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## Fairfax inmates create art with help of volunteer art teacher

By Noelle Riddle / Special to the Fairfax County Times  
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Courtesy Photo

According to a report from the Fairfax County Government, in 2016, there were 18,436 individuals booked in the Adult Detention Center (ADC) in Fairfax, with an average daily inmate population of 1,035 people.

Kelli Schollard-Sincock has a passion for serving the inmates of the county, and feels they are often overlooked. Schollard-Sincock wanted to change this and use her passion for art to create a program with the Fairfax County Sherriff's Office to provide art classes at the ADC in 2017. "My initial inspiration to teach art to the incarcerated began years ago with a trip to the Lorton Arts Center. They held a lecture series that featured original artwork from past prisoners and the guards who worked there," said Schollard-Sincock. "I was absolutely blown away by the quality of the artwork and found it extraordinarily inspiring. My friend turned to me during the presentation and said, 'You should do that, you should teach art in jail.'"

Schollard-Sincock kept the idea of teaching inmates as a possibility in mind, until her passion fueled her to do more than just think about it. "Years later I found myself quite upset about a governmental effort to cut the funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. I decided to turn my anger towards something more productive and reached out to the Alexandria Detention Center, that was the beginning," said Schollard-Sincock. "For 6 months I taught art at the ADC and developed my program from scratch. Once I felt I had an organized and effective program I reached out to the Fairfax County Adult Detention Center to see if they would be interested in art classes as well. They said yes."

The inmates could earn time in Schollard-Sincock's classes if they behaved well both inside and outside of the art class. The demand grew so large that Schollard-Sincock began putting on three different classes a week for different inmates, with an average of 25 inmates per class. There even was a waiting list to get into her classes due to popularity.

Many of the inmates had no prior experience with art, but that did not stop the program from becoming a success. The artist worked hard to gather enough donated supplies to put on the art class for the inmates. "Over the years I experimented with different art techniques, but as you can imagine the types of tools and supplies you can bring into a jail setting is limited for the safety of everyone, myself included," said Schollard-Sincock. "We primarily stuck to drawing, painting and collage work. Over time I realized that there was a huge interest in drawing the human face by the majority of my students. They often drew portraits of their loved ones and sent them home."

Some of the inmate's art even got to be viewed by the public and was displayed in the Torpedo Factory Art Center in Alexandria in 2018. "Most people think that the art that inmates want to do is more focused on emotional explorations of their current situation, but what I found was that my

students were eager to actually learn hands-on, foundational, drawing and painting skills,” Schollard-Sincock said. “I witnessed people who had extraordinary talents that had absolutely no idea because no one had ever taken the time to work with them.”

While COVID has put programs like Schollard-Sincock’s on pause, there is hope that one day the inmates can resume their beloved art classes again. The opportunities to serve those in the jail extends beyond art programs, as well. “There are many ways that people can get involved. Most jails, detention centers or transition home have rehabilitative programs and they often rely on volunteers for a variety of classes,” Schollard-Sincock said. “I also recommend that people think about what it is they themselves are passionate about, what they do for their own emotional well-being, and offer to teach those skills within the facility’s programs. At the Fairfax County Adult Detention Center there were several wonderful volunteers giving their time once a week to teach classes, such as interviewing skills, money management, poetry, yoga, music, reading and writing, stress management and more.”

Schollard-Sincock was able to help inmates progress their art skills while in jail, but once they were released, they still wanted to learn more about art and she was happy to oblige. “As my program progressed, I was often asked by my students how they could continue working with me once they were released,” said Schollard-Sincock. “So, in 2019 I established an outside studio located across the street from the jail. Those students who did exceptionally well in my classroom and showed artist promise were invited to continue their art training outside of the jail once a week, free of charge.”

While Schollard-Sincock was helping the inmates grow their artistic skills, she experienced personal growth from running the program. “There are so many things that are rewarding doing this work. The first day I walked into the jail classroom I was terrified. It was just me in a classroom with 25 male students, the door closed and locked, with deputies on the outside,” Schollard-Sincock said. “But it only took a couple of minutes in a room full of eager faces to understand the importance of this work and I immediately felt at ease. Every single one of my students was so excited to learn and was kind and friendly. Every single one was willing to try.”

The artist is passionate not only about giving back to the underserved population of inmates, but spreading awareness and education about art. “When I began this effort, I had a hunch that an enormous amount of our population within the United States has been failed by an educational system that downgrades, or even eliminates, arts programs within our schools,” Schollard-Sincock

said. “Our nation’s over-emphasis on science, math and technology, has literally left half of our nation hungry to learn. I believe we have a nation full of eager minds and capable hands that are being underserved.”

All Schollard-Sincock’s hard work with the inmates is being honored with an award from ArtsFairfax for her contribution to arts and culture in the community and her dedication to volunteering with an often-underserved population. She is grateful for the support and recognition her program has received from the community. “I would really like to express my deepest gratitude to Sheriff Stacey Kincaid for supporting programs like mine and for her continued effort to help heal our community. I would also like to thank the ArtsFairfax organization for selecting me as the 2020 recipient of the Arts Education Award for Fairfax County for an individual teacher,” Schollard-Sincock said. “The support of our community has been the single biggest driving force of my ability to keep this program running for the last 4 years. I am deeply indebted to all who have supported me.”