

Decarceration Nation Episode 70 College Behind Bars

DN70

Joshua Hoe

0:04

Hello and welcome to Episode 70 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 reform advocate and the author of the book writing your own best story, addiction and living hope. We'll get to my interview with the creators of the documentary series college behind bars and just a minute, but first the news.

So nearly two years ago, I started this podcast with my friend Joel. In the first year I was a freelance writer and activist but did not have full time employment. As a result, I had a lot more time to spend arranging podcast episodes. So in the first year, we managed to put out 40 episodes. This year. I started out there continuing my freelance writing business, but I was also getting paid as a consultant. So I dial back the expectations to 30 episodes. Little did I know that midway through tonight 2019 I would find a full time job at safe and just Michigan which would make finding time to do the reading Search and produce the episodes much more challenging to me. Anyway, to make a long story short, somehow with the help of Andy, Robert and now, Kate, I made it through 2019 and this is our last episode my 30th episode of 2019. Thanks to Andy Stein, Robert Alvarez and Kate summers for helping me make these episodes happen. And of course, thanks to all of you for taking the time to listen to the decarceration nation podcast and 2019 I never in a million years would have predicted two years ago that the podcasts would have grown this much. I think each and every one of you for listening and making it possible to continue to have these important discussions. Don't worry, I'm already hard at work making arrangements for 2020. And as always, our first new episode will be released on Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

I want to take a second to thank our sponsors from Patreon. Our very first sponsor ever is Tom Decker of Chicago green insulation. Tom and I went to high school together and it's been really amazing to reconnect with him over the last few Yours. Believe it or not, Tom runs a business that is staffed almost entirely by formerly incarcerated people. So if you're in the greater Chicagoland area Call Tom at Chicago green installation, comfort is only a phone call away. I also want to thank my friend Jim sweetened who goes to church with me here in Michigan for his support. And thanks to everyone in my church congregation. Thanks for supporting the decarceration nation podcast from Patreon. Okay, let's get to my interview with the creator of the documentary series college behind bars, which will begin airing on PBS starting on November 25.

Clip from the documentary "College Behind Bars"

“I spent more time in prison than I did in the free world. I came to jail when I was 17 years old. So it's like freedom. It's hard to visualize for me. been incarcerated for 13 years and from my experience I can tell you, prison is here to punish us is here to warehouse us. But it's not about rehabilitating. It's not about creating productive beings it just isn't”

Joshua Hoe

Today on the decarceration nation podcast will be discussing the PBS documentary college behind bars. College behind bars is a production of skiff mountain films and associated association with Florentine films and WETA. TV Ken Burns is the executive producer, PBS will air the series November 25, and 26th of 2019. Our guests today are:

Salih Israil, who's a formerly incarcerated software engineer who learned to code during his incarceration while earning his BA in language and literature with the Bard prison initiative.

Lynn Novak the Emmy Peabody and Alfred I DuPont Columbia award winning documentary filmmaker. For 30 years she's been directing and producing landmark documentary films about American culture, history, politics, sports, art and music for PBS. In collaboration with Ken Burns, she's created more than 80 hours of programming including the Vietnam War, baseball, jazz, Frank Lloyd Wright, the war and prohibition.

Sarah Botstein, senior producer of college behind bars has for more than two decades been producing some of the most widely watched acclaimed documentaries on PBS and collaboration with the directory tandem of Ken Burns and Linda Novick. Their recent work includes the award winning 10 epic 10 part series, the Vietnam War. Sarah also produced prohibition and the war, a series about the American experience of the Second World War. That was a lot of intro So welcome, everyone to the decarceration nation podcast.

Thank you for having us.

Thank you.

Joshua Hoe 4:47

So I always ask the same first question what brought each of you to making this powerful documentary and please feel free to share as much or as little about your stories as you feel comfortable with.

Everyone can just take one at a time

Lynn Novick

5:02

Okay, this is Lynn, I guess I can try to go first. In 2012, Sarah and I were invited to give a guest lecture to a college course about prohibition. And that class happened to be taking place inside the eastern Correctional Facility in upstate New York, as part of the BB prison initiative. And we went there and Joe clips from our film and had a conversation with the students, as we've been doing all around the country. And it was a life altering experience for us, to meet with the students and to hear their thoughts and to see how engaged and serious and informed and just intellectually sophisticated they were. We had one of the most interesting conversations we had about that film anywhere. And that put us on the path eventually, to realizing that we felt it would be an incredible opportunity to try to make a film that would show the world what these students were doing.

