

For APWA

## **Finding Family: Volunteer Programs Bring About Lasting Rehabilitation in Prison**

By Adam Roberts

The several reporters who've written about the Phoenix Players Theatre Group began by describing the imposing gray wall that surrounds Auburn Correctional Facility. But, as a prisoner, I don't get to see the outer façade; I walk through the yard to attend our gatherings. And this isn't about the group so much as it's about one of my peers, Jim "JR" Ryant, a golden retriever of a guy.

Let me note at the outset just how wrong I was about JR, who tried out for PPTG along with me in September of 2014. The try-out was meant to replenish the ranks of men who'd been transferred to different prisons or were sent to solitary confinement. Crucial men. Along with JR and me were Jay Whitmore, Larry Greene, Phil Miller, Ray VanClief, and Sheldon Johnson, each thoroughly vetted, and asked to fill out an eight-page application before being invited to join. PPTG is a small, selective theater group that operates quietly amidst the 1,600 residents of the prison, meeting on Friday nights in a classroom in the prison's school building.

During that eight-week trial, we got to learn each other, and helped form the dynamic. I looked at JR and thought, *What are you doing here?* A good-looking, rugged, reserved young man in his late twenties, JR had a smile that cosmetic dentists charge thousands for, and dimples, too. But he seldom showed that smile, and more often entertained a vacant look focused on the middle distance. The entire group was enrolled in Cornell's college-in-prison program, all except JR and me. Me, because I already have a bachelor's degree; JR, because he's still working towards his GED. In a group where members create autobiographical pieces which each then performs, I silently wondered if JR was up to the task.

There were men whose personalities, shall we say, didn't mesh in an environment of emotional honesty and positive fellow feeling, who graciously dropped out. Some missed Friday nights now and then, but JR showed up consistently, and there was no questioning his dedication and fine character. I'm ten years older than JR, so I began to view him as a younger brother.

PPTG was founded in 2009 by Michael Rhynes and Clifton Williams. They enlisted the help of Stephen Cole, a Cornell theater professor, who passed away in September, 2015. We now have a deep bench of volunteers from Cornell University, Ithaca College, and the surrounding community: Bruce Levitt, first among equals, and his wife Judy; Mariana Amorim, Nick Fesette, Norm Johnson, Mary Rolland, Chris Seeds, and Alison Van Dyke. They give direction, coach, coddle, choreograph, and help our annunciation. In addition to my class of newjacks, there were veterans: David Bendezu, the wildchild; Demetrius Molina, Nathan Powell, Leroy Taylor. They are mentors, informal leaders, critical eyes, and providers of mirth and joy. Michael was transferred to Attica in August, 2015, where he is trying to establish a local branch of PPTG.

We practiced Rasa boxes, bioenergetics, improv, and Theater of the Oppressed. All designed to unearth buried emotions and help heal the wounds of our pasts, in a comfortable and secure environment, where emphasis was on real emotions even when the piece was imaginary. PPTG was a most transformative experience in my life. I learned that adult play is essential to creativity, trust, and resilience. It's an adaptive wild card. Laughing and having fun with ourselves led to healthy risk-taking. Life provides precious few opportunities for such constructive play.

JR slowly came alive from the positive attention, transforming his awkward hesitance into random smiles of belonging. I noticed it in me, too, as my defense mechanisms – aloofness, intellectualizing – melted away. Like JR, whose only extracurricular was PPTG, I wasn't always a joiner of programs. During the decade I spent in Attica, aside from the occasional Jewish holiday, the only volunteer program I partook of was the Attica Writers' Workshop. I was still getting high back then, and nighttime "call-outs" (permission slips to get us out of our cells) would've taken me away from that party. Now, two nights a week are spent at call-outs: Narcotics Anonymous on Mondays (I quit heroin in 1999, cigarettes in 2009, and, finally giving up bud, I've been sober since 2011), and Theater on Fridays. Both require emotional honesty, maturity, discretion.

They also deliver more personal growth than all the state-mandated programs combined. The state programs – Aggression Replacement (8 weeks), Alcohol and Substance Abuse Therapy (6 months), Thinking for a Change (10 weeks) – are filled with participants who begrudge being mandated into a program, and treat it not as an opportunity for growth, but something that must

be tolerated, faking it until they make it to the final day. Take it from me, a peer counselor who's worked for years as an instructor in those various programs: the bulk of instructor energy goes into managing disruptive behavior from men who don't want to help themselves, and it's common for peer counselors to become cynical.

