



N.Y. / REGION

At Sing Sing, Inmates Who Are Pursuing an Education Take the Stage

By COREY KILGANNON DEC. 5, 2014

OSSINING, N.Y. — A dreadlocked M.C. — wearing a natty vest and tie, along with baggy prison-issue pants — stepped onto a modest stage and acknowledged that the well-dressed members of the audience in front of him seemed excited at the novelty of visiting the vaunted Sing Sing prison here.

The M.C., Jermaine Archer, then noted that he and roughly half the crowd, about 50 of the men in the room, had not just arrived at Sing Sing on this particular morning, but many years ago, and in a less excited state, to serve long prison terms for crimes they struggled every day to analyze and atone for.

The inmates were there to take in, and serve as presenters for, an unusual event held on Wednesday at Sing Sing Correctional Facility: TEDx Sing Sing.

“What would a TEDx event in a prison be without rules?” said Mr. Archer, chuckling and adding that the only real rule was not to take a bathroom break during the presentation.

One of the inmates, Michael Tineo, reminded those on hand that they were in “the most notorious maximum-security prison in the world,” though one that recognized that educating inmates can help reduce recidivism and ease their transition back into society upon being released.

Mr. Tineo, Mr. Archer and the other inmates, most of them violent felons, are pursuing studies through Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, an organization that teams with local colleges, including Nyack and Mercy Colleges, to offer classes at Sing Sing and several other prisons.

Hudson Link sponsored the event, an offshoot of the popular conference series TED Talks, as a showcase for its students and graduates, said Sean Pica, a former

Sing Sing inmate who took classes through the group and is now its executive director.

Those who had come to Sing Sing on Wednesday from the outside walked past the prison yard, which is encircled by barbed wire-topped fences, and gathered at the facility's rear entrance, at the foot of a tall guard tower next to the Hudson River.

"Another five," a prison guard shouted up to the tower, before a gate buzzed open so the group could be shuttled to a large room that once housed medium-security dormitory units. There, inmates had set up a platform with a backdrop of fake prison bars and guard tower.

Mr. Archer alluded in jest to Sing Sing's history in asking for patience should any power losses occur, because of "all the electricity they used in the past to use the electric chair."

Sing Sing's superintendent, Michael Capra, spoke about developing "a new cool" among trouble-prone youth that emphasized education and the arts over the notion that serving time in prison was something to brag about.

"This rite of passage to come upstate has got to end," Mr. Capra said.

Inmates praised the educational and arts programs, which offer coursework toward bachelor's and master's degrees. For this reason, Mr. Archer said, "Sing Sing is not like any other animal in this zoo of correctional facilities."

Noting that his own father had been imprisoned at Sing Sing, Mr. Archer, who is serving a sentence of 22 years to life for second-degree murder, spoke of hoping to break the family cycle for his own sons by learning about Shakespeare and classical music while serving his time.

"I left junior high school knowing how to carry a razor in my mouth, spit it out and catch it," he said. "I'm leaving with a master's."

The lineup of well-known speakers from outside the prison who were in attendance Wednesday included the rapper and actor Ice-T, who alluded to the educational programs.

"You all got master's degrees — I ain't got a master's degree," he said. "Do I need to come here to get educated?" He then recited part of one of his songs, "New Jack Hustler," a cappella.

The inmates' presentations were uplifting and often impeccably delivered. The outsiders in the audience applauded loudly and mingled with prisoners during

breaks when food and coffee were served. The inmates were eager to discuss their offenses as well as life outside the prison's walls.

Occasionally, the crackle of a correction officer's walkie-talkie would remind everyone of the dichotomy within the crowd, the free and the incarcerated.

The director Jonathan Demme, who produced and was filming the event, wandered around with a hand-held video camera.

Music was provided by several groups, including a guest ensemble of classical musicians affiliated with Carnegie Hall who played orchestrated compositions written by inmates as part of a continuing program.

The Sing Sing House Band, a pop ensemble, featured a rotating lineup of skilled inmate musicians and singers. They accompanied Kenyatta Hughes as he sang about "the regrets, disappointment, the miles and the years" of doing hard time.

Another inmate, Lawrence Bartley, 41, who, as a teenager, fired a gunshot that killed another teenager in a Queens movie theater, discussed having had a son, Lawrence Jr., as a result of a conjugal visit.

A premature delivery, Mr. Bartley said, had left the baby frail and clinging to life. He spoke emotionally about guards and fellow inmates who had allowed him the privilege of spending hours a day on the prison pay phone to call the hospital.

"We all came together because of him," he said of the boy, who he noted is now healthy at age 7 and has endeared himself to other inmates with the joyous personality he displays in the visiting room.

Yusef Salaam, who was imprisoned in the notorious Central Park jogger case before his conviction was overturned, was among the guest speakers. Mr. Salaam drew supportive applause when he said, "This is my first time coming back to prison."

Toward the end of the program, Mr. Archer reminded the audience's well-dressed members that they would soon be going home while he and the other inmates stayed behind. "You've got to leave from here before the next count," he said.

Introducing the final presenter, he called up "the poet laureate of Sing Sing."

At that point, an inmate named Simeone Duggins took the stage and began a spoken word piece he had written about growing up in a Brooklyn housing project where, in his words, "children play freeze tag, smelling empty weed bags."

Mr. Duggins repeated the piece's refrain — “Life is beautiful” — while giving thanks for what he cast as the simple pleasures of life at Sing Sing, from the early sunlight to the quiet at night.

Behind him, the Sing Sing House Band picked up momentum, and the audience clapped and sang along as Mr. Duggins closed his eyes, swung his arms and said that, even from behind the prison walls, “you heard it, man, life is beautiful.”

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