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Transformation through negotiation: Initiating the Inmate Mural Arts Program

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ABSTRACT

In 2008, the newly developed Inmate Mural Arts Program (IMAP) conceived, developed, and completed its inaugural project—a 22 ft × 47 ft mural painted on the front of a chapel on the grounds of a prison in rural Florida. This mural, entitled “Transformation through Unity,” was completed in collaboration between faculty and students of the Florida State University Graduate Art Therapy Program and a group of prison inmates. This project, complicated in scope and execution, was a students’ masters’ art therapy graduation project. The IMAP project took approximately 8 months to develop and complete. The process required formal and informal negotiations at all levels to succeed. This project overview will present a brief background and history of the project, review the negotiations that occurred prior to, during, and after its execution, and will present the completed mural. It will conclude with a brief overview of anticipated future projects. The negotiations ultimately produced a product that demonstrated the value and benefits of art for this population. The end piece has resulted in far-reaching implications and results, and has become the first of a series of successful projects for the new Inmate Mural Arts Program.

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In 2008, as an extension of the newly developed Florida Arts in Corrections program, members of the Inmate Mural Arts Program (IMAP) conceived, developed, and ultimately completed its inaugural project—a 22 ft × 47 ft mural painted on the front wall of a chapel on the grounds of a prison in rural Florida. This mural was completed in collaboration between two art therapy graduate students, a faculty member from the Florida State University Graduate Art Therapy Program and a group of prison inmates. This project, complicated in scope and execution, was these students’ masters’ art therapy final project. Although a school project, the end piece has resulted in far-reaching implications, and is ultimately the first of a series of successful projects for the new Arts in Corrections program.

This article, written by the two art therapy students and the professor who served as their project advisor, will present a brief background and history of the project, review the negotiations that occurred prior to, during, and after its execution, and will present the completed mural. This article will conclude with a brief overview of anticipated future projects and a reflection on possible benefits for having art therapists facilitate this project.

Background and history

Art in prison

Creative and artistic expression is prolific in the correctional arena (Kornfeld, 1997; Ursprung, 1997) as evident by prison craft shops, intricately designed tattoos, and the decorative envelopes bartered from talented inmates to send letters home (Gussak & Ploumis-Devick, 2004). Creating “good” art enhances one’s status in prison, and earns respect and friendship from others (Kornfeld, 1997). Even in a culture where prison inmates are deemed pariahs, the art produced inside is significantly accepted, if not celebrated by the “outside” culture; it provides a means to re-humanize those that are dehumanized within the repressive and punitive environment (Fox, 1997; Gussak, 2007). This, in turn, can build self-respect and decrease an inmate’s ennui and acting-out behavior. Also, it has been demonstrated that creating art fosters frustration tolerance, alleviates depression, and increases problem solving and socialization skills in the inmates who participate (Gussak, 2004, 2006). Art also provides useful tools that become valuable in assisting reentry into the community. “The making of art in prison provides a . . . space for the prisoner overwhelmed by the clatter and disruption of prison life . . . and it opens the possibility of a more creative life for many after release” (Liebmann, 1994, Forward).

Research on art and art therapy in prisons

Several studies have been conducted that support that art is beneficial for prison inmates. In 1983, Brewster’s study revealed that fewer disciplinary reports were recorded on inmates who partici-

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pated in the California Arts-in-Corrections program; as high as 80% in one institution. The California Department of Corrections (1987) revealed four years later that recidivism decreased for those who participated in the offered arts programs. Recognizing the benefits the arts offer correctional environments, several arts in corrections programs have been established (Alexander, 2003; Bruna, 2007; Tannenbaum, 2000; Williams, 2003). Some art therapists have also taken advantage of these benefits (Gussak, 1997; Hanes, 2005) and provided art therapy services in the correctional milieu. It has only been recently, however, that empirical data was gathered that demonstrated that art therapy was beneficial to the correctional milieu.

