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Life After Prison: A Different Kind of Sentence?, a Forum at the Boston Center for the Arts

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Commonwealth of Massachusetts

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Life After Prison: A Different Kind of Sentence?

In September 2012, the Boston Center for the Arts (BCA) hosted a forum on life after prison as part of its series, Dialogue: Social Issues Examined Through the Playwright's Pen. The forum coincided with performances at the Boston Center for the Arts of *The MotherF**ker with the Hat*, a play by Stephen Andy Guirgis about prisoner reentry.

Andrea J. Cabral, then sheriff of Suffolk County and secretary of public safety in Massachusetts, moderated the forum in BCA's Calderwood Pavilion, the same theater where SpeakEasy Stage Company was putting on the play. The four panelists work for nonprofit organizations primarily involved in assisting ex-offenders in making the transition back into society: Daniel Cordon, director of transitional employment at the Haley House in Roxbury and an ex-offender; Lyn Levy, founder and executive director of Span, Inc. in Boston; Gary Little, mentor coordinator at Span and an ex-offender; and Janet Rodriguez, founding president and CEO of SoHarlem in New York, which trains women given alternative sentences for nonviolent offenses to produce functional and wearable art.

What follows is an edited and abridged transcript of their discussion of "Life After Prison: A Different Kind of Sentence?" and is based on the Boston Center for the Arts recording of this segment of *Dialogue*, which examines social issues through an artistic lens. A discussion period with the audience is summarized because the questions are not clearly audible and not all questioners stated their names and identities.



Bettering Life After Prison

Gary Little, mentor coordinator at Span, Inc., (center) makes a forceful point during a discussion on prisoner reentry issues, held at the Boston Center for the Arts. Other participants, from left, were moderator Andrea Cabral, then sheriff of Suffolk County; Daniel Cordon, director of transitional employment at Haley House; Lyn Levy, founder and executive director of Span, Inc.; and Janet Rodriguez, founding president and CEO of SoHarlem in New York. The panelists spoke from the stage where a play about the trials of reentering society after incarceration was being performed in the fall of 2012. Photo courtesy of Boston Center for the Arts.



Passionate, Not Playing

*Veronica (Evelyn Howe) lets loose on Jackie (Jaime Carrillo), her formerly incarcerated live-in boyfriend, in *The Motherf**ker with the Hat*, a play that the Speak-Easy Stage Company produced at the Boston Center for the Arts in the fall of 2012. The drama about the obstacles facing released inmates takes its title from Jackie's pointed, profane question to Veronica about a hat he spots in their apartment and who it belongs to. Photo by Craig Bailey/Perspective Photo.*



Tell It

Jackie (Jaime Carrillo) and Ralph (Maurice Emmanuel Parent), friends, square off and speak direct truths to each other in this scene from The Motherfucker with the Hat, a play that the SpeakEasy Stage Company produced at the Boston Center for the Arts in the fall of 2012. Photo by Craig Bailey/Perspective Photo.

ANDREA CABRAL: Let me ask first, How many people have seen the play? [A few members of the audience raise their hands.] You have a great experience coming your way. I really encourage you to see the play.

I'll try not to spoil the play for you, but I'm not sure how well I'm going to be able to do that. Let me give you just a quick overview so what were going to talk about doesn't sound abstract. Jackie has just returned home after more than two years in prison for a drug conviction. He's also in recovery, has a sponsor, and has been sober for six months. As the play opens, he's coming home to the apartment he shares with his girlfriend, Veronica, who is very much *not* in recovery. Jackie is elated because he just got a job after months of looking. All is celebratory until he sees a hat that is not his sitting on a chair, which leads him to ask: "Who's the motherfucker with the hat?" And we are going to say the name of this play just like you said *Vagina Monologues*. That whole "mf with the hat" isn't working. The people who work with me—if they could hear me now—would be just absolutely thrilled. But he asks the question, and what follows is a very visceral exploration of

the difference between who we think we are, who we'd like to be, and who we really are, and whether or not in the end, those differences even matter.

