

## Episode 56 Katherine Vockins

Hello and welcome to Episode 56 of the decarceration nation podcast, a podcast about radically reimagining America's criminal justice system. I'm Josh Hoe, among other things, I'm formerly incarcerated freelance writer, Criminal Justice firm advocate and the author of the book writing your own best story addiction and living hope. We'll get to my interview with Katherine Vockins in just a second. But first the news:

I was thrilled to be invited to the celebration of second chances event hosted by the coalition of public safety and Kentucky this weekend. The people who did that do this work really hard and it's often very thankless work and it was really nice to get to spend a few days just celebrating our victories. Talking about our struggles together and having some fun with some of the people that I rarely see face to face, but really enjoy. It was great. Spend some time with friends like Jessica Jackson, Brett Tolman, Jason Pie, David Safavian, Guy Hamilton-Smith, Guy Hamilton-Smith's mom, and Guy Hamilton Smith's wife Laura. Some of the people I was super happy to meet for the first time included the amazing Matthew Charles, and also Rob Perez, the owner of DV8 Kitchen, which is a really amazing business helping provide opportunities for people in recovery, many of whom are formerly incarcerated themselves. This businesses in Lexington, Kentucky so if you're ever in Lexington, make sure and stop by DV8 kitchen. It's amazing food.

I hope everyone saw Episode Two of the redemption project last night. If you didn't, you should watch it on CNN go or through your streaming service. It was really powerful and emotional episode but also incredibly important. If you care about alternatives to incarceration, you should certainly be watching the redemption project Sundays at 9pm. I know that's the same time as Game of Thrones, but as I've been saying lately, and I write Recaps of Game of Thrones, redemption before dragons, so you know watch redemption project then go to your streaming service and watch Game of Thrones.

And other news I'm also really angry about the Florida Legislature did to go amendment four, which was the ballot initiative that allowed formerly incarcerated people to vote. The legislation that passed last last week would only allow people to become Rhan franchised if they pay off their often massive criminal justice debt in advance. Folks facing this can appeal to a court to get it waived or have it converted into community service. But this is exactly the kind of hoop that snares almost everyone that is covered by this law and all other laws like it, the point of this laws to make it much harder for formerly incarcerated people to vote, and most of the people who are affected or people of color. Let me read a quote from an old article about the impact of this. This is from Mark Mauer. Today an estimated 5.3 million persons are ineligible to vote as result of a current or previous felony conviction. The scale of disenfranchisement is now so broad that is likely to be influencing electoral outcomes. The historic 2000 presidential election was decided by a mere 537 votes the state of Florida at the same time, Florida had one of the most powerful restrictive disenfranchisement laws in the country. And on the day of the election, an estimated 600,000 formerly incarcerated people were ineligible to vote. Holy cow. I don't

support the felon language but the rest of that is incredibly powerful. Okay, on that sad note, let's get to my interview with Katherine Vockins.

Katherine Vockins is the founder and executive director of rehabilitation for the arts. She founded RT in 1996 at Simpson correctional facility and continues to lead both RGA and prison community national Incorporated. Katherine was awarded an honorary doctorate he made letters by State University of New York purchase for her prison work has been named Huffington Post Person of the day, a Westchester County thought leader and Chavez day hero. rehabilitation through the arts offers classes for 200 incarcerated men and women six days per week throughout the year. Welcome to the Decarceration Nation Podcast, Katherine.

I'm glad to be here. Joshua, thank you for the invitation. I look forward to talking with you.

Great. So I'm assuming that you did not start out in your life or career doing prison work. So where did you start? How did you get from where you started? All the way to Sing Sing in 1996?