Salif Israil

5:53

Yes, for me, you know, I wasn't alone. I was fortunate enough to know my frustration to be enrolled in it. barbers initiative. And when I heard it make a film about it, for me, it was a no brainer. I mean, I firsthand benefited from having access to a high quality of arts education. And any way that we can get that out there the importance of granting access to as many people as possible, including incarcerated incarcerated. I want to be a part of this how became a part of the film as an alum who graduate from program and then as someone who was a returning citizen who basically provide insight from the overall impact of that education in my own life.

Sarah Botstein

6:32

This is Sarah, I had the same experience that landed when we went to talk about our prohibition series at Eastern. And you know, we had been on the road doing similar classes to fancy law schools and elite universities. And this was a very unusual landscape to be having a really deep and sophisticated conversation. I actually grew up on the Baruch College campus so had known a little bit about BPI. From that, but was, you know, had never been inside a maximum security prison or on the school floor. And I think for both Lynn and me, the idea of using our craft and the work that we love doing together on a film like Vietnam, into a more modern subject in a different way with the challenges that that might be for us felt extremely urgent and important because it felt like a really interesting and different world to explore that we feel if we're going to BIG thumbs about the American Experience people needed to see and understand.

Joshua Hoe

7:40

It makes a lot of sense. So he could you spend a few minutes introducing people to the Bard prison initiative, how incarcerated people find out about it, how people apply, what happens when you start up and what it's like to be part of the program.

Salih Israil 7:53

So the Bard initiative was initiated in 1999. So it's been up for about 20 years and operations. prisons throughout New York State, one women's facility and other men's facility maximum and

medium security. So basically, you know, your state has anywhere between, you know, 49 and 55,000 people that's incarcerated. BPI serves right now 210 students in those six facilities. And of course you have to be in a particular city facility that is in once again. So people hear about BPI all throughout the state, you know, you have men and women who are literally trying to get to cities where BPI is that and BPI basically offers in a degree and then also offers a BA degree in various subjects such as history, social studies, mathematics and literature in a science in arts and sciences. So as someone who was a part of the barbers initiative, I was enrolled back in 2003. And for those of some people know, and you know, you had a Clinton crime Bill and I 74, which basically pulled Pell and federal funding for incarcerated people to be able to get hired. Prison. When BPI came along as a private, small private college in upstate New York, they decided they want to make a difference to the you know, most of the efforts of you know, the founder, Max Kenner, there was no there was no there was no telling when or how long it was going to last. So my experience of epi was experienced. So one, just been highly motivated, and totally committed to take advantage, obviously, because I didn't know when and how it was going to you know, what I was gonna evolve to how long was gonna last. And so for me, that's what that's what basically characterized my experience of epi, which was I wanted to take full advantage of the opportunity was available to me. And, you know, we've been very fortunate, you know, through through a, you know, funding and in modest grants that for 20 years, BPI has been able to grant that that particular opportunity to, you know, five 500 over 500 men and women throughout New York State, who are now home with, you know, various degrees and benefiting from the education that we get from BPI, so for me,

Joshua Hoe 10:01

and that, that does come from all their funding comes from private funding. Right? Is that correct

Salih Israil 10:07

with with with a smallest, you know, modest whereas, you know, in Brock Obama, President Obama had launched at the second chance pelt initiative. And you'll be proud as one of one of the 67 colleges that had opportunity get that that funding is not as a modest grant from them. But yeah, for the most part, largely due to private funding. Yes.

Joshua Hoe

10:29

And Lynn and Sarah, take a documentary like Vietnam, I'm sure you enter into that work with a much different set of challenges then you faced in making this documentary? I imagine these are very conceptual dip, conceptually difficult things to map out when you first start making a documentary. Can you talk about how you went from the idea to the research to PBS and then to Bard into the prisons?

Lynn Novick 10:52

Nice, good question. Because this was very different in the sense that the films we've made in the past were about history. So we pretty much read a lot of books, and talk to some historians and try to find witnesses, you remember that time in history and come up with an outline for

what the general, you know, trajectory would be. Here we were entering into a world with our cameras and sometimes without our cameras. And really what we knew from the beginning was that we wanted to film people over time, so that we could really witness with our cameras the transformative power of education. And that doesn't happen in a day or week or a month. So we conceived the film that it would happen, would be spread out. And we would come in and out with visiting with students and let them without the cameras over four years. And so that was our basic idea that we start when people entered the prison the ship and we would add more or less with graduation. But what happened in between, we really had no idea. And just to speak to your question of how we ended up being able to get into the facilities with our cameras, was a nearly two year process first. We had to decide between us at the Was, we're going to go to the very tippy top of a high diving board and jump off. Asked PBS for a little bit of seed money, can very generously agreed to be our executive producer Lynn actually taught in the program in an eight week seminar. And I was lucky enough to do a couple of those classes with her. But we, you know, then convinced Bart and BPI to let us at least try to do this convinced the state of New York and the Department of Corrections and and then began to do as much research without our cameras, as Lynn said, as with our cameras, and we started filming in the late summer of 2014.

