

BREAKING OUT

Prison art program sparks creativity from behind bars



BY TODD BAILEY

Sometimes they have to use a pen or even fingernails to make their art. They aren't allowed better tools. They aren't allowed to work on their art for long stretches at a time.

But just like any other artist, they feel a sense of accomplishment with a finished piece of art.

The only difference is that these artists are prisoners from throughout the United States, including the New Mexico state penitentiary. You can see their work during Santa Fe Indian Market at the nonprofit section.

"The guys make some incredible art out of nothing," said John Torres-Nez, deputy director of the Southwestern Association for Indian Arts, which puts on market. "They can't have anything unless they buy it through a state prison catalog."

Torres-Nez is one of a handful of Native artists who visit these prisoners, called the Grey Eagles. Once a month, Torres-Nez visits the state penitentiary for a two-three hour artwork session. He works with the Grey

Eagles on their art projects and often brings SWAIA artists to talk to the group about how they became artists.

"Most of the artists are self-taught," Torres-Nez said. "That is the case with the Grey Eagles. So they have something in common."

Finding something in common with the outside world is difficult for many prisoners, some of whom will never leave incarceration.

Jane Davis understands this too

well. Davis, a social worker with the New Mexico State Department of Corrections, is the founder of HOPE-HOWSE — or, Hope Other People Evolve thru Honest Open Willing Self Evaluation. It is a nonprofit organization that helps prisoners and society meld together better through a sense of respect. It was Davis who reached out to Torres-Nez for support by visiting the Grey Eagles.

"When I speak in the prisons, I focus on helping them find and accept the light within," Davis said on the non-profit's website. "When I speak out here, I help people find and accept the dark within. Knowing and accepting both is what spiritual peace is all about."

The Grey Eagles were attracted to Davis' work with another group of prisoners and approached her about working with them. She sponsors self-help programs, movies and art projects. Another visitor was Grammy award-winning artist Robert Mirabal, who helped the Grey Eagles construct flutes during his visit.

"The whole constant of showing up is really powerful to the prisoners," Davis said. "The fact that we are going there to help them touches their hearts. They sometimes wonder why we are there. We tell them we are there because we want them to know that they are not forgotten."

It isn't just the Grey Eagles who have work displayed at Indian Market. HOPE-HOWSE has sponsored several Native artist prison groups throughout the nation. Davis has works from prisoners in Georgia, Florida, Illinois, Texas and California. She recently began working with another group of prisoners at the Springer Correctional Center called the Red Eagles.

The display booth also serves as a conduit to find other Native artists who are in prison and to work with them. It is the start of an overall play



CLYDE MUELLER

Jane Davis, founder and director of Hope-HOWSE, and (top) Barbara Cates, a volunteer, with work done by inmates from the New Mexico State Penitentiary. Top, a truck made by an inmate, built from a saltines box.

by Davis to help these prisoners become more easily acclimated to society once they are released.

Eventually, she would like to see a second booth at Indian Market where prison artwork could be sold. But that requires assistance.

"If we got a booth where we were able to sell Native American artwork, it could only be art created from outside the state because of state prison laws," she said. "But we would need sponsorship and booth workers."

Some of those booth workers could be the prison artists once they are released. Not only could they work the display booth, but they also could have the opportunity to someday have their own booth at the market.

That leads to the second part of Davis' plan: education.

"We are working toward starting a scholarship program to IAIA (the Institute of American Indian Arts) for the prisoners who are part of the Native American artists' program," Davis said. "This art scholarship could help the prisoners to become more productive members of society."

Torres-Nez said that the many of the prisoners are low-end offenders who, through circumstance, found themselves on the wrong side of the law.

"I started going out there three years ago and what I found out quickly was that they are really talented and creative people," Torres-Nez said. "They just needed a way to channel that in a positive way."

DETAILS

For more information on HOPE-HOWSE, visit www.HOPE-HOWSE.org. You will find the booth telling about Grey Eagles and HOPE-HOWSE in Cathedral Park.