Well, that's a really interesting question. Let me see if I can condense it. So I am trained as an international marketing and management person, and spent most of my younger careers in a triangle between the United States Europe and Asia, working for people like American Express and JC Penney doing product development and design. My partner who actually ended up being my husband, and was part of our independent consulting organization, and he had what I think you could classically call a midlife correction at some point, and decided that he could no longer do international business that he needed to do something more meaningful in his life. And he ended up digging wells in Nicaragua and working with the homeless on the streets of New York, and eventually went back to get his advanced degree at New York Theological Seminary in Manhattan. So he, you know, has his PhD in ministry. And he ended up teaching as a volunteer in the only master's program in the country behind bars. And that's it sinks in Correctional Facility in Ossining, New York. And that is underwritten by New York Theological Seminary. So that's that was the beginning of his coming home and telling me about how amazing the people were behind the walls and how how they're missing Mrs. stereotypes that we have about people who are incarcerated need to be changed. And he was so passionate about what he felt about the students in his class, that I went in on a couple of occasions, also with other people to meet his class and to talk philosophically about who they were, what they were doing, and what it did was really blow away the myths and stereotypes that I think all of us, middle class Caucasians carry about people who are behind the walls because that is so often agitated by media. So after having had this kind of interesting experiences meeting his students blowing away these thoughts that many of us have, whether we recognize it or not, I was at the graduation of three or four months later, at same thing sitting with his teaching assistant, who was a man doing a lot of years in prison and eventually died in prison. And I asked how to Mohammed was there any theater going on at Sing, sing? And he said, not for the last decade? I do not know to this day while I asked. But after asking, he said, Can you come back and talk to us, which I did. Three weeks later, I sat in a room with eight men. They wanted to write a play about what they knew the most about their hood violence. chasing money, women drugs, but

they also wanted to write about the power of the human spirit to transform that became a play that I was asked to help them launch at Sing Sing, and eventually to get approval from the Department of Corrections central office in Albany to allow us Theatre Workshop program just started singing in 1996. That's the story.

So you say that you don't know why you asked the question. But did you have any background in theater or were you just a fan or How did you know? How did that?

That's a good question. I will very shallow background I was in community theater. I was in school and in school, I did some theater, but it wasn't as though I wanted to be in theater. I mean, I had been both a producer and an actor and a stagehand but it wasn't something that was burning in me but I you know, have had it, leaning towards it. And I To this day, I think it was spirit at work. I have no idea why I asked that question. Although I think watching some of the men in his class, be able to deliver the way they delivered, made me realize that there was a lot of talent behind the walls, but not something that I was planning to do at all. And how did you get kind of from that starting point to where it became a program and then a, you know, a larger organization. So we started in 19, Fall of 1996, to take this play, and see if we could produce it. So the first thing I had to do was to get permission from New York State Department of Corrections and syncing to allow some kind of a Theatre Workshop to actually exist and things like so we did that and that got launched in the fall of 1996. And then, this is again, the called synchronicity. But everyone that I needed to help launch this program appeared in various ways. Sitting on a train on my way to Manhattan. I met someone who was the head of the local community theater I told him about what I was doing. He said I'd love to join you. He brought a friend in who was also a director slash actor. I was on a tour of Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, met a woman there who had her advanced degree from theatre studies and was interested also in joining me. And within three months, there was a cast of four of us who helped to start this first production that became Theatre Workshop at same thing for a couple of years. And then along the way, the men began to say things like, well, this isn't just about theatre. This is really about changing lives. Because between the workshops, and the kind of humanitarian way we approached, working with people in prison, and the way the men reacted to it led to them saying this is more about rehabilitation is about doing theatre and they change the name to rehabilitation through the arts. We encourage rated in the year 2000 as a 501 c three nonprofit organization, and has been building ever since in 2003. Same thing closed their medium security nx and set 600 of the medium security people to different facilities throughout the mid Hudson River range. And with that basically seeded like in harvesting and seeding the idea of having the program in multiple prisons. So between 2003 and 2007 we put the program in for more facilities, train Haven, Bedford Hills correctional facility for women, Fishkill and would burn both of those are medium securities. That's how we grew to where we are elite basically today. We 10 years later, we have of course intensified the size of the program, the number of participants we now serve 200 incarcerated men and women at any given time in the state of New York in five maximum medium facilities and we're opening our six this summer. So we've had to grow. We've had to basically learn how to do serious fundraising. I mean, as I said, I'm a I am a profit minded person. So fundraising was not necessarily the first

priority for me, but I quickly learned how we had to work in order to keep the program going. So that's a brief look at the past 22 years.

And how it's not you don't just do theatre now. Right? You also do several other programs, I think was writing and visual arts is that correct? and dance too.

Right. Right. We of course, theatre became the sort of the core of our program mainly because theatre offers incredibly different ways to gain life skills. RGA is not about making actors or dancers and musicians. It's about using the arts as vehicles to build critical life skills and so today, in addition to theatre. We also do creative arts workshops and performances in dance, vocal training, music, creative writing, slam poetry, and visual art.