Since the summer of 2003, several research projects were instituted in several different prisons in the Florida panhandle to ascertain if art therapy was effective in addressing some of the problems inherent with inmates. These studies quantitatively indicated that art therapy could be effective in helping reduce depression and increase problem solving, socialization (Gussak, 2007), and internal locus of control (Gussak, 2009) in male inmates. Further studies revealed that art therapy has been effective in reducing depression and increasing internal locus of control in female inmates (Gussak, 2009).

AIC to IMAP

In the summer of 2007, the Florida Department of Corrections (DOC), influenced by the results of these studies, implemented a work force to develop a new statewide Arts-in-Corrections (AIC) program. The primary investigator of the above-mentioned studies was appointed chair of this workforce. Shortly after the Executive Summary and policy was signed by the Secretary of the Department of Corrections, an Advisory Group was formed whose chief goal was to implement this new and innovative program. One of the projects that emerged from the AIC program was the Inmate Mural Arts Program.

In the fall of 2007, several members of the AIC Advisory Group and the Deputy Secretary of the DOC attended the Arts in Criminal Justice conference in Philadelphia, PA. Part of the agenda involved being exposed to and exploring the results of the Philadelphia Mural Project (Golden, Rice, & Kinney, 2002; Golden, Rice, & Pompilio, 2006). Along with large community murals developed in the downtown Philadelphia area by various artists and community groups was a mural completed by inmates of a maximum-security prison. The inmates completed the mural within the prison facility on parachute cloth. Once completed, it was attached to a wall of a building in Philadelphia (Golden et al., 2006). Learning about this project inspired the visitors from Florida to coordinate a similar project with inmates from a Florida prison. However, they believed that it would be valuable if the inmates painted the mural directly onto a wall.

The AIC inaugural art project, the mural, began spring of 2008; this project was the first mural of what eventually became known as the Inmate Mural Arts Program (IMAP). A team was created that consisted of the researcher and the two graduate art therapy students from a major southern university. Its goal was to design and execute a large community mural with prison inmates, which in turn would facilitate problem solving and socialization skills.

Negotiations

Success of the program relied on formal and informal negotiations, which were constantly conducted throughout the process. All work, to a certain extent, relies on such actions. "Negotiation enters into how work is defined, as well as how to do it, how much of it to do, who is to do it, how to evaluate it, how and when to reassess

it, and so on . . ." (Strauss, Fagerhaugh, Suczek, & Wiener, 1985, p. 267). A social order is developed in an organization or work system in which agreements are made daily (Strauss, 1975), even if the work system is developed to address a single project or task. This social order, and the agreements thereof, depends on hierarchical structure as well as manipulation – two terms that are not mutually exclusive – as well as the social interactions inherent in the applied system (Hughes, 1959/1994). Thus, negotiation does not just occur at the individual level; it occurs at a systemic level as well (Gussak, 2001; Orr & Gussak, 2005). In this case, the system was comprised of art therapists and members of the correctional arena.

The Department of Corrections (DOC) Deputy Secretary initiated the IMAP project, and suggested that the project be conducted with inmates from the Wakulla Correctional Institution (WCI). WCI is a faith and character-based facility located in a rural part of North Florida's panhandle. This facility focused on developing programs for the inmates to facilitate successful rehabilitation and decrease recidivism. For the previous two years, WCI had been accepting practicum interns from the Florida State University's graduate art therapy program to provide art therapy services. Ms. Julie Argue and Ms. Jacqueline Bennett were chosen to facilitate this project as they had been interns at this facility and had experience working with this population. Furthermore, both of these students had experience with large mural projects. Thus, a meeting was established with key DOC personnel, the warden of this particular prison, and the graduate students chosen to coordinate and complete this project.

The meeting was held in February 2008, two months after the initial meeting with the Deputy Secretary of DOC. This meeting was significant, for although the warden was excited about the project, it was necessary to have "institutional buy-in"—support—from the rest of the facility's administration to assure success. The warden (Warden Russell Hosford) and the assistant warden, the heads of Maintenance, Classification, Security, and Psychology departments, and the chaplain of the institution, met with the Director of DOC Program Development, and the authors. Discussions ensued about the mural design, security strategies and the outcome expectations. Once the facility's administration was assured that institutional safety and security was a main priority, the mural project was enthusiastically received, and the administrators offered that the mural be painted on the prison's chapel wall. This building was highly visible; it had a large blank wall (22 ft × 47 ft) that faced the family visiting area, and many of the visiting legislative and administrative dignitaries would meet there prior to touring the facility. It could also be seen from the parking lot.

