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# Metro&Northwest

COMMENTARY

## Ex-inmates share dark pasts, brighter futures



**Samantha Swindler**

James Demry stood in front of the classroom whiteboard, looked down at the notebook in his hands and began to read.

His writing instructor gently stopped him.

"Be a little louder and a little slower," she said.

He looked up, breathed deep, and began again.

"Growing up I never knew my parents," he said. "I was raised by my grandparents until age 6 when my grandmother passed away from cancer."

He spoke about being separated from his older siblings in a foster home and how his fear and frustration came out as aggression. He said he went searching for a family and found the closest approximation with a gang in Minneapolis and, later, in Portland.

In 1988, Demry was a promising basketball star, fresh off the Class AAA state championship run with Grant High School, when he was arrested for his role in the first fatal drive-by shooting to occur in the Pacific Northwest.

He was 17.

Demry is one of four men and five women who will share their stories during "Shaping a Future: Life After Prison," a collection of monologues to be performed Sunday at Portland's First Unitarian Church.

Writing instructor Carol Imani received a \$6,462 Regional Arts & Culture Council grant for the project, which included a \$250 stipend for those who wrote and shared their stories. Since July, the group has met at the church for writing workshops and practice readings.

"These are inspiring and joyous stories," Imani said. "They are not dark stories. They certainly have dark elements, but they're stories of hope and possibility."

They are stories told with poetic voices.

Dawn Swan, writing about a hard life growing up on the Umatilla Reservation near Pendleton, described rape, drug abuse, violence and a kind of penetrating hopelessness.



**James Demry, who served time in prison for his role in Portland's first drive-by shooting death in 1988, speaks during a writing workshop.** *Samantha Swindler, staff*

"I felt as if oppression ran so deep across the land, it seemed as if it was in the ground," she wrote.

Jackie Whitt and her mom, Judy Whitt, have both written their stories, a process Jackie described as "so stressful and hard and challenging, but it's so worth it."

The project forced her to have candid conversations with her mother about her childhood, the neglect she suffered, and how she felt she was unprepared to make it in the world.

"Every memory I have my mom was using, she was getting beat, she was in and out of prison," Jackie said. "I talk about how my mom's relapse caused me to have to be on my own at age 15, and I lived out of a storage unit for a year."

Through this process, Judy said she's come to terms with how much her life affected her daughter.

"As much as it makes me shudder, it's

true," Judy said of Jackie's account. "I really thought it didn't affect her like it did. I thought she got through it pretty good. I'm sure that's a lie that I told myself to make myself feel better, but I believed it at the time. I was so into my addiction and my dysfunction."

Crystal Magaña served 16 years for manslaughter. She, too, described a traumatic childhood.

"By age 11 I began running away as DHS and Washington State was involved but no help," she wrote. "At age 14 I moved to Portland with a cousin whose home was safe and loving. This wasn't normal to me and quickly I gravitated to a man who was 10 years older than me and within six months forced me into a life of prostitution filled with horrific abuse."

She speaks quickly but confidently about her life before, during and after prison. Magaña was paroled on June 27, 2016, and

### Shaping a Future: Life After Prison

**When:** 1 p.m. Sunday; a reception will follow the performance at 4 p.m.

**Where:** Eliot Chapel at First Unitarian Church, 1211 S.W. Main St.

**Cost:** Tickets are free, but donations are accepted to benefit the church, which provided the event and writing workshop space for the project.

**More information:** [kfbaguette@gmail.com](mailto:kfbaguette@gmail.com)

today is an apprentice ironworker for Northwest Local 29. She said she loves working with her hands and being outside.

"I paroled at 35. I have no 401(k), no retirement, nothing, so what am I going to get into that's going to build up money quick?" she said. "I'm going to have a retirement. I'm going to be able to survive on my own."

Today, Swan works as a flagger and is studying to become a dental assistant.

Jackie Whitt is an electrician.

Demby works as a mentor with the Bridges to Change program.

That's the abbreviated version of their successes, but these stories contain relapses, rearrests, bad choices and tragic consequences.

These paths to redemption aren't straight and narrow.

But we need to hear these stories to understand why people ended up in prison and what supports we can put in place to both prevent crime and rehabilitate former criminals. These stories present a fuller picture of lives that can't simply be thrown away.

"People need to understand that these people in prison are going to be their neighbors. They're going to be a part of their community. Their kids are going to be going to the same school as their children or grandchildren," Magaña said. "Maybe you want to come and get to know us and understand who we really are."

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