So there's actually been some studies, I think, two studies that have supported the success of this approach and math and the way that you're doing things. Is that correct?

That's correct. The in both cases, the studies were done with the New York State Department of Corrections research department. The first study was done by John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and that proved that our members have better disciplinary records. They are locked down less often for less serious infractions. They have better coping and anger management skills, compared to a perfectly matched control group. And the second study done by SUNY Purchase College proved that RGA is a catalyst for learning. Our members finish their high school equivalency diplomas faster in their incarceration. And were available in prisons, enter college and do better than another control matched group. So those are the two studies. Those are quantitative published research studies. We also have done a qualitative one in which we follow those members of ours who are paroled or released to the Metropolitan New York area. And after following 125 of them for over three years, we know that our recidivism rate is less than 7%. Well, nationwide, it's over 50%.

So when you first were starting or when you've tried to become involved in a new facility, how did that process start? Like, how did you start working with the Department of Corrections deal with the pushback, etc. You know, what, what was this? How did you get from a concept to actually being able to practice or start to do this practice?

Well, I think the first step simply that we were able to get a Theatre Workshop, a small operation, just a workshop at sentencing. I mean, that didn't seem to threaten the New York State Department of Corrections in any way. And then to be honest, I think my training in business made me go at the development of this whole organization from a business perspective, which is, it's about negotiation. It's about win-win. It's not an adversarial approach. And that impact assessment, measuring the way we conduct our business, training our teaching artists, so that they know how to act inside of prison, all of that, painstakingly over all these years, is part of what's made it successful. Sitting down with the Department of Correction is of course complicated because you're dealing with a very large bureaucracy. But after being in business for 25 years, I understand the mentality of I think that was one of the things that that I believe

other arts based organizations across the country may have to learn, which is, it is not an adversarial role, it needs to be a supportive role in which we are clearly an asset to the Department of Corrections in New York State. Certainly our studies, which we chose to start and get approved by them, and then publish, prove that what we're doing is making change. So I would say that it's all part of being able to build an organization, which is what my background is all about.

So when you first started, though, you didn't know necessarily didn't have proof of concept. And so when did you first become really convinced that you had something important here and that could really be transformative with people's lives?

And that's a really good question. I think when, when the medium security people were transferred in 2005 at that point we were about five years old. And they were really clamoring for the program saying things like we've learned more in RGA. Then we learned in other types of programs that are available in prison. So I think that was one thing. In 2005 RGA began a long term collaboration with NYU use graduate program in Educational Theatre. And during that collaboration, and we learned that probably the most important thing we should be doing in bringing teachers into our prisons is that they, as well meaning as some artists can be, they must be able to teach. And so we have been building a faculty based upon artists who are interested in working inside the prison walls, which is complicated to say the least. But more importantly, are aware that they must have teaching background preferably with people from marginalized populations. And that is In addition to understanding the skill set, the main difference is that we're not delivering the art form for the sake of the art form, we're delivering it as a vehicle to help people build the life skills that they need to have better lives inside the walls, and then on the outside. So it's been a graduating process in which we learn more and more by being open to collaborations and partnerships, and to listening. And we listened to our own members on the inside about what they want it what are their wish list for what they would like to have inside the walls.

You've mentioned that a couple times about people about it not being about the art but it being about learning skills. Can you talk a little bit more about how giving people access to, or or dance or any of these things starts to translate into skills?

So for instance, you talk about a skill set coming out of let's just use improvisation, because improvisation is one of the basics that one uses in theater studies. And the types of skills that come out of improvisation are that you can excel under pressure, that you can read body language, think on your feet, listen, actively build trust and take risks. those skills can be then applied when you go back into employment when you're working with family, or back in community. So there is a skill set for each of the disciplines that we teach. And we make this available to our teaching artists and to our students in something we call the RTA skill wheel. And it's basically a wheel that shows the various disciplines that we use and the skill sets that you can learn or develop further within your own being by just following it. Full length productions which usually take us somewhere between four to five months the basics within any

kind of a production is that you have to set goals and solve problems, practice public speaking, manage authority issues, accept criticism work as a team, and perhaps really importantly, experience empathy. Empathy is not something we're born with. It's something you learn through families that model it, or other modeling agents. So those types of skill sets come out of looking at what we do not as just a way to get a play dumb, but as a way to gain these types of skills.

