PERFORMING WITH/IN PRISON

Dr. Anita Rich

Project:
"Performing With/In Prison " is a collaboration between EMU and the Woodland Correctional Facility, a high security mental health correctional institution. Dr. Rich has worked with Diane Kneffel, music therapist, using performance at this location as well as the Huron Valley Men’s Prison over the last few years (starting in 2008). In fact, Anita and three EMU students (current and alumni) have continually worked there volunteering their time, expertise, and service. Now that our CASL grant is complete and theatre group is on break for summer, we have agreed to help this new group which just started at the prison because many of our theatre men and pursuing their writing and working in a new writing group that Diane is co-facilitating.

This past semester we designed, revised, and implemented bi-weekly performative workshops in for a group of inmates exposing the men to various forms of theatre, including Playback Theatre, Image Theatre, numerous improvisational/trust exercises, as well as literature. The experience culminated in a performance offered for correction officers, the warden, staff, and administrators. Also, for the first time ever, we received clearance and offered a dress rehearsal for other inmates.

The production was an original piece of theatre generated by EMU students and the inmates but performed solely by the menTrue to the heart of Service-Learning, this dialogic partnership in which both university affiliates and community members continued to grow as everyone reaped benefits. The warden and officials were extremely impressed with Eastern’s process as well as product and here is just one excerpt of a recent email sent by the community partner after our public showing:

I got a lot of positive feedback this week from staff members at the show! Even the one prisoner sitting in the audience (from Creative Writing Group) had very positive things to say. The staff who came for the first time were really impressed and amazed that this functioning level can “organize” so well. I try to tell them that my experience shows mental functioning does not always reflect creative abilities. It's amazing that I have to “educate” mental health professionals about how some of the most creative musicians, artists, dancers and theater people have all suffered some level of mental disorder. I just thought that would be common knowledge! But they were all really interested and amazed and want to know when the next performance will be!!