Joshua Hoe

12:44

And was there a lot of pushback about different elements of the film throughout the process from the from from the prisons?

Lynn Novick

12:52

No, we made the film. You know, we took it really seriously that we were working in maximum security prison. We obviously had to work closely with the Department of Corrections, to make sure that we had all the right lists of gear and obeyed all the rules that we had to in order to film. But I think they believe in education, and they're proud of the program. And we're very patient with us over a long period of time.

Joshua Hoe

13:23

And Salih, how does the program actually work? Do you just go to school just like any normal person outside of prison would go? is it part of like, you know, normal incarcerated people generally have a work assignment, you kind of end up going to class like as someone else would go on a work assignment or how does how does it functionally work? So

Salih Israel

13:44

that's an excellent question. And the answer that question has evolved over the 20 years, right. So the beginning of BPI as it as it grew out of facilities that it was in was pretty much with linen and searches just expressed about how to deal with the film. It was a matter had a rough

collaboration with the facility. But it wasn't so much a part of facility and people basically men and women will have assignments, like you said whether it is the mess hall for you know, being a porter inside of recreation police, and you know, their spare time when it wasn't when I work hours, you know, at 3am Pm evening, depending on what hours they didn't have class we have work they could take classes, you know, now is at a stage where someone can potentially have BPI as their assigned program, meaning like some many women are in school, their sign program is you know, GED classes or vocation. BPI. Now is such where in certain facilities you can have where you are BPI student and, you know, they say it has gotten to the point like minister, I said, where, you know, the administration of most of these facilities and you know, in Albany in particular, are very proud of the collaborative process that you have with BPI and they honor as such and they allow to create opportunity, it basically allow exactly opportunities, and it helped create opportunities that remove roadblocks Men and women being able to participate in programs fully.

Joshua Hoe 15:07

And they mentioned that during the film that it certain correctional officers might treat people in the program differently than people who aren't in the program. Did you have any experiences with that? Or is that been a struggle?

Salih Israil

15:15

You mean in terms of negative or positive? So it's a good question.

Joshua Hoe 15:18

think a little of both.

Salih Israil 15:20

That sounded like yeah, so I think it's a very dissonant relationship between an incarcerated person and corrections is a very, you know, complex relationship. And there is no that there can be instances where for whatever reason, it appears as if or maybe, that in this particular situation to circumstance you are now being you know, held up or held down because of whatever your circumstances with relation to the program. However, that's the case with everything in prison, right? You could be somebody you could be somebody who was like the best plumber to put in a prison. And for that reason, you are you know, some someone corrections or you know, incarcerated person Kids take a position on you because you think you're better than them. So that's, that's not very specific to college. But it happens it happens if you're the best cook, right? You have to be somebody who's the best cook in the vessel. and is like, you know, you have civilians who also cook if someone could feel like you know, somehow you've got obviously become a better cook than me because of where you're at, or a bit, you know, you got a bit education because be where you're at, it was come and go, and you've got the same officer who they feels like that. And tomorrow, he's clapping when you get your degree, right. So it's a matter of just creating opportunity for shared experiences and shared

knowledge about those experiences are and you know, we start from a point of not having it that knowledge, and then through interaction, we kind of like chip away at it.

Joshua Hoe

16:40

Were there ever times or have there been times where the other people who aren't in the program that creates tension between different groups of people within the prisons?

Salih Israil

16:52

Like I said, I just mentioned, you know, circumstances are very specific in particular, it may very well not be that you're in a college could be other things underlying factors that can make you know, someone looking for a reason to lash out someone trying to make sense their own situation. But I will say this when we have those graduations in the prisons, literally, everyone in associated with the prisons in that moment is as proud and as supportive of the graduates, as you can imagine. So and that's been my experience, and I've been to a lot of graduating graduations, I've been to a lot of those graduations. And when that day rolls around, no matter what happens in the day to day activities leading up to that point, and that moment, you know, it's almost like an out of body experience, that there is there is an acknowledgement that something productive has happened despite the situation insurance why everyone and that is something to be applauded on every level it with with, you know, with the corporate individuals that may have felt like you know, didn't have opportunity to have or CEOs that feel the same way when it comes down to actual accomplishment of what that education represents and the culmination of that education and What we call the graduation, we just, I mean, it's literally like you feel like a rock star in a moment.

Sarah Botstein

Speaker 2

18:05

You do. Yeah, I think Lynn and I probably both have a quick comment to your last question. I think we found over the course of filming the documentary and even in the last six months going around the country talking about the film with a whole cohort of graduates and students from BPI that they would say, and have said to us that, you know, BPI being inside the facility helps to change the culture of those facilities in many cases. And so when they were out in the yard, studying if they needed a table, the other incarcerated individuals would sometimes you know, join in on the conversation and want to hear what they were learning or inspired to try to apply to the program would give them the picnic tables that they could practice for an upcoming debate that I think Sally can obviously speak to direct experience but Lynn and I definitely found while we were filming that the other incarcerated individuals were supportive of The people in the program getting your education.