So did you have any PR any problems at the beginning getting people It sounded like you said, originally, there was a lot of serendipity. But as the program grew, have you found any trouble getting people to be teachers or to come into the prisons or to do the work?

I would say not really because again, from whether you call it serendipity Whether we call it synchronicity, it has seem as if the program was driven by some power greater than all of us, that the person or if we need it turned up at the right time and in the right place. And I really mean that Joshua is just people would call, or probably because also I come from the business background, I knew that public relations are really critical to build an awareness of a brand. That's what I did on the outside before I started doing prison work. And so we worked hard on getting public relations and, you know, Esquire magazine in 2006. To the centerfold about our organization, people came to us after reading about it, The New York Times has covered us multiple times, the Daily News, NPR has covered us. And it's surprising that you know, the more you're out there and people hear about what you're doing, the more opportunities for people to say. That's something I'd like to look into. And we often, especially after production, I mean this past year, both the Rolling Stones A New York Times op ed page covered RGA. And when that happens, people do contact us and they are interested and after they've been vetted, to be sure that they're coming for the right reasons. We then continue to build our faculty. And this the faculty end up including people who are on the inside, in a sense or been desire start to be a leadership that develops within the prisons. Well, all of our programs have something we call steering committees, and those are members of our every member who is in our program goes through First of all, something called RGA, one on one, which is like going from a college point of view, a survey program. You go through it, it's taught by members of the program, and it's basically about here's how this program unfolds. This is not about becoming an actor. This is about self development and self understanding and self confidence building. So that's one thing and we encourage the development of Steering Committees in all of our programs, and it's a really interesting exercise in leadership, because to be the voice of your community without being another layer of oppression inside the walls is a tricky tightrope walk. And so the people who eventually end up being really good as steering committee members learn a lot about leadership. And lots of our members go back inside not as prisoners again, but as teachers. And one of our own alumni is now RGA, Operations Director here at headquarters, and many of our alumni go back into the facilities to teach within other social service agencies.

And how does someone start out to like when you're just starting, you know, what, how does someone qualify to be to be included in our program?

First of all, we don't consider their crimes. We ask all of our faculty not to look up people on the internet, that if they have chosen to change, if they are willing to come into RGA, and they're looking for a positive program, not necessarily to become an actor, I have nothing against becoming an actor. But that's really not what our team is about. And if someone wants to be an actor, they can get the skill sets with us. But they better have a day job when they get back out. That's true. Most actors do. Exactly. So. So we are very careful to say we're not trying to crush your dream. But what we're trying to say is, please realize that when you go out, you're going to need a day job, your family, your appeal, your parole officer, they're all going to be asking you your housing issues, social services, issues. You know, having the dream of being an actor is great, but you're going to have to get a job for sure. So I think that I'm sorry, I've gotten off a little bit of a track there. You're asking me to speak to remind me again where we are?

Well, yeah, I was just asking about, you know, how people become or what the path is for someone who's in a prison to join your program.

Right So, as I said, they they everyone who wants to be in our program approaches the steering committees, which are this body of men or women as explained and say that they're interested. They then in some cases are putting on a waiting list. Unfortunately, it's thinking we have a waiting list of 100 because the program is so well known there. And then they go through what we said is an interview process with the steering committees and then RGA one on one which is a precursor to our program to be sure that they know that this is about self development. And and then they come and in most cases, they can go right into workshops, and, but not right into productions. What we try to do with everyone is to say you have to sort of work behind the scenes before you get out in front of the stage. And we make an effort to have a production in each one of our five facilities at least once a year, if not within 16 months after the last one. So there's always an opportunity to get involved in a full length production, which lots of people want to do. But the real due diligence is taking workshops that improve your ability to publicly speak, to focus, to have concentration to move your body in a way that is also healthier for you and your mind development. So you have to go through a variety of workshops in order to be in the program.

So when I was looking on your website, I saw that you have two performances coming up. One is Macbeth and the other one is 1776. How do you all decide what productions you're going to put on? And how would a new production startup?