Along with the formal negotiations facilitated to develop this project, a great deal of "back stage" negotiations (Gussak, 2001) occurred informally with various personnel, from the security officers in the facility to the inmates that would be chosen for this project. Informal negotiations and renegotiations occurred on a daily basis.

Planning and developing

Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett began working with the inmates soon after the mural site was determined. Four weekly one-hour sessions were scheduled to develop the sketches and the final image. Inmates were selected by the institution's classification officer and chief psychologist, based on the inmates' history of successful programming and psychological needs. The interns interviewed the inmates in late March 2008; during this process a couple of concerns emerged. Several indicated that there would be conflicts with work and programming schedules. More pervasive, however, was how overwhelmed the inmates were at the scale of the project; as one inmate stressed, "How are we *all* supposed to make *one* mural



Fig. 1. IMAP sketch.

with all our ideas.” Despite these concerns, fourteen inmates were chosen to participate in the planning sessions. The chosen participants discussed the project description and goals, and were asked to think about “who you are and what you have to say” prior to the first meeting. They were also asked to bring any sketches they may develop on their own.

The following week the fourteen participants were divided into two groups of seven, and each group met for their first session. They were asked to brainstorm ideas as a group, present their sketches and further develop any further inspirations. Over the next several sessions, themes began to coalesce from these initial ideas and drawings. Four major themes emerged—religion, freedom, unity, and transformation. Each theme was described separately, and was illustrated through various symbols. For example, religion was illustrated through a triptych of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, freedom was represented by butterflies, sailing ships (Fig. 1), and broken shackles, and unity was represented through words and images that described “love thy neighbor” and Buddhist philosophies.

However, the term that emerged prominently was “transformation.” One sketch, entitled “The Transformation,” depicted a sketch of a person whose clothes changed from a prison uniform to a business suit (Fig. 2).

For the inmates, this meant “making changes,” “looking within, and find the true self,” overcoming struggles and adapting to adversity. The inmates further discussed the concept of the “journey of life,” which represented something different for each participant, especially those that were serving life sentences.

The participants were prompted to discuss these themes, and ultimately decide on one. The group eventually agreed that “Transformation through Unity” was the best one. The participants were then asked to draw their own personal stories of how this theme reflected their lives. This sparked much discussion; one participant summed it up by stating “In order for a person to have unity and love, they must give of themselves, they must make change within themselves . . . we must think about our family, friends, even those that are lost.”

The group members agreed that Ms. Bennett would take the sketches and begin designing one comprehensive image based on what was presented and discussed.

The first version (Fig. 3) was presented to the inmates on May 16th, to mixed reviews.

Several made supportive comments, such as “Yeah, Nature is unity.” Some presented constructive suggestions, such as “Maybe a clock instead of a crystal ball. It takes time to make change,” and

