



Connect!

Freedom Project Newsletter

Supporting the transformation of prisoners into peacemakers

January 2014

Did you know?

- In 2012, Washington State had a prison population of 17,808; 16,420 men, 1,388 women.
- A prisoner costs the state \$33,283 per year.
- The black/white ratio is 6.4:1.
- Since 2000, the number of prisoners serving life-without-parole sentences in Washington State has increased from 412 to 637.
- According to a 2008 Washington State Department of Corrections report, 37% of offenders returned to prison within 5 years of their release. That same report found that recidivism for prisoners who attended Freedom Project training was 21%.

Freedom Project is a work in progress

By Fran Howard, outgoing board president

It has been my privilege to serve as board president since 2007. At times it has been exhausting work, always guided by a steady commitment.

We all love success stories, but our co-founder Lucy Leu, paraphrasing Mother Theresa, once said, "We are not called to be successful; we are called to be faithful." After 6 years on the board I can say that we have remained faithful, even in the face of setbacks. How could we give up when our students told us in their evaluations about their life-changing experiences?

"This program has made me look inside myself," wrote one of the 24 men, for example, who attended a workshop last November at Twin Rivers. "I was allowed to tell my story and what has been in my heart," said another.

I plan to continue my work with the Freedom Project with outreach and work in the prisons. During my 11 years as a prison volunteer I have had so many experiences that changed my views and attitudes. I did not expect, for example, the important role that prisoners with life sentences could have in our classrooms. I had thought that our training should prepare returnees, give them coping skills for re-entry. I didn't expect lifers to become tutors and mentors to the younger inmates, admonishing them time and again, "When you leave, I don't ever want to see you back here!"

Over the years I also learned how important it is for prisoners to feel that they matter. Early on I introduced an exercise in which we work in pairs, taking turns to talk and to listen. Once I was paired with a prisoner who had been very detached. He told me that in the 20-plus years of his incarceration he had never had a visitor or a letter from anyone. Sharing this took courage; it allowed him to get in touch with the enormity of his pain and feeling of worthlessness. We sat in silence, yet remained connected. I could feel him release his pain; he felt understood and valued in a way he had not experienced in years.

The exercise reminded me of the power of empathic listening and how we are not called to fix anyone, but to be truly present. That is the power and the gift of Freedom Project.

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A short history of Freedom Project

Lucy Leu encountered Dr. Marshall Rosenberg for the first time in 1995 in a Seattle church basement. The founder of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) talked about truth and compassion in human relations and explained how we can learn to process this language.

He outlined the four components of NVC: Observation, Feelings, Needs, and Requests. He gave an example of how the components might be expressed: "A mother could say, 'Felix, when I see two balls of soiled socks under the coffee table and another three next to the TV, I feel irritated because I need more order in our common area. Would you be willing to put your socks into the washing machine or in your room?'"

Marshall, a clinical psychologist, talked about the common difficulty in identifying our feelings and needs, but insisted that we can learn to use the feelings and needs vocabulary. And while we can learn to express ourselves honestly, we can also learn to listen to others with our whole being. Once our communication is guided by compassion, we speak the language of the heart, Marshall explained. To let it all sink in, he reached for his guitar and sang one of his songs, "*I want to live compassionately, each and ev'ry opportunity...*"

Lucy, a Harvard-trained educator, listened and thought, "This is what I've been looking for all my life." She subsequently signed up for an intensive NVC course in Atlanta and started to gather supporters of NVC in the Seattle area.

By the time Marshall returned to Seattle in 1998, Lucy had helped organize a NW Compassionate Communication organization with a cadre of trainers and volunteers. (Nonviolent and Compassionate are interchangeable terms, NVC is the usual abbreviation.)

During that visit Monica Wood, who had been facilitating Alternatives to Violence workshops at Monroe Correctional Complex, invited Marshall to visit the prison. Lucy came along. Rusty Thomas, an inmate at the time, was moved by the NVC message and realized how it could drastically improve his life and that of those around him. "You must come back!" he urged the visitors. Lucy responded to the plea by coming back again and again—for the next 10 years.