Joshua Hoe

19:04

This is a really good bridge to my next question. One of the things that I found very nice, I think a lot of people who are watching the film will think that it's what their immediate thought will be that you've presented a film about a specific group of people in this prison program. But to me, it really came across that you were telling the story, not just to people in the Bard prison initiative. But in many ways, the story of all prisoners through the Bard prison initiative was

Lynn Novick

19:30

that by design, that's a hard one to answer. I think by design, we wanted to tell the story of the students in the program, but I think everybody and fall off recognize that their stories, well, individually, in particular, also represent lots of other people's experiences. So that's very, very true. And, you know, one of the things that we all speak about a lot is that I think in the film, you'll hear one of the students Rodney say, you know, we're 100 or 100 of us in this program within the context of the facility at Eastern where there may be a Or 900 people incarcerated. There's hundreds more who would like to be able to do want to do this and you have the desire to go to college and just aren't enough spots or enough opportunity, generally in the system. So in a way they represent kind of the aspirations and the potential of everybody that's incarcerated. And more broadly, all the people in our society haven't had access to quality education.

Salih Israil 20:24

And I'd like to add to that. We recently we visited San Quentin, and we did a short viewing there. And, you know, one of my biggest concerns were was that, you know, we've we are not only are we just BPI and disability students, but we're also in New York. Right? So is the question of how does that translate for how people experience no prison across the country? And does it speak to some broader context that is about all prisoners? Of course, it can be it could be it could be so much more in the context of New York than outside New York is what my thinking was. And the one thing I was I was adamant the ass. You know, the gentleman that week that we met was Did you see yourself in this film and literally every Hands shot up. And it dawned on me that, you know, no matter how specific, you know, particular, your environment is in the prison or what state you're in, there is a common thread with they didn't trade to me that there was a common thread that even through the very specific ways that they were also in college in prison program and California. Despite no matter how specific the everyday day to day was in our facility, there was something inherent about just being incarcerated, individual that resonated with them in the film from the minute they heard from his soul, the stories they saw. So I think that also speaks to the question you asked from what was what was shared with us from people who are not where we're at, or halfway across our across the country. And still, somehow everything that they saw resonate with them in a very deeply personal way.

Joshua Hoe

21:49

I'm sure there was a lot of work to be done, especially at the beginning on both sides, and a lot of trust had to be built. Can you all address the process of how relationships developed over time? Now trust started to build between the, for instance, incarcerated people, and the documentarians and the correctional officers, etc.

Lynn Novick

22:09

Well, Sarah and I have been doing this making films that involve getting to know people for a very long time. And so we sort of approach this more or less the same way that we approach all the films we've made, which is to really just meet people where they are to approach them with an open mind to explain who you are, to be fully present, to listen without judgment to just keep an open heart open mind and just try to understand someone who's got something to share with you. And for this project, you know, we're very aware of the differences and where we are in life and where we come from. And there's a lot of just getting to know each other, frankly, and a lot of the students at the beginning, from what we know now they're having a lot of conversations among themselves wondering what were we up to and was this going to be a project they want to be associated with and over time, we all got to a place where Without comfortable, we didn't bring cameras for quite a while. And we spent a lot of time visiting with the students without the cameras, even throughout the course of the project, especially if we wanted to talk about something that was going to be really complicated or painful or difficult. We didn't ask them about their criminal convictions for years, frankly. So we just got to know people in the context of what they were doing what they were studying Flipboard you know, what was up with them? Before we sort of even began to approach some of the trickiest and most complex questions that we would want to ask. I think just to piggyback on what Lynn was saying, I think the other thing we did once we were filming, or when we would film is we were a small footprint. We tried to get out of the way we tried to be as in obtrusive as possible and to listen as closely as we could so that the students could be our guide through the process.

Salih Israil

23:58

Yeah, I would so The one thing that I applaud minister with with this film is and I say it every time we go so to speak, is that there's no narrator. This film, this film literally is the students in their own words. This is a students working through their experiences Past, present in, you know, their aspirations for the future. And we, you know, research was about that small footprint, like there is literally in terms of purely, you know, sharing the experiences of the students no footprint. You know, there's the question of editing, but for the most part, there is literally like the students as they are sharing what they want to share when they're willing to share. I think that that goes a long way and building trust. And I can't speak for all the students involved, but for the students that I have spoken with about this issue. They're very, they're very grateful for having that type of, you know, autonomy in that process, where they were able to like kind of like, work there with five struggle, they were wrong. Again, it's not a struggle film is happening in real time and they always We're allowed to like find themselves as a bolt as a film with more and more.