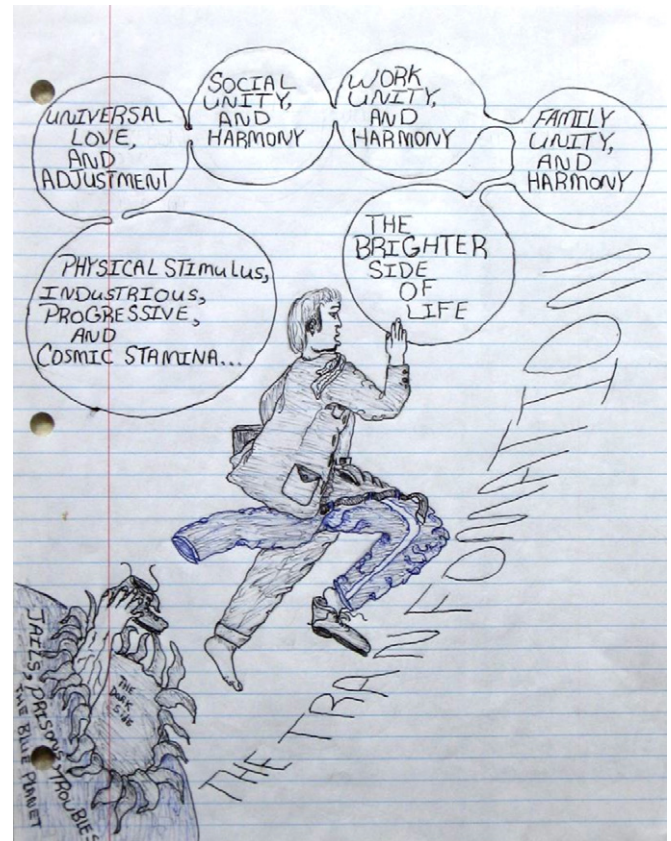


Fig. 2. IMAP sketch.

“The columns remind me of a prison I was in up north. Can we make it more of an arch?” One person suggested that those serving life sentences be represented through tombstones and grave markers. One inmate simply responded with “What’s with the ship?”

After this feedback session, Ms. Bennett redrew the final image (Fig. 4). The inmate participants accepted this final version with enthusiasm. When the group was asked to discuss what they saw, they indicated that it represented “new horizons,” “new life,” “mov-



Fig. 3. Preliminary composite sketch of mural.

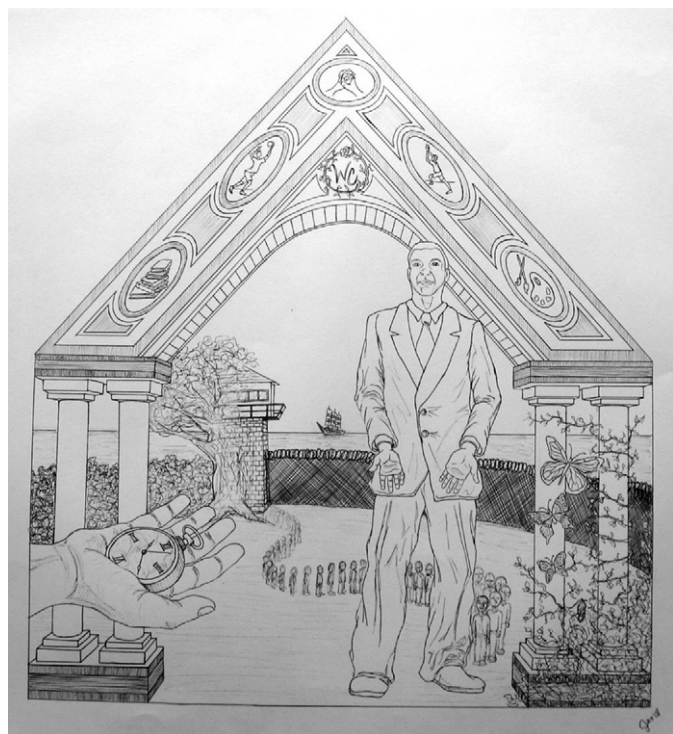


Fig. 4. Completed composite sketch.

ing towards change," wisdom, unity, and opportunity. The next step was to take the design to the warden and prison administrators for their approval.

A meeting was held on May 24, 2008. All of the prison administrators present at the previous meeting met with Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett. After the theme of the mural was introduced, the mural symbolism explained, and the execution process detailed, the administration unanimously approved the final version. The Head of Maintenance was so impressed that he volunteered to move two 4-ton air conditioning units, conduit boxes, and light fixtures from against the wall that would have otherwise blocked the final image. The only difficulty was when Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett were informed of the actual dimensions of the wall; Ms. Bennett had to revisit the final sketch to adjust its proportions to fit on the 22 ft × 47 ft wall. Fig. 5 is of the completed color sketch.

