

Background:

Riverbend Maximum Security Institution houses all death row prisoners in the state of Tennessee.

These men live in Unit 2

Many of them have been there most of their lives—35-40+years.

Since we've been working with our group (2013) numerous men have been moved off death row to other Units, mostly unit 6. This happens because they are in appeals of their cases and once a judge agrees to hear a case, it is often decided the crime did not deserve the death penalty.

The Death Penalty will be removed from someone's sentence for many reasons. Mostly—prosecutorial misconduct, racism, poor representation to begin with (all are poor), juror bias, or other things.

Riverbend has an honor system in place, allowing residents to earn privileges for ability to work, take classes, time outside, etc.

All the men in our class, and in other classes, have earned the A level. If they receive any type of disciplinary action, they are moved to B level, where they stay for at least two years. Currently we have two men in B. We do not get to see them, they cannot come to class.

When we enter the prison, we (and all our supplies) must go through a checkpoint with several security screenings.

Then we walk back through two chain link gates with razor wire into a building where they check our badges.

Then we walk outside to the unit blocks to unit 2. All doors are locked and unlocked by a corrections officer who is watching us via video camera. Unit 2 has 4 cell blocks all around a center area. Usually, our class meets in another building behind this one connected by a long hall and 5 locked doors. Sometimes we meet in the empty cell block in Unit 2.

Report from Nashville—events related to Art in Prison

1. On September 17th some of the men living in Unit 2 at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution developed and presented a play inside the Death Row unit for prison administration, educators and invited public. This play was in the works for many months. Developed as a vehicle to show the value and significance of a program in Conflict Resolution, the men wrote and performed this play entitled—*Community Building and Conflict Transformation Circle*.
 - a. The play began with a skit from a previous performance simply showing an inmate being taken rather roughly from his cell by a Corrections Officer.
 - b. Then Kevin talked about the course they had all taken in Conflict Resolution. This course is part of a program in Conflict Resolution at Lipscomb University in Nashville. Here is an abbreviated version, from a hand-out, of what he said:

Community Building and Conflict Transformation Mission

- We are a diverse group of residents in Unit 2 interested in the reciprocal education and therapeutic community healing approach.
- Reciprocal education means that everyone has something to teach (say/share) and something to learn (listening).
- Community healing is a process of building a mutual respect in order to repair and/or habilitate relationships that have been damaged.
- Success will depend on committing one's self to an intersectional (reserve negative attitudes) approach—recognizing the complexity of each person's relation to race, psychological make-up, faith group, and ability.
- We affirm our collective responsibility to address the harm of multiple forms of violence: interpersonal, structural, or institutional.

- In everything we do, we should aim towards conciliation, habilitation, as well as transformative healthy ideas that will be non-violent in nature, producing harmony between residents and staff within the R.M.S.I. community.

Conflict Transformation Course: this twenty-week, 40 hour course is designed to advance the proposes and pedagogy of the Schools for Alternative Learning and Transformation (SALT) program by providing the substance and content of conflict management (CM) education taught in undergraduate and graduate courses at Lipscomb University Institute for Conflict Management. This seasoned faculty brings collective knowledge, skills, abilities, and situation-specific experience essential for building conflict management knowledge in this unique learning community. Students who have successfully completed course of study may be awarded a Certificate of Achievement in Conflict Management by the academic leadership of ICM and SALT. Seventeen men have completed this course in Unit 2—four of them have been moved off death row and one additional member, Abu Ali, will be moving to Unit 6 (general population) soon. Our first graduation in Unit 6 was held this last spring with seven graduates.

We appreciate the cooperation from Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, and we are deeply thankful for the ongoing support from Unit Manager Keys and Warden Mays. RMSI signed off on our mediation process and the men have successfully negotiated a number of incompatibles, several disciplinary disputes and many everyday conflicts.

- c. Then Akil read a poem. (*I was planning to get a copy last Thursday night but they had lock down at the prison and we weren't able to have our class. I'll get it this week.*)
 - d. Then two men enacted a conflict as it might take place inside, including one of the corrections officers, playing the role of a corrections officer, moving everyone back to their cells. Kevin asked the corrections officer if he could try mediation with the two men in conflict. She said there was a procedure but would ask. Once it was agreed resolution could continue, the men acted out their parts to show us what conflict resolution between the inmates might look like. This part of the mediation is done completely by the incarcerated men. Only if mediation doesn't work, is the prison involved with disciplinary action.
 - e. The audience was asked to line up and walk around the cell block. (*the play was taking place in an empty cell block that we sometimes use for class if there isn't a corrections officer to watch A block, which is where the classroom and library are located.*). All the cells were empty except one. In it, Donald was sitting on a bunk with his head in his hands. Once we walked all the way around, we were asked to walk back. This time Donald was lying on the floor of the cell with blood on his shirt. After we all sat back down, he came out and told us about his struggle with mental illness. He had been in and out of mental institutions for 6 years prior to committing the crime that put him on death row. His talk was a plea for more mental health services.
 - f. Oscar told a story from his high school years when he first became aware of racism. His story punctuated the problems caused by racism, both inside and outside of prison.
 - g. Kevin gave a conclusion. We had a Q and A. Abu Ali sang Amazing Grace. We left.
2. The second thing I want to talk about is this situation with Abu Ali. So as not to make this too much to read. Abu Ali is scheduled to be executed April 16 of next year. His attorney was able to get a judge to rehear his case based on prosecutorial misconduct and racism in jury selection. The judge agreed it was unfair and agreed the death penalty would be removed from his sentence and he would serve life in prison. He has already been on death row for 35 years. Needless to say, we were all really happy. However, last Friday, the Attorney General for the

state of Tennessee, reversed this decision. I have attached some links. We do not know what will happen next.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/abu-ali-abdurrahman-condemned-tennessee-inmate-spared-execution-alleged-racial-bias-at-1987-trial/>

<https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2019/09/20/tennessee-ag-appeals-nashville-court-order-took-man-off-death-row/2386432001/>

Just read this—dated Sept. 24

<https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/pith-in-the-wind/article/21088545/state-attorney-general-seeks-execution-dates-for-nine-death-row-prisoners>