So these are my jumping-off questions for the panelists. I warned Gary when I saw him this afternoon that I was going to ask him first. Gary, if *The Motherfucker with the Hat* symbolizes all the potential challenges, self-made and externally created, that ex-offenders face, how big is that universe? How big was it for you, and how big is it in the lives of the people for whom you work?

GARY LITTLE: For me, I have the luxury of having seen the play. That hat kind of defined everything in a nutshell for me. As you were saying, early on it was going one way, everything was celebratory, Jackie was doing what he needed to do for the transition, and when the notice of the hat came about, things changed. Without giving away the play, things changed, and a lot of issues came up in his reentry, his recovery and the path that he was on. It shows how easily one small decision, one event, can change a person's whole direction and path in life, and it can cause a lot of issues if you don't have the right support system, if you're not thinking clearly.

For me, personally I faced a lot of challenges my first time coming out, not having a support system, not really knowing what to expect, becoming overwhelmed with so many different people telling me what I should be doing and what was best suited for myself. The whole list of goals and things I wanted to do for myself and the mission I listed for myself, I sort of tossed it aside out of fear that if I didn't do what I was being told, whether it was my parole officer or the case manager at the house where I was staying, then there would be serious repercussions and consequences that would cost me, send me back to prison.

However, the second time when I came out, I made it clear: I was working off the list that I created for myself. I knew what was best for me. The people who I dealt with, I made it clear— although I needed services, assistance, and structure—I needed them to work with me on my plan, my goal, and my vision, the path I needed to be on, as opposed to placing me on someone else's path that they thought was best for me.

I deal with that a lot now with clients. I try to let them know and explain to them that it's not one answer for everybody. Although we deal with them in a group setting, everything is individualized. Issues are their issues although they may be similar to other people's. They have to find their path. They have to accept the fact the path that someone else takes isn't for them, just kind of work off where they're at and take time to get to where they need to get to. For some, it's very, very simple; for others, it's very, very difficult.

A lot of the things that we face coming out of prison—psychological, definitely psychological—and some of the answers that we get when we're seeking certain answers, people really are not prepared to answer or deal with at that time. When I went before the Board of Parole the last time, I made it clear what worked for me was going to therapy, doing group and one-on-one therapy. Their response was, then go to NA [Narcotics Anonymous]. I didn't have a drug and alcohol issue. I didn't feel that would work for me. But I had to make a conscious decision, whether I listen to what they say or whether I'm adamant about what I need, that this wasn't going to work. And we came to an understanding that I was going to follow my path, like it or not. If they didn't agree, then they could keep me behind the wall, and I can stay there until they come around. But I was not going to come out and dance with somebody else, and just become a revolving cycle for me, back and forth in prison. It wasn't worth it to me. I'd rather stay behind the wall than come out here and know that I was going to fail. So a lot of it is internal in dealing with the individual, but it helps for people who find the services for these individuals to understand all the challenges that they face, whether it's lack of education, lack of job skills.

Me and Danny were talking earlier about people's confidence level. We've been through a lot, being in there. Your confidence levels are down. You come out here, you're really not sure [of yourself]. You don't have any real structure. Prison is structured for you. When you come out here, there is absolutely no structure. You have to create that on your own. And you're asked to become responsible when you come into society. Behind the walls, your responsibilities are very limited, what you're responsible for. You come out here, you're responsible for

everything, so it can be a major, major challenge for folks reentering society, and to have a little insight and know what they're facing helps us better serve those we deal with.

ANDREA CABRAL: We're going to talk a little bit about the impact of self-esteem, which is the thing nobody ever talks about. Janet had you, prior to your experiences with SoHarlem, ever worked with people who had been involved with the criminal justice system, and now that you've been doing that for a bit of time, tell us what you expected and how your experiences compare with your expectations?

