

Painting yourself out of trouble:

Parc Prison's innovative art course

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These days it's hard to find positive things to say about our prison service. But while legitimate questions are being asked about the way British jails are run, few of us know anything about what's being done to help prisoners break free of crime. At Parc, one of the UK's largest, privately run detention centres for men near Bridgend, an innovative art programme gives young offenders the chance to change their mindsets. Called the Art of Living Course (AOL), the project encourages inmates to express themselves freely through the medium of painting, drawing and group discussion. Working in small groups of no more than ten at a time, the prisoners are invited to paint in pairs and as a group; they also make self portraits and draw cartoons about their lives. Some of these youngsters are drug addicts with huge psychological problems, a few are self-harmers, many have found it impossible to break out of the cycle of getting into trouble which leads to repeated prison sentences. Most of them have very low self esteem.

The course runs on three or four afternoons a week for six weeks. It is not a quick fix but aims to foster a team spirit and catapult the students into a more positive frame of mind. To change the metaphor again, AOL aims to sow the seeds for longer term improvements, so that by the end, the graduates (each of whom gets a certificate) want to study new skills which they can put to good use when they get out. So far 120 people have been through the project and Parc reports that it has been a great success. Results have been so dramatic that the BBC has made a documentary about the scheme, screened last year, called *Inside Art*.

Overseeing the AOL course is writer and artist Phil Forder. In fact it is his baby. A former Steiner school teacher, Phil began giving art classes at Parc

prison eight years ago. The course began in 2006, since when he has been appointed Parc's first Arts Interventions Manager.

Teaching art inside is nothing new – earlier schemes have included the Prison Arts Foundation's work at the former Maze (now Maghaberry) jail, the Koestler Trust's prisoners' art programmes, art projects supported by The Howard League for Penal Reform, and Fine Cell Work which teaches embroidery skills to male prisoners.

But Parc's project is unique. Being able to paint what they like and talk about themselves in the safety of a small peer group has had dramatic results. *Inside Art* shows habitual offenders with appalling backgrounds beginning to see some hope.

The course takes up about half of Phil Forder's time. He devotes a part of the rest to an even newer venture, Hay in the Parc, which links the prison to this year's Hay literary festival.

Although the tie-up with Hay is primarily about words, one of its four main threads is visual. Responding to the news that the people held in Guantanamo Bay have no access to paper and have resorted to writing on used polystyrene cups, prisoners have inscribed poems on their own used beakers, and one of Phil's prisoner-students, Glen Harris, has made these into a giant, organically shaped sculpture.

At the same time the jail will run its own arts festival, celebrating the publication of two books. One is an autobiography by former inmate Gareth Truscott and the other a compilation of essays about the African slave trade inspired by last year's Black Awareness Month. It's been written by prisoners at Parc and its twin prison in Barbados.

With more than 7000 visitors each month Parc has a huge interface with the general public. Phil Forder thinks this could be turned to everyone's advantage by turning Parc's visitors' area into an art gallery for prisoners' and

outsiders' work. His enthusiasm is catching and his arguments persuasive. When the current building expansion is complete, Parc Prison will be the largest jail in Britain housing more than 2000 offenders who will be managed by hundreds of staff.

The suggestion that Parc become an alternative art space has a distinguished precedent. In 1779, Britain's first state prison opened at Millbank in London; the building was to become the Tate Gallery.