Despite the apparent ease with which the mural was approved, and the enthusiasm of the administrative staff, negotiations continued to occur on an almost daily basis. Although what may be seen as tedious details, it was important that the team, and subsequently anyone wishing to perform such projects in a prison environ, be



Fig. 5. Final color sketch redrawn to the proper dimensions.

aware of the minutiae of a prison bureaucracy prior to beginning such an endeavor. For example, material Approval Lists were required, and constant updates needed to be processed through custodial staff. The project could not begin until the maintenance staff painted the wall with primer and built adequate scaffolding. Although the scaffolding was approved, it had to be erected and dismantled at the beginning and end of each workday. Constant negotiations and renegotiations were conducted with the staff who secured the entrance and sally port of the prison, to be able to bring in new materials or when processing non-inmate volunteers. Although the administration approved choosing the team from the general population, each inmate chosen for the team had to be processed through custody before they were allowed to participate. To bring in the laptop and projector to project and transfer the final sketch onto the wall required paperwork and hierarchical approval.

The team did not just rely on the interactions with the correctional system. The local county waste facility was approached to donate discarded used paint, and the university's Department of Art Education donated some materials. Eventually, all initial negotiations were completed and the team was ready to begin.

The Mural

Preliminary precautions were taken to facilitate the process. Color copies of the final drawing were provided to the inmates who would paint the mural. Ms. Argue mixed all of the paint donated by the county waste facility into the color palette agreed to by the team, and put them into individually labeled containers. Although the projector was available for the transfer, the air conditioning units were not yet removed and the scaffolding was not yet erected. However, as time was important, Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett began transferring the image onto the white wall with Sharpie pens as far up as they could reach.

Although Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett had intended to paint the background first, because the scaffolding was not yet available, the assembled team began painting the lower part of the mural. After they rapidly completed the bottom section of the mural, Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett approached the administration again to inquire about the scaffolding. Once they impressed upon them their need for these supports to proceed with the project, the maintenance staff began to construct the scaffolding. Amusingly, the supported platforms were erected in stages—the participants could not initially reach beyond ten feet the first week; as the project progressed, the scaffolding was raised higher. Even after the scaffolding was completed, in order to reach the top portion of the mural, an extension ladder was placed on the top level. Although the staff assured Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett that the supports were sturdy, they were both wary of the structure. It was not until the end of the project that Ms. Bennett felt comfortable enough to venture to its top.

Initially two teams were formed to paint the mural—a morning team and an afternoon team. However, once the project began, the members of both teams became so invested in the process that they all wanted to work on the painting all day. Thus, after the first day, and after negotiating with the correctional staff, all the participants merged into one large team.

The inmate artists needed to be strongly encouraged to take breaks; they became so engrossed in the art making process that the security staff had to force them to break for lunch. They even needed to be told to get down from the scaffolding and cease working when lightning storms ensued (but they still stayed during rain showers—they justified this by indicating that it was "just a sun shower"). There were days when the temperature exceeded a hundred degrees, and the location of the mural wall meant that the team worked in direct sunlight the majority of the day. During this heat, it was necessary to remind the inmate artists that water was

available and that they should at least stop working long enough to rehydrate.

Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett originally intended for the inmates to work all over the wall, sharing the entire space. However, as the painting progressed, each team member became identified with a specific section and image. For example, one person was known for the hands, one was known for the butterflies, one for the suit, and one for the boat. They developed mutual respect for these identified territories and would be conciliatory when they spoke of working on each other's spaces. For example, when one team member could not make a session one day, and another was asked to complete the section that person was working on to maintain forward progress, he indicated "I can't do that—those are (inmate's name) butterflies." As the painting progressed, the team members learned not only the importance of stepping back to monitor the progress of their work, but also learned the value of receiving and accepting input from others on the team. When an inmate did move back from the image to ascertain how it looked, he would often grab a peer and ask him questions on how it worked or needed improvement. They learned through this process how to work as a team and value the interaction; they learned to negotiate with one another to accomplish the result, while simultaneously learning the value of reflective distancing.

