



## Five Auburn Correctional Facility inmates reach for salvation on the stage

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AUBURN — The late afternoon sun filtered down through green stained glass onto five men on a stage as they shared their past and bared their souls to a rapt audience of 80.

Speaking solo and in pairs, they brought back memories of swimming at a favorite uncle's house, their first sexual encounters and growing up as a fat kid.

The stories were moving, and those listening were moved. It could have been a theater group anywhere, but the matching green pants and robust security gave away the setting: Auburn Correctional Facility, where the five performers are all doing time.

They are members of the Phoenix Players Theatre Group, an inmate performing arts organization that bills itself as “a community of transformation.”

The night of April 28, the group delivered autobiographical monologues at the prison chapel to invited guests, mostly from Cornell University, where professors and students are working with the inmates as volunteers and as part of a college credit program.

David Bendezu, 24, recalled his last day before getting arrested for murder. He was 17 years old and working at Toys “R” Us, and a customer he'd helped told his harried boss, “We need more people like him in this world.”

“Before I came to prison and started wearing these green pants, I used to be a normal teenager,” he said.

Many of the performances were light-hearted reflections on childhood. Efraim “De” Diaz, 41, talked about playing Little League with his brothers and arguing over who got to be Dave Winfield and Reggie Jackson in backyard games.

Michael Rhynes, 49, recalled trying to impress a nun at Catholic summer camp by trying to fly — and breaking his arm in the process.

“What better way to impress an older woman than to fly?” he asked.

Some of the monologues, though, touched on the men's inner turmoil, both in prison and on the outside.

Michael Shane Hale, 40, remembered being molested by a friend's father at a sleepover. He likened the guilt he felt to a thick sludge that covered him and his shame but eventually turned to stone.

“I'm working to chip away at that stone of shame, fleck by painful fleck,” he said.

The prisoners created the group in 2009. The volunteer Cornell faculty members teach them to use theater to get in touch with their own stories and, as Rhynes wrote, “to atone for those human beings for whom we've caused so much pain and suffering.”

Cornell volunteers Jeremy Flynn and Juliana Kliet-Mendez were also on stage for the performance, and shared their own stories about the past.

Stephen Cole, a retired Cornell theater professor and healing arts practitioner, has been working with the inmates the whole time, teaching them to use psychology and physiology to heal themselves.

“They want to be witnessed as who they are now, not what we imagine them to be,” he said. “They're willing to break down all social barriers and learn something about themselves. ... Everyone I know who teaches in prison says the same thing: They're the best students you'll have in your entire life.”

Cornell professor Bruce Levitt instructed the men on autobiographical performance in particular, something they worked on for several months before last week's performance.

“They take responsibility for their crimes and not living up to whatever they didn’t live up to,” Levitt said. “The whole point is to find a way to live a decent life while living in prison.”

The prisoners themselves were effusive in their enthusiasm for the program and the chance it gave them to feel human behind bars.

“In the normal course of prison life, you can’t be vulnerable — you’re too busy surviving,” Hale said. “I took someone’s life, and I have to live with that guilt every single day. You want to make it back, but how can you do that? ... So to have access to this rehabilitative opportunity is just beyond words.”

“I came into prison very young, and I was so scared,” Bendezu continued. “When you come here you’re told to be quiet and not open up to anybody. This is the complete opposite; this is encouraging you to speak up.”

All five of the performers have a long way to go before appearing before the parole board. Ultimately, they said, their goal is to get reintegrated into the outside community, but in the meantime, the theater group lets them see where they went wrong in the first place.

“It helped me reflect on myself and the things I did in the past,” said Kenneth Brown, 42. “I realized I didn’t reflect on life too much when I was out there in the real world, and that’s how I got away from school and positive things like that.”

The performers and the guests shared a last round of hugs before the latter were escorted to the gate and the former to their cells.

“I wish I could do this every day,” Diaz said. “It’s the only time I feel free. I don’t feel incarcerated right now.”

Staff writer Justin Murphy can be reached at 282-2237 or [justin.murphy@lee.net](mailto:justin.murphy@lee.net). Follow him on Twitter at CitizenMurphy.