Sarah Botstein

25:04

I will also just add what Sally was talking about was remembering that we didn't really realize this quite at the time. But sometimes just the process of being part of this film, some of the students have told us it sort of gave them the place or space to have conversations with each other that they didn't otherwise have. And also, eventually even to speak about things that they hadn't discussed with their own families. And so it sort of opened up a process, frankly, of coming to terms that we didn't really realize at the beginning.

Joshua Hoe

25:40

I thought one of the really great things about the movie I mean, so often, as you all probably know, you know, most states have one facility for women and a bunch of facilities for men. And so these things tend to get film that a male prison or you tend to just see male prisoners. Because it's just so much easier to access one population at a time, I thought it says a lot for you all that you went in and went to the women's facility to. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Lynn Novick 26:14

Well, I think that was very important to highlight and show the women's experience. I will say that while we were making the film, there were many people who said, it's going to be too complicated to tell the men story and the women's story, you should just tell the men story. And we pushed hard against that and feel very lucky to have met the women that are in the film. I think their experiences are different. And they are in conversation with the men in certain instances in the film and that is so important.

Joshua Hoe

26:49

Yeah, I agree. And you also take the film back to the neighborhoods and a lot of ways from the families and communities, which I think is really important as well. Can you talk a little bit more about kind of that approach?

Lynn Novick

27:01

That's, that's something that sort of evolved over time, you know, this film took six years to make. And so when we started with that, we're just going to focus on the students and their experiences. But over time, it became clear that we would want to know our audiences want to know where people come from, and ultimately even get to know their families, we're so grateful, we were able to fill in some family visits, and you know, see what that dynamic was like, and then also interviewed family members outside of the prison, and interview the students about their family visits. And we really got a better sense of what it's like, for families to try to stay connected or be connected with these, you know, huge walls between them, and how important that is, and sustaining people. I mean, one of the moments I remember so well, from early in the film, Sarah was interviewing with Giovanni, and he was going through, you know, family pictures

in his dorm area. He took out this big envelope, and he started rifling through and he said, Oh, this is my favorite. And I held up a picture and said, here's my entire family is my mother, my father, all my cousins, my siblings and my grandfather. He's in the back, and he's holding up a picture of me. So in this little snapshot, there's this, you know, family group, and the grandfather in the back has a photo of Giovanni. And he said, that reminds me of what I have waiting for me. And that's just, I think, crystallized in a way that was early in our process to understand even just visually and sort of in a conceptual way, what, what incarceration does to families, and we were told early on, and I think it became truer and truer and more real for us as we went that two of the markers for real success in life is education and family. And that's true in life. And it's true if you're incarcerated. And one of the other things that I think people have said when watching the film is the power of the medium of film is that you get to see people, certainly who are incarcerated in ways that their families and frankly they don't get to see themselves and so filming the family visits or individuals in their selves or just the landscape of where they are living, it has been actually a revelation for their families to see.

Salih Israil

29:11

No, I mean, I think that that, that is absolute exactly what the film was able to capture and what is the reality for most men and women in prison, that they don't exist in a vacuum inside of a prison that they are, they had theirs, it's connected to between them, their families and their communities at large. That in a film does a great job at highlighting that and bring it to life.

Sarah Botstein

29:32

I think one of the things was really just beautiful to see and to be able to explore was how much the effect it had on families when the person who was incarcerated started going to college. So we have a number of people who are parents in the film and they talked about their own children, seeing them going through college and that inspiring their children to, you know, pursue their education, and also siblings, Giovanni sister was in college when he was in college, and so they were on the phone and compare notes, and he would help her with her calculus homework or, you know, that kind of thing. So we began to see that this kind of engagement with intellectual challenges and the high standards that the API sets for the students really sort of permeated entire families and communities through the way that people communicate and share their experiences in the film.

Joshua Hoe

30:23

linen, this one's for Lynn and. Sarah, I often think that one of the major reasons prisons in America are as bad as they are, is because they're almost entirely black boxes, as filmmakers. First what did you learn about being inside the black box? I mean, Sally and I both been in the black box for way too long, probably. And did you have any thoughts about how you wanted to use the documentary to kind of shine a light on presence in America?

