

Project recovers prison's memory

By John Mason Columbia-Greene Media | Posted: Tuesday, October 1, 2013 12:30 am

When artist Alison Cornyn and filmmaker Tracy Huling started the Prison Public Memory Project, they figured they would be in Hudson about a year. Their idea was and still is to use their work on the Hudson Correctional Facility and its predecessors as a pilot site for a national project on recovering and preserving the histories and memories of prisons.

Now they've been here more than two years, and the project is richer than they had ever expected.

"The more we do, the more we understand how significant it is," Huling said in an interview Thursday, referring to the prison.

There is no museum or gallery for the project — their work can be found on their website, prisonpublicmemory.org.

They have worked in collaboration with oral historian Suzanne Snider to mine some of the rich history associated with the New York Girls Training School, which occupied the grounds of the current correctional facility from 1904 to 1975.

In addition, Russ Immarigeon is doing more traditional, document-oriented research, and was recently awarded a grant to study the ideas, influence and innovations of some of the superintendents of the school and its predecessor, the House of Refuge for Women.

Another source of information for these historical detectives is old documents stored away in attics.

At a garage sale, Lisa Durfee, owner of Five and Diamond, picked up a box of papers that had come from the training school in the 1920s and 1930s, Huling said.

It contained personal photographs of the girls, copies of their letters, parole forms, newspaper articles about the girls and the institution.

"The beauty of it was there was enough material from different perspectives to give us a window into these girls' lives, from the judge, the family, the newspapers," Huling said. "It was very unusual to come across documents like that."

Cornyn then used the artifacts to create the exhibit "If These Walls Could Talk," at the Dr. Oliver Bronson House on the HCF grounds in June.

“For each girl that had a portrait, I blew it up larger than life,” Cornyn said. Each six-to-eight-foot-high portrait was suspended in one room of the Bronson House. The stories were reproduced on newsprint and scattered on the floors of the rooms.

“The images were haunting,” Huling said, adding that it was interesting to see how people responded to the documents that were thrown on the floor. “Some people walked carefully around the documents, some crouched down next to them, others walked over the documents, others picked them up.”

“Some people stepped on the documents,” Cornyn said. In discussion groups that followed, people talked about how it felt to step on the documents, and how they felt about the people behind those documents and on the walls.

“One girl was married at 12 to a boarder, who then basically raped her,” Huling said. “Her parents were prosecuted — they had sold her.”

The child was put in an orphan asylum, where she told her story to other kids.

“The head of the asylum became alarmed and called her a moral menace,” Huling said. “That’s how she ended up at the training school.”

Cornyn said there was also a letter from the girl to her mother, talking about her first day at the training school, and that it was full of love for her mother.

Chatham artist Beth Thielen created a large bound book for each room and each girl, which visitors could page through. One of the photographs was of Ella Fitzgerald, who was a resident of the school in the 1930s.

At that time, the housing was segregated, with the black girls living in different cottages than the white girls, and often acting as servants in the superintendent’s residence, the Bronson House.

The NAACP was bringing lawsuits to stop the segregation at the time Fitzgerald was there, Cornyn said.

“You could have inferred that she may have been one of the girls that people in the NAACP touched base with,” Huling said. “Tom Tunney, the last living superintendent of the school, tried to get Ella to come back and talk to the girls (in the 1960s).” Fitzgerald refused.

There were rumors that she may have been kept in a basement and possibly abused.

When Tunney took his job as head of the school, he reportedly said to his wife, “My God, Patti, we’re running a plantation here.” They moved out of the Bronson House, taking quarters that were less grand.

Black girls were sent to the training school in Hudson because there were few other options for them.

“Hudson had to accept them because it was a public institution,” Huling said. A young woman named Shirley Wilder sued the city of New York for having her sent to Hudson, where girls were not getting the community-based services that other institutions offered.

The House of Refuge, which preceded the training school from 1887 to 1904, was founded as a progressive-era reform school for immigrant women. It was the first institution in New York for state-sentenced women, and the first to make use of cottage architecture.

“You’d live in a small group,” Huling said. “They would teach incorrigible women how to behave and create a life for themselves — home economics, furniture making, sewing, bookmaking. This is a very historical institution.”

The House of Refuge was the idea of the progressive Boston reformer Josephine Shaw Lowell, sister of Charles Russell Lowell, commander of the nation’s first black regiment, chronicled in the movie “Glory.”

Following the wave of immigration from Europe came the waves of the Great Migration of blacks from the south.

“There were no progressive reformers reaching out to those girls,” Huling said. “It was about saving white children.”

This led to the Black Child Saving Movement, chronicled in a book by Geoff Ward, who spoke at the Hudson Area Library in August.

Many members of the Hudson black community were employed as teachers or matrons at the training school. For the time, before equal opportunity, that was unusual, Huling said.

“They were able to relate to the kids,” she said. White women who had worked there told Snider, “Have you talked to the black women who worked there? There were things they could do that we couldn’t do.”

The late Hudson supervisor and alderman Staley B. Keith worked there for 30 years.

“One woman we met with knew Staley B. Keith,” Cornyn said. “He taught her how to stand up for herself.”

“We showed her a picture of Staley,” Huling said. “She flipped.”

Former Hudson resident Rev. Mabel Blanks worked there more than three decades. “She’s revered by the women who worked there,” Huling said, “clearly a central figure.”

“Here they were, making middle-class wages, and they used them to build a professional class in Hudson,” she said. “That’s how they built the churches. That’s how a lot of them were able to move up Warren Street, above Fourth Street.”

Some former inmates they interviewed talked about how the training school saved their lives, and taught them things their families couldn’t or wouldn’t, Cornyn said.

“You hear about abuse, but it’s a complicated story,” she said. “The women were really appreciative.”

“A lot of the girls came from horrific backgrounds,” Huling said.

In the future, Cornyn and Huling hope to partner with local institutions, artists, historians to document and interpret this history.

“We’re hoping to get money to commission local artists,” Huling said. “We want to make it come alive for the people who lived it. It’s their town, a way to own their history.”

For more information, go to prisonpublicmemory.org.

To reach reporter John Mason, call 518-828-1616, ext. 2500, or e-mail jmason@registerstar.com.