JANET RODRIGUEZ: First, I should clarify that I haven't been doing this a long time. My training program working with women and doing services with women as an alternative to incarceration is a year old, exactly, this month. I came to this in a very different—from maybe a not so different perspective. I live in Harlem. I was born in East Harlem, and I had been working with, I still work with, a developer in one of the last industrial areas in Harlem that has not been developed. He owns many of these buildings, and he agreed to provide me with space. He's a developer with a conscience, as I call it. He's been doing low- to moderate-income housing in Harlem for 25 years.

This was going to be kind of the first mixed-use development project [in Harlem], which is about 800,000 square feet. My question to him was: So how is this going to benefit local people? Because where we're based, we're surrounded by the highest, tallest public housing projects in New York, thousands and thousands of units. So whether we like it or not, it's a mixed-income community, and he wants to build a mixed-use development. I said I'm willing to work with you on how you prepare a workforce. So we talked about this. We met every week for about a year, and I started doing a lot of research in this area and realized from doing some research with the Justice Mapping Project that a very high percentage of people in my community were either incarcerated or were going to be incarcerated by at least by 2009, 2010, and I said, that's my community.

I have been totally overwhelmed with the disproportionate number of people of color in jail. That just keeps me up at night. It has for many years, from having family members and close friends in jail, and

constantly telling my son that my mission in life is for you not to go to jail. It's just an obsession of mine. It's so debilitating economically to our communities, never mind emotionally. I knew that I did not have the capacity starting a new social enterprise to provide all the services that folks who are either trying to reenter or still are incarcerated need, so I decided to partner with someone who knew how to do that.

What I could do is [I] could provide training programs. I could work with women. I have a group of artisans who had had backgrounds in teaching and were master artisans, so they're patient, they understand how to work with people. I had no expectations because I had never done this. One thing was very positive for me. I've always been of the opinion and from the school of thought that every single human being has a creative gene, a creative potential, but it's never really developed in everyone, particularly if you are poor. What was proven with the 14 or so women who have been trained, is that they all had it, and they all swore they never had art in school, they had never done anything creative for the most part, and they took off. They were probably the best workers I've ever had because it was just about, first of all, allowing someone to just think on their own, let's start with that, and respecting them. I think the biggest disappointment maybe is that when they leave SoHarlem, when they maybe go home on the weekends or have furloughs, they have relapses. The push and pull I had with my partner agency was when the women had relapses, they wanted to pull them from the program. And I said, "Wait, that's not real world. I know tons of functioning substance abuse people." [laughter from audience]

ANDREA CABRAL: A number of them in the audience right now.
[more audience laughter]

JANET RODRIGUEZ: We had to work that out because I said, "This is affecting everything. You just can't pull a person. We can find other ways to deal with some repercussions for that." It's a work in progress, and I'm constantly negotiating with my partner agency on how to deal with relapses, placement, and things of that nature.

ANDREA CABRAL: There's definitely a learning curve there for all of the people. Everyone thinks it's going to be a learning curve for the

folks who are coming in to benefit from the program. It always turns out to be a much greater learning curve for the people implementing it.

I probably should have told you [the audience] this, what it means to be sheriff in Massachusetts means is you run a county jail and a house of correction. So you have a population of people who are held on bail while their cases are pending but can't make that bail, and you also have a sentenced population. The Suffolk County Sheriff's Department is probably the 16th largest in the country, out of over 3,000, even though we occupy a very small geographical footprint in the city. That means we have a lot of inmates and pretrial detainees. My part in this is that we focus very heavily on reentry programs. We focus on educational and vocational programs. While people are doing their sentences, they have a specific focus on reentry.

Daniel, on occasion, when my schedule permits, I'll go to a graduation, either from a reentry program or a substance abuse and recovery program. I went to one at one time and remember saying to a group of male graduates, "You have to find a way to get past the worst thing that has ever happened to you and rise above the worst thing you've ever done." When I said it, I said to myself, "That sounds pretty good." Right? [laughter from audience] I walked away, finished the graduation, and as I was leaving I thought to myself, "That was unbelievably easy for you to say." That is not at all a small thing. And the way I said it literally rolled off my tongue. It sounded good, but when you think about what that is, you're asking "get past the worst thing that has ever happened to you and rise above the worst thing you've ever done." There are people who can't bring themselves to think about either of those two things.