Lynn Novick

30:55

You know, we agree that as a society, we have isolated And, you know, carved off and and sort of put in a place where no one sees what goes on in our presence and that has caused is the source of some terrible dysfunction and injustice. But for our film, we really were focusing in a way pretty strongly on what it's like to get an education while incarcerated. And that was our primary focus. On the other hand, we didn't want to have our audience forget that this was all taking place inside prison. So early on in our filming, we're mostly on the school floor. And we're mostly showing students in class in the library and the computer room and just you know, working through academic material and being interviewed about whatever was going on in their lives. And when we looked at the footage, we realized that if you if you weren't careful, and you could believe that this was happening in some kind of academic institution, you would lose sight as a viewer, that of the context. So over time, we did ask for more and more permission from the Department of Corrections to film, the context. They are the you know, the mess hall The hallways, the gates showing an opening that kind of thing. So you can really see the physical environment and understand what the students had to navigate. And they do speak quite a bit about having at least two identities if not three, or four, but are being, you know, having to constantly sort of be aware that they're viewed, they are living both as incarcerated people and students all the time. So we want the audience to be able to carry that as well and watching the film. I think we also wanted it and this we've talked about this a bit on the road as well to sound authentic. So the last shoot we did, we actually didn't have any cameras, but we asked the Department of Corrections for permission to just have our really high end sound people in the prison for a whole day to just make sure that the sounds were authentic because anyone who's been in prison, the sound landscape is super intense. And so we needed that to go along with the visuals and to really feel authentic. And you know, one of the things that really emerges from what the students say is how sort of isolating dehumanizing and lonely prison can be. So we wanted to find ways to represent that visually, even for students in BPI, but just generally that aspect, the kind of loneliness so we shot at night, and we shot sort of just cell blocks with nobody in every you know, just trying to get a feeling for what this physical environment is like. Yeah, one of our most atmospheric shoots was, you know, very cold rainy night in the yard. There were no no people in the in it, but it was very evocative, and I think our editors love that material. And and

Joshua Hoe

33:47

the second part of the question was a little bit about how it impacted you all both to be in the black box. Did you all did it change anything about how did you feel the experience of being in prison in some way that's different than before? You went to

Lynn Novick

34:01

just we got asked this exact question from a BCI student at Eastern on Saturday. We, the the current BPI cohort of students was able to watch the whole documentary and then we went in with two alumni from the program West Keynes and jewel hall with Max Cantor and linen me on Saturday just to talk with them about what they thought of the film and they got to ask us questions and one of them asked us that exact question. Um, I will just speak for myself I don't think I could possibly equate the time I spent in prison with anything like doing time or being incarcerated. I think I feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to make the film and learn what I learned mostly from the students experiences and how much I am a different person than I was when I started making this film because of how serious and complicated and lonely And difficult. The prison landscape is in our society. So that's my answer. But beautiful answer. I think a lot about this too. And you know, when you're in the middle of something, you don't necessarily have the awareness of how it's affected you. And every project we've done with how this has affected us in different ways. This one more than any other for so many reasons. But I'm, there is no way to really explain to anyone who hasn't been there, what it's like to go into a prison and see who's there and see how the whole environment is and what the dynamics are. And certainly, if it didn't affect you, there would be something wrong with you. So, and we spent many, many days and it was incredible privilege. For me. You know, I felt in looking back sort of a great deal of shame and regret that I was not focused on understanding this world until we got involved. In this project, and it was this black box that I knew was terrible, but I didn't pay much attention really or not enough attention. And if you can't help up these dragons is your every prison I've been in by the inescapable point that the vast majority of people that I have seen incarcerated people of color.

Joshua Hoe

36:22

I opened this whole podcast when I first started it by saying, you'd have to be willfully blind to walk into a prison to jail in the United States and not see the racial disparities.

Lynn Novick

36:31

Exactly. So, you know, and even if you know that intellectually, and I certainly did, it's not the same as seeing it for yourself. It just isn't. And so it begins, we'll start turning about what am I seeing? What does this really mean? What is it? What How did we get here? And how do we how do we get away from the system? How do we fix this incredibly broken system that has resulted in so many people of color being incarcerated? I think it's It's both extremely energizing and gives you enormous motivation to try to do something. And it's also very psychically draining because of how as you're saying how serious complex and difficult the landscape is, but at the same time, we were, you know, also inspired, and in some ways hopeful by the impact of rigorous education and what that can mean for those who are inside. And the only other thing I will just add is that we've gotten to know many of the students very, very well over five, six years, most of the students that we got to know best are no longer incarcerated. And it's been incredibly inspiring to see many of them leave prison and embrace life and move forward with incredible determination and resilience. And so that's been just extraordinary to see and to

be part of as we've gone around the country promoting the film and some of the people that are in the film, our song is rated along with two nine other people. So whenever we go in and see them, and then we leave, we're just constantly reminded of, you know, where we're at in life and how hard that is

Joshua Hoe

38:12

Salih, I certainly remember that whenever you go for a visit, when I was in prison, you'd get strip searched on the way in and way out. I was deeply moved watching the film. Watching the graduates in the film talking about after leaving graduation being taken directly through full strip search. Do you have any larger thoughts about kind of a lack of dignity and dehumanization that all of us faced in prison?