We try our best to present to our members plays that can work in prison mean in aside from the women's facility, when you have, you know, 25 to 50 members in a membership in a prison, picking a play that has multiple male roles and minimal female roles is not always easy. So in some cases we have done plays like Macbeth in all of our facilities, not, not because it's the only play but because it's not only a play in which there are really lots of very good roles for men, but also because we try to present plays that teach a lesson. And Macbeth, his body as it is really teaches a lesson about power, absolute power, and greed. ending up with you know, consequences is one of the issues you know, you you're going to pursue this, this is what

possibly can happen. So my best was a choice by the members of Fishkill were, they looked at Oh, a variety they went through a whole play reading series. They evaluated something as extreme as the Elephant Man from Broadway, to Macbeth to an old timer, like Mr. Roberts, which was a film that went back quite a ways of play. So they go through a variety and it is really the membership that make the decision. I mean, RGA always has to be aware of language because the Department of Corrections, really, in some of the facilities in particular will not allow any kind of swear words, any kind of curse words. So that changes, of course, some of the pieces that you can offer. Some of them if they deal very strongly with fighting, rising up against oppression that can pass in we don't we have to be careful about the type of program that we do. So Macbeth was voted in by the numbers of fiscal and that's why we're doing Macbeth and we were able to get it approved and minute, thinking they had long wanted to do a musical we've only done. Up until this time, we've only done two other musicals in our 22 year history. Both of them at Sing sing. We did West Side Story in 2007. And we did the Wizard of Oz and 2015 when families were allowed for the first time to come inside the walls and watch their members perform. Was that a little bit? Thanks.

Actually, that was actually a question I was going to get asked is who gets to see the final product?

Well, it took a took us many, many, many years to go from five to 10. Outside community guests, I mean, admit initially, it's always been that we perform for the population inside the walls. That's what we do. This is not about performing for outside. This is showing the general population that storytelling can produce conversation can be prompt for writing Opening up dialogue to family. So we perform for the populations in all the facility first and foremost, secondarily, since one of our goals is to raise the awareness of the humanity behind the walls. One of our goals was to build a number of community members who could come inside. And we started with five, I think, in 2004 in 1997, and our largest count is 250. At Sing Sing for our last one. We it took us more than a decade and a half, to get security to agree in any of the facilities for families to come in. I'm not sure that I can explain why it's a security issue to have family members in an audience. But it was so we finally got things going and Albany department of corrections to agree that we could invite family for the first time in 2015. And, and that's been the beginning subsequently. We are In leopard hills, a family and we're working on getting family into fiscal. I'm not saying it's right or wrong, I'm saying that that is, for whatever reason, an issue with security. And we do our darndest to get families inside. But what we have done almost from the beginning, probably for the past 20 years, is to film with the permission of Department of Corrections, every performance, and then be allowed to send DVDs to every family member of everyone in the program, whether they're on stage or not. And this builds a connection to the family member. It also sees them in a positive light, and it helps the families find new ways of talking.

That's really powerful. And you just spoke of one of the unique challenges I mentioned. There's a lot of you really unique challenges to putting on a theater production inside. Can you speak a little bit about that?

Yeah, that's that's also a really good point Joshua, because working inside of The world. Almost everything that we would want to do from a musical theatrical even writing point of view requires security clearance. But the basic black and white notebooks that we all went to school with, that are not bound with metal can come in for writing classes and poetry classes, but they have to be approved first. And that's no, it's not a big deal. It's just a general thing. So that's simple. Then we opened up keyboard classes, music theory and songwriting classes, and we supplied the keyboards as two of our facilities. And in both those cases, this is a complicated security issue. The keyboards could not be able to be recorded, only special models are allowed. And then they had to be a special designation of the number of the prisoner was applied to the keyboard. So there's it's painstaking on a lot of levels to get it in, but again, we are here to win the war. And occasionally we lose a battle or two. But overall, we're slowly getting installed inside the walls, the things that are helping our members transform their life. Then when you start talking about bringing in the kinds of things that we do for production, it gets really, really scary because, of course, there's no glass ever. There are prison colors that are not allowed in black, grey, blue, orange, and therefore costumes and props cannot break those color codes. You can't wear a wig, you can't wear mustaches, you can't change the facial recognition of people inside the walls. If we're going to teach hip hop dancing, which we did and actually was wonderfully covered by the today show at Sing Sing it required a special clearances for the CD players to come in to play the CDs. And for the members to be able to wear sweat pants to move through the jail through things thing to get down to the room. So it is a very complex administrative jigsaw puzzle to put together. But at this stage RGA has built a reputation of working with the Department of Corrections, where on both sides, it's a respected partnership, that we do our best to adhere to the rules and to live by their codes as best as possible in order to provide what we do to the people we serve. And as I said, we're out to win the war. And every so often we're going to lose a battle here and there so that you have over 600 people who participate in your program. And you mentioned earlier that several of them have returned to become teachers and some of them have become work with your program and Their ways.

