



The pursuit of happiness at the Stafford Creek Corrections Center

by Joslyn Trivett MARCH 2ND, 2018 AT 5:19 PM

Finding enlightenment and environmental leadership inside prison walls

In my professional life, my most satisfying experiences have been inside prisons. As part of a team of 10-12 staff of The Evergreen State College, I work with incarcerated individuals and corrections staff members in dozens of ecological conservation and environmental education programs in Washington state prisons.

In these programs, I have witnessed breathtaking inspiration, bravery, and creativity. Corrections staff and incarcerated individuals have offered attention and inventiveness that are rare in any other setting. It is not an exaggeration to say that discussions inside prison can be more progressive and productive than discussions in my Olympia circles. People in prison inform and improve my worldview, and offer real hope for meeting environmental challenges.

Happiness through enlightenment

Here I will tell a story of enlightenment by describing a climate change symposium at Stafford Creek Corrections Center (Stafford Creek) in Aberdeen, Washington. The idea originated with a session in Sustainability in Prison Project's environmental lecture and workshop series at the prison. We facilitated a critical discussion of the program scope and focus, and solicited ideas for improvements and priorities. Several students told us that they wanted to learn more about the social and political facets of climate change—complex and compelling topics. I envisioned a forum for an extended exploration of climate change, in which they could learn more from experts...and the experts could learn from them.

Building resilience

On the morning of October 18th, 2017, we packed the visit room at Stafford Creek for our first Climate Change Symposium; in attendance were 91 incarcerated students, several prison staff members, and most of the SPP-Evergreen team. We had five hours to devote to climate change which felt like a luxury, but still barely enough time to sample the topic. Our focus was informing and empowering everyone in the room to take positive action and build personal and community resilience.

Those who faced life-altering disruption and persevered

I expect climate change to be enormously disruptive to the status quo. I believe that most people currently working on responses to climate change are like me: comfortable, privileged Americans who don't know enough about change and adaptation to grasp



A student pens the details for the group's selected climate change actions. Photo by Ricky Osborne.

what's necessary for climate resilience. As I see it, environmental students and practitioners at Stafford Creek have the kind of experience and insight that the climate movement really needs: they have faced life-altering disruption, and figured out how to persevere and create positives; they embody resilience every day. Also, I see that these same folks could gain from their involvement: as they play a part in re-creating culture, they might be more widely recognized as leaders.

Playing with ideas

The first guest experts were Mike Burnham and Katrina Van Every from Thurston Regional Planning Council. They described a framework for region-wide planning and action for climate change resilience, and then gave us the chance to practice. We split into groups of eight to ten individuals and were charged with planning for a hypothetical community. We prioritized actions, and for our top choices we assigned implementers and identified expected benefits

and costs. The exercise gave us tools for creative, discerning leadership in our own communities.



The students at Stafford Creek are the most engaged I have ever experienced. Photo by Ricky Osborne.

We next heard a presentation from Toby Erhart, an incarcerated man who has worked in SPP’s prairie conservation nursery and has been active in other environmental programs. He told his story of his evolving environmental awareness. He described what climate change means to him now, and actions and choices he believes can create sustainable change. He asked for input from his peers in the audience, and warmly received their reactions and ideas.

Not lost causes, not leaving people behind

The final presentation came from three members of Got Green, Johnny Mao, Johnny Fikru, and James Williams. Their presentation, and the discussion and input that followed, were the day’s most striking and stirring. Their presentation title, *They Tried to Bury Us, But They Didn’t Know We Were Seeds*, made an immediate and lasting impression; when we debriefed the next day, a student repeated those words, and followed with, “I believe that...we’re not lost causes.”

James Williams led with, “There’s a lot of things wrong with the world today, a lot of things that need to be different, and we’re going to talk about how to get there and not leave people behind.” He described fostering environmental leadership in south Seattle

among people of color and of lower income, and bringing green economy benefits to those communities as well. A more critical student asked what south Seattle programs have to do with people in prison, and James' response was "You are still my community." It is difficult to describe the surprise and impact of those words in a prison setting. Many incarcerated people say they feel "thrown away" by society. This message of inclusion seemed to resonate widely; the room crackled with new hope.

Change starts with empathy

Coming back together, we asked for questions and observations from anyone willing to share. Dozens of incarcerated students volunteered to share their insights and new resolves. While I make a general practice of transcribing impressive quotes and input, this time I was so taken with both the form and the content of what was said that I failed to write more than a few phrases: "We're talking about affecting change, and it starts with empathy." "We can't say what the problem is without being part of the solution." It was an outpouring of generosity and self-awareness. Again and again, the students talked about how the challenges of climate change inspired their caring for others, and what they wanted to do to meet those challenges.

I felt so lucky, so happy to take part in the symposium's extraordinary mixing of ideas, expertise, and insight. It was a supremely life-affirming event, and I will carry its inspirations to the challenges and opportunities ahead.

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A student signals that he has something to share. Photo by Ricky Osborne.