My question to you is: One of the biggest things to sustaining a success is self-esteem, how we think of ourselves, how we present ourselves to others. How do you tackle these very delicate issues, both when you're dealing with clients, but also when you're dealing with employers? When you're trying to help somebody get a job and you're dealing with the people who might potentially help that person get a job, or you're trying to get the community engaged in helping this person get housing or a job?

DANIEL CORDON: That's a good question. My starting point will always be my own issue, which is 15 years' incarceration for homicide when I was 20 years old. From that though, I really learned the brokenness of humanity. I think if you use that as a starting piece—I don't care what part of the community you are, there's ownership in that. So either you've helped create a divide, you've helped perpetuate the "us and them," or you've directly impacted the breaking down of the fabric of the community. So everybody is involved, somehow, some way. And the worst ones, to me, turn a blind eye. But having said that, I recognize that everybody listens differently.

So I had the opportunity to be in prison to learn and hear the voices. And in the voices was always a welcomeness. It was never "the system did me wrong." No, they said that, but what was really being said was that I never gave myself a shot because I never believed that I had a shot. When you hear from the jailers, "that one's coming back." Well, part of your mission [as correctional officers] is also to invest and to help folk and to heal. First, custodial control, but you are working every day with a person who's going to go back into your community. There must be investment.

And then for employers, it's always the closed door: You're a liability. I'm not trying to entertain this. I don't need—if something comes up missing. And for the men themselves, to hear that you're not as strong or as powerful or as in control as you think you are because at the heart of your brokenness is the self-esteem piece. You allowed yourself to believe that you're less than deserving. You were afraid, like eight out of ten people [in prison], to engage in education that you know would have given you opportunities. And I will say in our society, the darker you are, the poorer you are, the fewer opportunities you believe or you recognize exist for you. So when you add in this lack of hope, that's a challenge. And it all rests with the men who are coming out, the women who are coming out, because an employer doesn't owe you anything. The community doesn't owe the vote for laws or policies that will make it more lenient. At the end of the day, it's for that person to look in the mirror and say I need to overcome this, because I deserve more. But that [means] being willing to actually put it to work, not just have a hand out.

So when I go in to [visit] employers, what I always try to stress to them is, one, [ex-offenders are] a part of your community; two, if you learn to look at them as an asset, you can grow a business on them. I'll give you a quick snapshot of what I teach my guys. You bring something to the table that nobody else looking for a job has. It's a bad economy. Everybody's looking for a job. What you are actually bringing to the table, though, is, one, a tax credit. So the moment you are hired you have just saved that company \$2400. Two, you have a parole officer, probation officer, aka professional babysitter. So if you honestly give the employer that person's name and say, "Listen, should you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to call him. If I don't show up, call him. Potentially I could go back. If I come in high or drunk, call him. I could potentially go back. By the way, I also undergo urinalysis and breathalyzers. I can get federal rebonding, so in any case something goes missing, you have assurance that you can be reimbursed. I'm coming out of a very stressful situation and very diverse people. Next to war or combat I don't think you can recreate that kind of intensity that's day in, day out, 24 hours a day. So, yes, I'm pretty good in stressful situations. [laughter from audience] And I'm a communicator."

As men—and this sort of goes to the self-esteem piece—prior to incarceration, nobody processes things. The moment you get locked up, and forgive me, you become an old woman. Because you're going to talk and you're going to gossip about everything, because you've got nothing but time. So when you get that letter in the mail that says, I got rid of your dog, sold the car, and I'm never writing you again, you're going to talk about it. When you call on the phone and tell your daughter, "You can't go on a date," and she says, "I already did," and you realize that you have no control, you need to process things. So you are learning a coping mechanism that is actually useful and very, very helpful when you get out, [for example], being able to communicate with customers. We have a bakery café. The first spot you're going to go on is the cash register. That's the easiest spot in our café.