How is the general feeling from the people who I assume many of those people have returned to society? from the prison? How is reentry gone for them and how do they feel about the program after the fact?

So, reentry is a is a multi-level challenge for many, many people, as I'm sure you, you must know, have a little experience when when people come home or back into community or where they're allowed to be parole to, they have multiple, multiple challenges from simply getting their identification and social services, to having housing issues, parole officer issues, family issues, employment issues, and how each and every one of the returning citizens that we deal with deals with it. Got a lot to agree to do with the time they spent inside how much time they they

have spent in RGA. Because what we deliver gives them some incredibly important soft skills that they use on the outside. I think to a great degree, it depends on if they have a family setting to come home to, but they're not returning to the hood that sent them to prison. So there are multiple reasons that reentry works for some, and not for others. But I would say since our recidivism is less than 7%, and we watch very closely, those who come out and know that there are only X number who have gone back to prison, we would have to claim some of the credit for providing a way that people can, can be enter and do better when they come home, and how they feel about the program. We have our alumni, talking and presenting as often as possible, we have a documentary film called dramatic escape. And as more and more of the members who were in that film come home, those are the ones who turn up at the, at the film at the screenings. We had a fundraiser this past week in New York and three of our alumni performed for that. We have others who simply present what the arts has meant to them in their lives, whether it's on podcasts or or video tapes, and in general, we keep in touch with our folks as best as possible, and let them know that we're here. We're not a reentry program in the traditional way that an exodus or fortune or Osborne is that are based in New York City, but we do network, we do provide Metro cards we do suggest they move on to certain reentry sites for resume building, and we are there if they have to call and talk.

So do you have hope That your program is a path that other folks can follow. Do you feel like your model is transportable or transferable?

Well, there are other organizations using art in this country. I think overall, it's disproportionately too few. The biggest, I'd say the state that has the most opportunities is California. And that's because California in the last eight years, has decided, God bless them to put it as a line item in the state budget and now funds \$8 million worth of arts based education in prisons in California. to a lesser degree, there's a organization in Michigan that is similar. One in touch project, and for the creative parts program. There is another prison arts program in St. Louis There was Shakespeare behind the walls that used to be in Kentucky. But I think my friend Kurt has moved to Michigan. So there are a few around the country, but certainly not as many as there should be because Arts in corrections is a viable way of changing people's lives. However, I'd have to say that if they're just a creative writing program at Auburn in New York State or a dance program in Florida, that that may not give the same skill set that we believe are do because we are constantly talking about the role the arts in delivering critical life skills. And yes, I would love to have RGA be the model for the use of arts and corrections across the country. That's been my vision for a long time. And I'm hoping that that may happen either to our reputation replicating our program in other states or by expanding beyond the Six facilities where we are in New York State.

So for folks in New York, what are ways that they can help you in rehabilitation to the arts continue to do the good work that you're doing?

Well, we would always welcome donations since we are the predominant amount of our budget is privately funded, state and government only represents 27% out of our budget. So donate,

gifts are always appreciated. We also welcome people who are interested in teaching inside the walls, and if they are, have the skill set of being an artist and a teacher, we welcome their resumes or their contacts. We love people who want to be invited to the community guests nights in our various facilities. We are not able to open that invitation to the public at large. Everyone has to be vetted. But if folks go to our website at [www.ourta-dasharts.org](http://www.ourta-dasharts.org) they can put down if they're interested in attending a performance. And we will put them on our mailing list. We always have to vet people who are coming in, we have to be able to know that they are reasonable. And so we tend to end up talking to some people about it. They're brand new to us, if they've not come recommended by someone else who knows how the rules are going inside the walls. But we're open to that people who want to volunteer to serve and administrative or customers or prop finding for us would always be welcome.

So imagine that you've seen quite a few of these productions, or at least some of them here. What was the effect on you?