Together with Rusty she developed ongoing courses at the Monroe prisons; those courses became the foundation of Freedom Project. On Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in January of 2001, Freedom Project was officially launched and by 2006 had attained tax-exempt non-profit status.

In addition to NVC courses and workshops, Freedom Project introduced Mindfulness Meditation into the prisons.

Mindfulness (a practice adapted from Buddhism for today's living) teaches us to pay attention to the present moment by focusing on our body and breath, letting them be just as they are. It is an especially powerful tool when dealing with anxiety, an ever-present mindset at the prison (see *Silent Night*, p. 3). Mindfulness can interrupt catastrophic thoughts and projections by recognizing that they are just thoughts. Instead of buying into these thoughts, we can let them go, always returning to the present moment.

In 2013 Freedom Project issued certificates to 480 prisoners (286 men and 194 women) who completed NVC and Mindfulness classes and workshops at the following Washington State prisons: Twin Rivers Unit and the Minimum Security Unit at Monroe Correctional Complex, the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Gig Harbor and Mission Creek Corrections Center for Women in Belfair.

Interested in NVC?

Here is a list of classes in our area

For more information contact info@nwcompass.org, visit the Northwest Compassionate Communication website www.nwcompass.org or call (206) 653 4265.

Exploring Nonviolence (Janice Eng)

Thursday evenings 2/6, 2/20, 3/6, 3/20, 4/3/2014
310 - 21st Ave E, Seattle 98112

NVC Basics (Karl Steyaert)

10:00 AM to 5:00 PM Saturday, 2/22/2014
628 12th Ave E (Capitol Hill), Seattle

Radical Acceptance (Kathleen Macferran)

12:00 to 3:00 PM 2/25, 3/4, 3/11/2014
(Bainbridge Island home)

Consciousness in Action (Karl Steyaert)

9:00 AM to 5:00 PM Saturday-Sunday, 3/1 to 3/2/2014
(Capitol Hill) Seattle

Foundations of Nonviolent

Communication (Liv Monroe)

7:00 to 9:30 PM Thursdays, 3/27 to 4/24/2014
5 Weeks (Olympia, WA)

Four components of NVC

1. Observation
2. Feelings
3. Needs
4. Requests

'I learned that I have choices,' says returnee

Interviewed by Valerie Kreutzer

In 1999, into his second year of an 8 ½- year sentence, he decided to sign up for a Nonviolent Communication (NVC) workshop at the Twin Rivers prison.

"In prison you have two choices: to abuse or be abused," he explains. "The culture was sterile, it taught you to conform. Nobody cared who I was, and I had lost most contact with people outside. I felt very isolated. And when I came to the workshop, here was this little Asian-American woman who stepped towards me and said, 'Welcome, I'm glad you could come.' She looked me in the eye and allowed me to drop my guard a little.

"I learned that I have choices, that there is no need to give up who I am," he explains. "At the workshop I realized that I can make choices that move me forward. I also learned that I need to take responsibility for my choices and accept the consequences. I stopped being a victim."

Realizing his choices and offering choices to others dissolved tension, he observed. "For example, I may be watching TV and this big guy walks in and says, 'You're sitting in my chair.' I can choose to fight and perhaps get caught and end up in the hole, or I can move, or I can say, 'Just let me finish this show and you can get your chair back.' It works every time, whether in the yard or with the celly.

"I also learned to accept my feelings, how to deal with my anger, to take responsibility for the pain I caused, and really feel the pain rather than run away from it like an addict."

As soon as he was eligible, he returned to Monroe as a volunteer to assist in an ongoing class where prisoners study Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication* chapter-by-chapter.

"It was very strange coming back," he recalls. "In a way it was like coming home, it was so familiar. I also felt—icky," he adds with a laugh. "And it was wonderful because they knew who I was. I still knew about 10 percent of the participants, and I knew where they were coming from."

Note: To protect their privacy, names of prisoners and returnees are omitted or changed.

A silent night in prison

By Sue McCarthy

On the day after Christmas a Freedom Project facilitator asked a group of women at the prison in Gig Harbor, "What can you appreciate about yourself today?" Cathy, a bubbly 21-year-old who had landed in the segregation unit for fighting, offered a story from her previous night.

