

Gandhi, inmates participate in Season for Nonviolence



Nelson Rodriguez was all too familiar with a life plagued by violence and crime.

After doing time in two maximum-security prisons, he is now at Groveland Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison in Sonyea, Livingston County, serving a 7- to 14-year sentence for five counts of robbery.

“I had done a prison stint before this and I did what was more comfortable for me,” said Rodriguez, 43. “At that time, violence was more comfortable.”

But the Season for Nonviolence, a 64-day period focused on promoting peaceful action, has given him — and about 300 other inmates — a chance at personal redemption.

Arun Gandhi, founder of the Season and grandson of Mohandas Gandhi, spoke at Groveland on Thursday to help the men connect with his grandfather’s nonviolent message.

“Because of the violence (inmates) have experienced, they get trapped in the thinking that we can’t get out of this,” he said. “I want to give them hope.”

A sitarist played with passion and serenity while Groveland inmates filed in. Gandhi told stories about his grandfather, the tribulations his family faced living in apartheid South Africa, and explained how to remain calm when provoked.

After the speech, several inmates got up to ask questions, and Rodriguez said when the men exited, “they looked very different from when they came in.”

Rochester’s [M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence](#) — also founded by Arun Gandhi — provided inmates with a pamphlet outlining daily words to live by and suggesting small positive actions to carry out. Sandra Amoia, superintendent of the prison, said inmates have been encouraged to express their nonviolent messages through art, poetry and skits — culminating with a friendly competition on the final day of the Season.

Prison programming is only one aspect of the Season for Nonviolence, which marks the period between the assassination anniversaries of Mohandas Gandhi on Jan. 30 and Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4. As of 2012, more than 900 cities in the U.S. and 67 countries participated in the Season. The decentralized concept gives communities the freedom to implement any program or personal practice that aligns with the dream that Gandhi and King shared.

“Sixty-four days is a real opportunity to change your lifestyle,” said George Payne, peace and justice educator at the Gandhi Institute. “It’s not like a holiday that’s 24 hours and then it’s gone.”

Rodriguez has felt the direct results of practicing mindfulness and nonviolence daily. He is now living in the honor dorm because of his good behavior and serves as a mentor for others during the Season.

“Change comes from within, and when we make that change and are walking the walk instead of just talking it, people see that and it helps them change the way they feel about themselves,” he said.

For Amoia, the Gandhi Institute’s Season for Nonviolence prison program is a “win-win-win” for inmates, staff and administration.

“Right now, New York state is experiencing a 40 percent recidivism rate,” she said. “If we can lower that by them leaving here and practicing nonviolence and never coming back, we’ve won.”

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