Well, since I'm the founder and executive director, I've seen all Josh and been in a few. No, but thank you. I don't think I've missed any one production in any of our facilities. In the years. I made this workshops and I may not make it to everything. But the production's are really important to all of us. And so I am at that. I've also performed in a number of them in cameo roles, which I really enjoy doing. And as long as I am the Executive Director here, I hope I'll be able to be at all the productions. In time, it's, you know, we are building our own staff and team here and their program department now, which there wasn't for many, many years. And those folks are also going to be taking over a lot more of the producing of basically, up until three years ago have produced everything that we've ever done. And I think there's probably close to 50 Productions over the last 22 years within all five facilities.

But when you were watching, say the very first one that you saw, and you had you been an idea in your head, and here it is coming in groups and you see these these folks, you know, on the stage or whatever approximates first stage, what was the effect on you emotionally and intellectually?

Well, the very first play that we did reality in motion at singing in 1997 was the very first play that got written inside the walls. And I was actually performing in it a small part. But I watched a lot of the rehearsals, of course. And I think there is nothing more addictive than transforming people's lives. People who could never stand up in front of others who couldn't speak clearly enough until their addiction was, let's say more focused by the training that you need to train for in public speaking or in theater. Coming to you and saying something like I have not worn a suit in 14 years. Thank you for setting me free. So those types of testimonials to how the program has made individuals feel. I've never worked on a team before. Now. I can see that team effort is more important than an individual agenda. That's the kind of thing not just watching them. I mean I, we have talent up the wazoo inside the walls, whether we're talking about artists, visual artists, or poets, or actors or dancers or musicians or writers. They're all there. So the talent exists. So I'm not surprised when we have extraordinary talent on stage or

behind a painting. What is transformative for me is to know that we are really changing their lives.

I always asked the same last question, what did I mess up? What questions should I have asked but did not.

You did a really good job of asking questions. You clearly were not trying to trip me up by asking about the relationship with the Department of Corrections how adversarial that could be you asked about research which is important. You ask about the people we serve. You didn't ask about crimes. Crime is always for us. incredibly sensitive area. And when we've had media ask us about their crimes, we always say that is for them to decide to share with you. And we tell our folks that if you're going to be interested in being on a video or interview or whatever, in today's world, the internet will always be the record of who you are. So as you talk to media, be prepared, that it will never go away. And that if you want to bury your present background, you cannot do it if you've ever spoken to press. So that's sort of a, a little warning on my side. And I think you've been a gentleman and I think you've been intelligent and kind and I appreciate that very much.

Well, thank you very much. And it's sort of one of my long term belief that it's not my job to tell someone else's story or to ask about someone else's story. Unless they volunteered to me, so that's I don't you know what i definitely understand the complications of working with the Department of Corrections, etc. So thank you so much for doing this. Catherine. I'm big, big fan of your program is very nice to have this conversation with you.

My pleasure. I was really sorry, we got off to a little bit of a jumpy start there to begin with because of timing. But I am delighted to have spent the time with you, Joshua. And please keep us in mind if there's anything else RGA can do for you and I'm glad to get to know you. Have a good afternoon and good evening.

You too.

Thank you so much.

And now my take. I've often said on this podcast that we have to have prisons prison administration to start working to plan for successful reentry for every single person who enters the gates starting on day one. Organizations like rehabilitation to the arts the last mile and Edwin's Institute get this and start working to help people reenter society. While they're incarcerated every single day, we know that almost everybody comes back from prison. We know that the most important parts of reentry to successful reentry are having the education that allows you to get good employment, allowing you to get stable housing, and allowing you to have connection with your communities. These are incredibly important programs, and we need to make sure to support them in every way that we can. In addition, these programs help people develop beautiful things inside themselves that they might not ever have known existed. Every

year. My favorite local event here in Michigan is the exhibition of art by Michigan prisoners which is a program that was created by the prison Creative Arts project in my state. You can literally walk around this, this this, this, it's basically an art exhibit. You can literally walk around and feel the transformative power of this gigantic art show it when you experience the art I often feel the power of this show so deeply that it affects me for weeks. Just seeing the amount of talent that is untapped inside of prisons. If you haven't been there, you really need to experience one of these performances or one of these art shows. And then you'll really start to connect with not just the stories that the media tells about people in prison, but also the reality of the human beings who are inside prison, the talent, the intelligence, the ability, the desire to communicate that lives inside of our prisons. Regardless, 96% of the the folks in prisons and jails in our country are coming home, how they come home matters. I deeply thank organizations like rehabilitation through the arts for trying to make sure people come home more healed, more healthy and more capable than they were when they first arrived in prison.

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