The inmate artists viewed Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett as the facilitators and team leaders throughout the process. However, they were also seen as contributing team members when extra help was needed. Although originally the intention was for the inmates to do all of the painting, the schedule became erratic when team members became unavailable due to institutional administrative and security issues, which at times resulted in facility-wide "lock-downs," or when weather conditions mandated discontinuation. Unfortunately, the mural was being completed during Florida's hurricane season, making the schedule somewhat unpredictable. This resulted in the need for the facilitators to be more involved with the actual painting in order to complete it in a timely manner.

Maintaining boundaries

Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett consulted with the team researcher/faculty supervisor to review institutional negotiations and discuss boundary challenges. However, although Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett clearly understood the boundaries necessary within a prison, it became clear that comprehension was different from experience. Because of the humanizing effect developed during the art process, and the inmate/artists' joyous attitudes while working, it was difficult at times for the facilitators not to be drawn into the camaraderie. Maintaining strong boundaries was a daily concern and the students often felt like they were walking a thin line. Although the officer's presence helped reinforce their respective roles, and the boundaries as defined by these roles, the correctional staff responded positively to their interactions and later stressed what a benefit this process was and how professional Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett were perceived by the institution. The pattern of boundaries maintained a clear course. Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett began the mural project intent on maintaining rigidly clear boundaries. As time progressed, they found themselves relaxing these boundaries, and found themselves drawn into the team's camaraderie. It was not until the end of the project that they were able to reflect on the importance and therapeutic benefit of balancing the two. Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett also recognized that the inmate/artists self-monitored their own boundaries and were able to interact with their female team leaders in an appropriate manner. It seemed clear that they understood what was at stake if the boundaries and rules were violated, and had a vested interest in maintaining the integrity of the project.



Fig. 6. "Transformation through Unity"—the completed 22 ft × 47 ft IMAP mural.

Negotiations between the graduate students and the inmate/artists were constant. This included adjustments to the murals. Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett provided guidance in helping determine what was needed during the painting process, and would even strongly suggest where the inmate/artists could paint during a given session that would best serve the entire mural. If five inmates congregated in the lower right hand corner of the mural but the upper left was neglected, they would direct two members of the congregation to work on the neglected section. Not only did this facilitate interaction, the mural developed as a single integrated painting, despite the territoriality of the inmate/artists. This in turn, facilitated integration between the group members. The mural defined the group as much as the group defined the mural.

The team felt that the finished product maintained and communicated clearly the original theme of "Transformation through Unity" (Fig. 6).

However, the inmate/artists indicated that not only did this mural reflect change, but it also represented freedom. They pointed out that freedom relies on such change and that in order to feel free, they need to examine their lives, and why they are in prison. Once examined, they need to change in order to become "free"—from the prison and from their past mistakes.

Symbolic meaning of the mural

One of the unintended consequences of the mural that the team members reflected on was despite the intent of the message they meant to convey, whoever viewed the mural believed it represented something different. In essence, everyone, staff and inmates, projected onto the completed piece what it represented to them. However, each component of the completed image represented distinct and cohesive meaning to the team. The following descriptions of the components emerged from the team members during the initial meeting, the painting process, and after its completion.

The overall image was about the need for change in their lives. The archway structure represented the prison itself, specifically the faith and character-building aspects, and the need for structure in their environment so they would be able to change. All of the different images in the ovals that are embedded in the arches represented the different programs the prison offered, including art, vocational services, religion, and education.

The line of inmates behind the tall man represented the endless number of inmates within the correctional system—those who are trying to make changes and those who have not yet made the decision to change. The inmates closest to the tall man are further along in the process than those that originate behind the guard tower. The tall man in the foreground represents the actual transformation process, illustrated through the metamorphosis of his

prison uniform into a business suit, an image taken directly from the sketch represented in Fig. 2. He is also “stepping out” of the prison, represented by the archway, to emphasize this change. He is reaching outward with his palms up to indicate that the power of choice is in his own hands and it is up to him to better his life.

Behind the line of inmates is a fence and guard tower that transforms into a tree and brush to further represent transition from prison to outside world. Essentially this means that change may begin in the prison, but it needs to continue once the inmates are released into society. Even for those inmate/artists that were serving life sentences, these symbols encouraged them to transform their own “mentality,” and the need to help spread “the word to others who still have the chance to be released.”

