. Lessons that could not be taught directly – youth can be stubborn, like I mentioned above. But, having a culture of this on a team, pushing a set of rules that simply made sense; by having the team have amazing success ... this all led to major changes in how the yard was and could be. It showed the strength of community, of working together. When we started, there were no mixed race teams; there were no set practice days (practice? What for?). We dominated, winning thirteen championships in a row. By the end of that run, all of the teams were mixed, and everyone practiced. To our joy, other teams cloned what we did and had success with it.

During the run, most everyone wanted to play with us. We took in a lot of men that other teams did not want – men that needed a little help finding their way.

Other men did the same things in the library, education, and in each building. Everywhere men congregated, older men set the tone. The chapel was quickly a place where groups from differing religions worked together to make everything better. They saw benefits in everyone getting a long, being a united force.

The attitude was about community. That's what was sold, a place where everyone cared about everyone, or close enough that it counted. Elements of that culture are still here, still present from what those men instilled. Many of the old guard are gone,

some truly gone, but what they forged lives on.

The Honor Yard was changed at some point to the Progressive Programming Facility (PPF) and the name fits the new yard. We have become about programs and that is excellent in most respects. The problem that I see is that the goal has become more individual. Instead of working for others, a lot of men work for their own agendas. There's nothing wrong with that, as long as it is a part of something else. Men with life without parole (I am one) worked for years to create an oasis where we might do something to better others and give to our lives. There were no certificates, no rewards other than doing it. Now, thanks to commutations, everyone wants to stand out so that they might be seen and granted a chance to go home. I worry what that could do to community, especially if commutations ever stop – if hope is lost.

The PPF is a great place, better than anything else we know in California's massive prison system. What we have is awesome, but it is not the same as it was, and it is easy to forget what those men did back then; easy to see the vast array of programs and assume that they are the most amazing thing here. Programs are great and they help so many of the men – I just completed a great one, and am involved in several incredible ones. But, the work of those before us should be remembered for what it was, for those ideals are the real beauty here. How we use the programs will tell how well we remember those lessons.

### Reflecting on Words Uncaged Before Albuquerque Presentation-*Jose Cubias*

Dr. Linda Greenberg, chair of the Cal State Los Angeles English Department, asked me give an overview of Words Uncaged (WU) as part of a larger CSULA English Department presentation on community engagement and academia at the Imagining America conference in Albuquerque, NM. A lot of what I share at the conference on October 19 focused on the logistics of the program and its general impact on the men in A yard in Lancaster. As I outlined my talking points for the presentation, I self-reflected on WU's impact on my life, which later led me to write the fragments below a few days after the trip to Albuquerque.

...

Almost three years ago, some friends and I walked into a meeting in the English department seminar room. I had heard about WU but had no idea about the organization's work. I don't remember that meeting much except that I agree to help out without understanding what that meant.

Months later, I was in a room with Alfred, David, Ellie, Lizette, and a few others editing the work of men from A-yard at Lancaster Prison. That work eventually became the first journal, *Human*. Back then, I could not imagine one day meeting the men whose writing I helped to shepherd beyond the prison walls.

*Human's* release party took place at Ave 50 Gallery in Highland Park. At that point, I, a shy

person in general, just played my part helping in silence. I remember meeting people, telling them my part in the whole process, and feeling overwhelmed by their thanks and gratitude for my contribution. I did not feel worthy of praise.

My contribution to *Disconnect:Reconnect*, the second journal, mostly focused on the work of George Sanchez who was incarcerated at the age of 13. George manifested into my life in the form of a two foot stack of manila envelopes filled with poems. George's honest poems are something special, so I wanted to do more than just publish his work in the journal. This time around, the journal's release party in the summer of 2018 included an art exhibit, and I devised a plan to print George's poems and cover a section of the gallery wall with his words.

I finally met George about a year ago at a WU BBQ because his juvenile sentence ended when he turned 18. Since then, we have become good friends. For 6 months, I saw him once a week. I taught George to drive and helped him get into college; we spoke about the importance of poetry at K-12 schools in Los Angeles.

George taught me a lot about writing. He said to me once, "everything is a poem," and though I believe it to be true, I did not understand the significance of such a statement until I heard it that day while driving around LA listening to Nipsy Hustle.

### GEORGINA'S LEGISLATIVE COLUMN

*Senate Bill 1412- Criminal History Inquiries*

Senate Bill 1412 stops employers from having access to arrest inquiries that did not result in a conviction, a diversion program, or a conviction that has been judicially dismissed or ordered sealed and stops them from using criminal history information in employment decisions. The only way an employer can now use criminal history against someone is when an employer cannot by law hire someone with a "particular" conviction. This "particular" conviction is described in the bill as, "a conviction for specific criminal conduct or a category of criminal offenses prescribed by any federal law, federal regulation or state law that contains requirements, exclusions, or both, expressly based on that specific criminal conduct or category of criminal offenses."

This is impactful because how society deals with those accused of crimes speaks more than any propaganda meant to stir the deepest of emotions. When denied employment due to past arrests that did not result in a conviction, a diversion program, a conviction, or that was dismissed, people can fall behind and be forced to actually commit crimes that can result in a conviction- such as theft because they were not employed and could not afford to pay for food to feed their children. This bill seeks to deter employers from accessing those documents to allow people the ability to make something of themselves.

P o e t r y  
U n c a g e d



CAGED

by  
J.D. Allen

Some people look surprised that I've been  
in prison for forty years.  
Though I've heard that a captive Cockatoo lives  
up to or over fifty years.  
There is somewhat of a difference I have to admit!  
The Cockatoo is caged for its beauty.  
I've been caged for the ugliness I've committed.  
I'm trying to see the true beauty of life  
from behind bars.  
So that when I come in contact with it, I  
Rather than destroy it like I did when..., I  
Will recognized it and cherish it rather destroy it like I did when I  
Was too young to know it existed.

Untitled

by  
Anthony Hernandez

Detached from what's reality,  
The goal of this man's child.  
With pain in heart and loss in mind,  
I pull-off my tomorrows.



## SO ON WE BREATHE: PHOTOS FROM AN INCARCERATED LIFE

OPENING RECEPTION: SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 7TH 6-10PM

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**Editors and Contributors:** Elanor Carpenter recently earned her master's degree in English at CSULA. She has been involved with Words Uncaged for the past three years. Lizette Toribio just earned her master's degree at CSULA in English. Erik Vargas also earned his master's degree in English at CSULA. Jose Manuel Cubias graduated from CSULA with a Master's in English Literature student. Duncan Martinez, Anthony Hernandez, JD Allen, thanks for the contributions this months. Georgina is currently finishing up her Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice at California State University, Los Angeles.

**Special Thanks to Bidhan Roy, Tobias Tubbs, and Ray Adornetto and our board members.**

Make sure to check out the radio show **Think Outside the Cage**. Words Uncaged hosts the radio show on the 2nd Saturday of the month on KPFK 90.7. Also listen to **Sentences Podcast** this month for content featuring writing from Words Uncaged alumni. Find it on iTunes or SoundCloud.

Don't forget to follow us on Instagram for updates on upcoming events @wordsuncaged

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