Salih Israil

38:39

Yeah, you know. Then surge mentioned, you know how guys being outside and just thriving. I'm always amazed. I'm amazed by the resilience of formerly incarcerated people. You know, I say I often say that, you know, the question of mental health is, is a major issue. You know, you you live in it. You live in an environment where, you know you said dehumanizing even an environment where you just not considered a lot of ways you're not treated as a human. And, you know, we could talk about why systemically that is but the reality is that is unsafe, that you as a human, I'm pretty sure you know, before Linden and Sarah came into prison, they were told things about the people who would want to counter this. I mean, there is an entire process of ensuring that there is an there are minimal opportunities to treat people who are incarcerated as anything but not being human. You know, so, yeah, I mean, one one circumstance had another you are, you are reminded that you don't have you know, for citizenship in this country, citizenship is humanity. Unfortunately, in this country, you know, citizenship is the litmus test for being treated as human. And I think that, you know, we've learned that to immigration. policies we learned through criminal justice policies, that when you are in this country and you don't have full citizenship, then you lack lack of recourse to be treated as a human being.

Joshua Hoe

40:13

And you mentioned that there are two degree plans. And I think one of the really great like, powerful moving moments in the film is the different graduations to pick the Can you talk about your, the degree you got and what you've done with it since you left BPI?

Slaih Israil

40:28

Yes, I'm, I'm, I'm a very unique situation. So I mentioned the fact that I got into I got involved in a program in 2003. And in 2007, I graduate my AA and liberal arts. And then in 2009, I graduated with my BA in language and literature with the focus in German. And then you know, from 2009, I don't go I'm not qualified eligible for parole until 2016. So I have seven years and a beautiful

thing about BPI is that when you You know, we talked about DPIUCQ in his films on my BP hours from the question of networking and family and support. When I graduate, it wasn't you graduate, you're done. It was like you graduated. And it was a conversation, what do we do a guys wants to graduate and women wants to graduate, do we just leave them out there. And they may it was a conscious decision not to do that. And to allow many women who are complete with the program to further their education by taking other coursework, and I was able from 2010 to 2016 to literally take enough math computer science courses to get a degree in math. And you know, so I walked out with the full breath of the liberal arts education, you know, a good foundation in the philosophy of language in literature, and then if affirm it, firmer foundation, and computer science and math. So um, I released in 2016. Within two months, I had a job as a data analysts with the book and community Bell fun and I stay Dear for about seven months. And then I, you know, out of my commitment and my love and dedication to the work of epi, I formally joined the BPI team as an employee from 2017 to 2019. And then very recently I decided to, you know, go back in and, you know, follow my love of computer science and math. I did a lot of great work with BPI, including helping to launch the Michael Collins at the Brooklyn Public Library. And now it's like, you know, my goal is to expand how we think about what's capable and possible performing across individuals. And that's going to be done by ensuring that we have opportunity in every single profession, not just you know, nonprofits in directly with justice work, but also in computer science and math and finance and real estate. And that was partially for me to do this, you know, to get me to go into computer science and math, because I want to get other people involved in it. It's a very valuable profession for former corporate individuals. And I think that we need to be creating more partners. Africa.

Joshua Hoe

43:01

So at the end of the day, you know, the documentaries out there you worked on for six years, some of you and all of you were participants. So what do each one of you hope people tak away from the film?

Lynn Novick

43:17

Alright, well, I'll go first I, you know, we it's hard to boil that down to one thing, because it's a complex story, right? So, you know, we really hope that seeing this film will have the effect on viewers that it certainly have making it had for Sarah and me and our team, which was to begin to break down the barriers between us and people who are incarcerated, and to understand what people who have not had access to education, which is largely communities of color, but not only are capable of and can do and can accomplish and then to think about the sort of tragic waste of talent in our society that is happening right now and is bad public policy and morally wrong. Then I have my my personal goal, which is, I really am disappointed deeply in our elite institutions of higher learning, that they have essentially advocated abdicated any responsibility for education for anyone not lucky enough to win the lottery and get to go to their school, and especially the most well endowed schools that have enormous resources, and are not doing this work, or doing it in a minimal sort of, you know, experimental way. So I would like to see our

college is a small liberal arts college with very limited resources that has done extraordinary work over 20 years to grant degrees to more than 500 students. And I would like to see Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Princeton, Rice, Emory, you know, the name Grand Michigan, thank you, Michigan, I think is starting right. These are, you know, these these institutions, I believe, have not fulfill their obligation to the society and the work they do. And I think that this film can maybe help shake it up a little bit. We always say when we're talking about the film that we hope the film will have people ask two essential questions, who in our country should and does have access to education? And what is prison for and how to think about those two things in relationship to systemic issues in our country around race, poverty class. And so I think our goal is hopefully for the country to have another conversation around those two issues. And to rethink what it means that we have so many people behind bars and that so many of them are getting out and what does that mean on the front end and the back end?