The hand holding the watch on the left side represented the time it takes to facilitate change, and the globe within the watch indicated that even though the inmates may come from all over the world, they are all still of the human race and that they relied on one another in order to succeed. The ship in the background represented a similar sentiment, in that “it takes a crew to run a ship - it takes a crew to make changes.” Finally, the butterflies were also a fitting symbol for change/metamorphosis. The final reflections by the inmate/artists themselves indicated how transformative this process was for them.

Inmate reflections of the finished product

The process of completing the project and working together was illustrative of how much they needed each other to transform. The participants described this process and the mural as a metaphor for life:

Everyday we face this massive white wall - the obstacles in our lives - and how are we going to handle it? We can walk away and ignore the problems, or we can face them and conquer them head on.

Their responses to this project validated all of the team's work that went into coordinating the project. The inmates indicated, “Everything we put on that wall came from within,” and reflected that the guidance from Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett allowed them to “create beyond [their] ability.” They marveled that they were treated like human beings, and that they took pride in what they were accomplishing: “I'm not one to walk around with dirt on my clothes, but I walk around here with paint splattered all over me. . . I'm proud of it!” One inmate indicated that it would be “Hard to go back to regular life but it was still worth it,” and one even indicated that “I'm usually always alone. . . how much I enjoyed the teamwork surprised me.” Ultimately, “This was about more than paint.” Yet, most rewarding was their own ability to reflect on the final product, and relate it back to their own experiences. Perhaps the one inmate who worked on the tall man's suit best summed up the difficulty with what they faced, both through the mural and by being in prison:

The rough way I did the transformation in the pants of the dude reflects how hard that transformation is to make. I couldn't do like how it was in the sketch. . . that was a smooth transition. I had to make it look torn, almost violent, because that's what it feels like. . . *that's* how hard it is to change.

Follow-up and conclusion

On August 9, 2008, there was a formal unveiling, in which staff, inmates, and the families of Ms. Argue and Ms. Bennett attended. The chaplain organized a brief concert by inmates in the chapel, and then a slide show was shown about the development and execution

of the mural. After the chaplain spoke a few words, everyone was brought outside to view the final piece.

Reflections: art therapists as the IMAP coordinators

Although the literature clearly reflects that artist facilitators and art educators have successfully completed such endeavors, it became apparent that art therapists were able to lend something unique to the project. The art therapists were able to monitor closely the dynamics that occurred around the art making—between the participants and within each participant, encourage reflective distancing when necessary, understand and encourage discussions on the latent and manifest content of the artwork, and facilitate the group process that went into planning and executing the finished piece. Significantly, the art therapists maintained the vision of the therapeutic goals—improving socialization, problem-solving skills, and appropriate expression of artistic endeavors—that resulted in greater insight, interaction, and self-esteem than may have otherwise been achieved. The directive provided during the initial group session—*think about who you are and what you have to say*—facilitated therapeutic development and self-reflection. The initial brainstorming sessions were conducted as group art therapy sessions, resulting in the successful integration of the participants' ideas and problem-solving processes. Ultimately, all of these details strongly suggest that although other artists and educators would have been successful in completing the final *product*, the art therapists facilitated greater therapeutic development during the art making *process*. Unfortunately, no comparative research exists that would elucidate whether the art therapist was indeed more effective, and whether it was this particular project that brought about such positive responses or if a similar communal project would have similar benefits. Regardless, each inmate that took part in this project emerged with a greater sense of self and accomplishment, feelings necessary to facilitate healthy ego development. The necessary formal and informal negotiations that were conducted on a daily basis ultimately succeeded in producing a major product that demonstrated the value and benefits of art for this population.

Postscript

Shortly after its completion, a display presenting the progression of the mural, complete with sketches and photos, was placed in the Department of State Division of Cultural Affairs Gallery for two months as a corner piece for an Arts in Corrections exhibition. Based on the success of this mural, the IMAP team has been commissioned to work with jail inmates in a small community in South Georgia to complete a mural on a downtown mural and another IMAP team has been established for a separate IMAP project with a women's prison in rural North Florida.

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