She told us about Margaret in the cell next to hers. Margaret struggled with recurring nightmares in which she relived her trauma of being raped. Every night as soon as she fell asleep, the nightmares would come back and Margaret would alternate between crying, screaming, and shouting obscenities, keeping everyone awake.

Cathy's first impulse was to yell at Margaret, "Shut the f---- up, b----!" But the nightmares continued. So, after several sleepless nights, Cathy tried to apply a tool from her Mindfulness class.

Before lights out, she called to Margaret, "Listen, I've got something for you."

Curious, Margaret asked, "What's that?"

"I've got a meditation for you."

"Medication? Sure, I'll take some of that."

"No, no. It's a meditation," Cathy laughed.

"No, thanks. That won't help," said Margaret.

Cathy persisted. "You're gonna get it anyway. Listen to this." And Cathy proceeded to read a loving kindness meditation that she had learned from Tami, a Freedom Project volunteer who had once been locked up at the same prison. Cathy started reciting, "*May I be filled with loving kindness, may I be well....*" For the first time in several days Margaret's nightmares did not return, and everyone around her had a peaceful night. It was Christmas.

You're invited to Community Circle

Returnees and supporters are invited to join Freedom Project's Community Circle on the 1st and 3rd Tuesday in February, 6-8 p.m.

WHERE: Community Circle will be held at the Compass Housing Alliance, Nyer Urness Home, 1753 NW 56th St, one block north of Market Street in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood. To gain access, please inform the receptionist through the outside speaker that you are attending Freedom Project Community Circle. For further information, call Freedom Project office: 206-325-5678.

TRANSPORTATION: If you would like to carpool, let us know your address, so we can get you in touch with others in your neighborhood. Bus routes #44 and Rapid Ride D are convenient to the location.

RSVP: Please let us know if you plan to attend or if you are interested in attending in the future.

'They are hungry for learning,' says volunteer

Interviewed by Valerie Kreutzer

In 2006, a friend gave Steve Cleaves a copy of Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication*. "It sang to my heart," Steve recalls. "This is the way I want to live," he thought. He enrolled in Nonviolent Communication (NVC) courses. Four years later Kathleen Macferran, one of his trainers, asked if he would be interested in volunteering in the prisons.

"Initially I felt a resistance," Steve recalls. "In our culture we have stereotypes about the prison population, but once I decided to enter I learned that they are just like you and me. They have the same feelings, they face similar choices; the difference is that they made choices that did not meet their needs. That's why they are in prison."

For the past 3 years, Steve has volunteered at the Monroe prisons.

"I'm not teaching them. I only provide opportunities for them to learn," he insists. "I urge them to learn from their personal experiences. I'm just amazed how hungry they are for this type of learning. I'm especially moved when they share everyday stories of trying to solve conflicts, by risking their lives or getting beaten up. I'm so grateful to hear how they try to prevent violence by making personal connections.

"The hard part of leading in the prison is the environment. You never know who's going to show up this week. It's always a mix of experienced practitioners and newcomers who need a crash course before there is a level of awareness in the room to let us go deeper. And it's also hard to accomplish much in such a short time. I go in with an agenda and a plan and often I don't get through the material."

This year Steve co-facilitates a Wednesday night class; it means leaving the house at 5 p.m., returning 4 hours later. He also participates in workshops and leadership training. For a recently retired contractor and newly married man with major family responsibilities, Steve's involvement in Freedom Project is a major commitment.

What keeps him going? "The men are so extremely grateful to us volunteers; they count on us coming back."

A matching gift increases the value of your donation

A long-time supporter of Freedom Project has pledged to match 2:1 all donations made in 2014, up to \$10,000. If you donate \$100, Freedom Project will receive an additional \$200 from this benefactor. Your donation, no matter how big or small, is important to Freedom Project and the people our programs serve. So please take a few moments to complete the form below and send us a check or visit our web site to donate on-line. Just click on the orange Donate Now button in the top right corner of the home page. We want to thank all our supporters for their contributions of time, energy, and financial resources. Your contributions support the transformation of prisoners into peacemakers.

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