That behavior also shows up in the GED classes, and turns many civilian teachers apathetic, which explained why JR wasn't learning much in school. A six-month course in electrical wiring satisfied his requirement to learn a vocational trade. Not much else on offer for him, which, I believe, motivated Michael, David, and Demetrius to offer JR's name for PPTG.

Michael went upstate in the early '80s, and had over thirty years experience with volunteer programs: yoga classes, meditation retreats, writers' workshops, theater groups, art programs. It was shortly after the '70s and '80s, when prisons were rebranded as correctional facilities, that the concept of rehabilitation was retired, and money for programs dried up. Thankfully, there are volunteers across the country who come into prisons and provide a service not able to be measured in dollars (see Jonathan Shailor's "Performing New Lives").

A boyish vulnerability about JR made us want to help. Several of us tried unsuccessfully to get him moved out of A-Block, the loudest, craziest block in Auburn. After a year without a disciplinary infraction, he was able to move to an honor company in another block (into Michael's old cell, actually, after he was transferred); his neighbors included PPTG members David and Ray, who mentored him.

I continued treating him like a kid brother. We were able to arrange an additional call-out once a week during the day, sans volunteers, to further prepare for our production, "This Incarcerated Life: The Foundation of a Pipe Dream" (check us out at [PhoenixPlayersAtAuburn.com](http://PhoenixPlayersAtAuburn.com)). My peers and I worked through material and discussed personal issues, occasionally bumping heads like raucous brothers, but being charitable and good-natured to each other, engaging in hilarious ribbing that made me laugh till my cheeks hurt. Perhaps it was then that I realized just how tight we were.

In quiet moments, I got to learn about JR, who's doing fifteen years for a robbery, which surprised me the way people are surprised when they learn I'm guilty of murder. That base curiosity satisfied, we progressed to details that more accurately define who he is as a person. He had PEGGY LEE tattooed on his wrist, his girlfriend, who had cancer, whom he had a hard

time reaching on the phone. The relationship was in trouble, which I'd learn later. Peggy had two kids from a previous relationship, and JR tried to imagine himself a father of their happy family, something dear to him because he never really had a family growing up. His early years were spent with his grandma in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, but he was removed from the home and became, his words, a "floater": "Five years here, six there, three there." Foster care and group homes, before coming to rest in a residential treatment facility in Yonkers.

I just sat with him as the revelations ceased and silence took over. Then he asked, "Who invented the chair?"

"Ha! What?!" It was a characteristic non sequitur, but I wondered if it wasn't his attempt to lighten the mood.

After a year of Friday night gatherings – writing, introspecting, performing, receiving love, and being listened to with nonjudgment – the transformative nature of PPTG was evident in all of us. I began to see myself through the volunteers' eyes, someone worthy of love and forgiveness. Why else would they continuously make the hours-long drive and give up their Friday nights each week?

JR's stark transformation became even more apparent when we began workshopping our pieces. By this point, he was radiantly goofy, so it was all the more jaw-rocking when he got up and delivered: "Father. I know what the word means, but I never knew my father. I talked to him one time on the phone when I was about six or seven years old." At twenty-nine, JR finally saw a picture of his father, but it accompanied an obituary that Peggy brought on a visit. He went on, plaintively addressing his father: "Dad, why weren't you there for me? I wish we could've played ball together. When kids came over, they asked where my dad was. I just tried to avoid the question.... I wonder if you and I had anything in common."

When he was done, we all stared in amazement, and then applauded, which sent him into awshucks headshaking.

Next week, he performed something equally powerful: "Now that I have time, I sit and wonder about what I really want in life. I always wanted a fambly. The last time I was really with my fambly was when I was around eight. I'm twenny-nine now." He spoke about Peggy and her kids, becoming animated as he described them coming to visit him, then dejected as he described Peggy's cancer. "Sometimes I don't get to talk to her for weeks, and that shit kills

me.” Now hopeful: “I want to thank God for sending my family to me, and I want to say, ‘Please God, can I dream?’ Please don’t take my family away from me.” Some of us were crying when he finished. But only I knew JR’s secret: Peggy had broken up with him the day before (they’ve gotten back together since).

He dug deep and his work put mine to shame. For those of you keeping track, I learned the answer to the question of what JR was doing in PPTG. It was the same reason I was there, along with all the others. We were looking for family, and we found each other.