Salih Israil

45:58

Yeah, I'm hoping that I mean, one that sees this film is two things happens. One is digging up. There's a knowledge myth that you see a lot of people, you see a lot of people returning home inside the film. The reality is that 95% of people incarcerated will return home. And, you know, everyone that watched the film could potentially be an employer for those people, they can be a reference for those people, they can be the neighbor of someone who might interact with those people. You know, so my goal is that hopefully this film, like, you know, pushes like Minnesota's it pushes the conversation forward, but in a way that causes everyone to rethink how we treat each other. And what happens when you give someone an opportunity, and how people literally when given opportunity can excel in several countries, why not give people opportunities to start thinking through what happens when we do work hard to give people opportunities, and I think that this film captures that in a very, a very intimate way. And you have, you know, participants in this film, grappling with with the Excuse me for themselves and what it can be for others. And I hope that everyone walks away doing the same thing. Just thinking about in thinking through what is opportunity would give someone an opportunity, who otherwise wouldn't have it, how it could change people's lives and make people better. And in basically cultivate that relationship between each other.

Lynn Novick

47:21

I just want to quickly add one thing, because, you know, we started the film 2012 13. And we didn't know when it would be done or when it would come out, and it's coming out, it seems as at the perfect time, because we are having some of these conversations right now in significant way. criminal justice reform, as you well know, is, you know, an area where there is significant bipartisan consensus that we have to do something and there's even at this moment conversation and serious movement toward restoring Pell grants for people who are incarcerated. And so you know, on a national level on the state and local level, we are heading in the right direction. We have a huge huge, huge mountain to Hi. But we really hope the film coming out this fall can kind of catalyze her jumpstart that momentum.

Joshua Hoe

48:07

I always ask the same last question, which is there. Are there any questions I should have asked her questions you wish you could have answered that I did this.

Lynn Novick

We always ask that same last question too that's a good last question. We've covered a lot, Salih, anything on your side?

Salih Israil

No, I think that, uh, I think we did cover a lot. Really nice, substantive conversations. It's really nice to take some time to think about these things and talk about them as a group.

Joshua Hoe

48:40

Yeah, thank you. It was a real pleasure to have all of you on and I'm really hoping everyone to watch the documentary. I watched it for hours straight yesterday. So

Lynn Novick

Oh, thank you.

Joshua Hoe

48:51

Thanks so much for doing this and really nice to talk to all three of you.

Nice to talk to you.

Joshua Hoe

48:59

And now my Take, I've said it before and I will say it again. Unless you offer people hope for a future that people in prison can see, believe and understand, we will be unlikely to sell them on a different life after they returned from prison. reestablishing Pell Grants is one way of helping to ensure people get access to real and meaningful classes and prisons, and the model barred uses as another but in order for them to accomplish what they're doing required funding from both the state and from the second chance pal pilot program. It is an everyone's interest that we support funding for education for people who are incarcerated. When people come back with no obvious path to housing, employment or community connection. recidivism is often the predictable result. And disconnection is certainly the result. If we care about public safety, and we really believe in second chances, we just start building towards redemption while people are incarcerated and building on ramps for people when they returned from incarceration. Until we

start dismantling Filling the prisons as they exist now we should try to make sure that the prisons that we have are actually generating good outcomes. If we want radically different results, we have to make sure our legislators know that we demand a system that generates better outcomes. We are the only way changes like this can happen. We are an old movement but young in power, we have to continue to build our power and use it to let our legislators know what our demands are. Call your legislators at the state level and let them know you care about better funding for education and prisons. Call your national representatives and senators and tell them you know, you want them to know that you support the SAFE Act and the reestablishment of Pell grants for people in prisons. I want to thank you again, for being so supportive throughout 2019 it's been a great year, and I really have enjoyed this whole experience and getting to know so many of you over the last two years. As always, you can find the show notes or leave us a comment at decarceration Nation com and make sure to check out our new t shirts, sweatshirts and hats. Well, they're not really that new anymore. from our website. If you want to support the podcast directly, you can do so from patreon.com slash decarceration Nation. You can also support us by leaving a five star review from iTunes or like us on Stitcher Spotify. Special thanks to Andrew Stein who does the editing and post production for me, Robert Alvarez. He's been helping with the website and the Kate summers has been helping with our Instagram and Facebook pages. Make sure to add us on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. And remember we'll be back as on martin luther king day, Jr. Day in 2020. Thanks so much for listening to the decarceration nation podcast and 2019 See you next time.