The other piece that I'm always sharing with employers is that you can build a business on this person. When I talked about the "us and them," to make sure "they" always stay over there, we have a

CORI [background check under the Massachusetts Criminal Offender Record Information Act]. That is the sentence after the sentence, and I'll say it out loud. In certain circumstances, we should have it. When we're dealing with kids, we should have a CORI [check]. When we're dealing with certain populations that potentially could be influenced or taken advantage of, we should have it. However, it should not be a second sentence that's imposed.

But for a business owner, it's actually a good thing. Because a forward thinker, somebody who's inside always thinking about "when I get out, I can't wait, when my time comes," well, all a business owner has got to say is, "Hey, I'd love you to become a supervisor. Watch what he does. Learn it. Everything." And he can see that. Because [the employee] also understands loyalty. See, everybody else has closed the door on his face. This employer gives him an opportunity. He's going to give him the shirt off his back. So being able to build a business, you don't have to worry about training and losing the dollars. Because the second he leaves, after being there six years, guess what? He starts all over again. You have a CORI [record]. You have a [criminal] background. So for the employer, the courage is to stand in the face of public perception and say I will invest in my community. Smart employers actually begin to see, "you know something, this is actually to my advantage because I can also market that I invest in my community." But all this only works if Gary, myself, and everybody else who comes home actually does the work, has the confidence and the self-esteem to say, "When I'm given that opportunity, I'll hit it out of the park."

ANDREA CABRAL: Now, Lyn, I know that Span's work has made life or death differences in people for what—38 years now? The position you occupy, given the length of time that you've been doing this work, is absolutely unique, not just in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. So I'll ask you an easy one. [laughter from audience] What's changed over the last 38 years, what's stayed the same, in terms of your experience with the clients? Is it more difficult now than it was when you first started? Where have we moved forward, and where are still stuck in the kind of puritanical spirit that makes us delight in punishing people so much?

LYN LEVY: That's an easy question?

ANDREA CABRAL: That's a very easy question.

LYN LEVY: Oh, my God. Well, I don't think that much has changed. I have to say my first reaction to that question is that I think that we have a set of issues in this state and this country that folks are beginning to quantify in the research that they are doing, identifying prisons as a way to create, in Michele Alexander's language, "a new Jim Crow." We have developed a system that uses incarceration and punishment as an answer to mental health issues, substance abuse issues, psychological problems, a lack of education, communities that don't function, folks who have not been able to get a grip on things largely because the opportunities are so few and far between that people have had to come up their own ideas and ways of following the American Dream. I read an interesting book or listened to an interesting book—I'm too old now to read, I fall asleep—called the *Outliers*, by Malcolm Gladwell. There were a couple of quotes in there that I wrote down because I wanted to bring them with me, because they really said a lot to me. "Success is not a random act. It arises out of a predictable and powerful set of circumstances and opportunities. What happens when one possesses ingenuity and drive without the advantages, without the opportunities and without the supports?" And that's the system we have created here.

We are trying to create a strength-based way of looking at things, and people who have been able to survive incarceration for as little as an hour to as much as a lifetime, have learned skills that are transferable in almost every avenue in the community. Folks have learned how to communicate with people. In spite of the fact that African Americans and Latinos make up a very small percentage of this state, they make up two thirds of the population of our prisons. It's probably the most racially and ethnically balanced institution we have—for all the wrong reasons, but it exists.

People have learned how to communicate, how to share, how to talk to each other, how to build relationships—and by people I mean inmates, folks who are serving time. People learn how to make quick decisions. Folks learn how to make quick judgments. People learn how to take care of themselves, in some of the most adverse circumstances

that are ever possible. When you could smoke in institutions but you couldn't have matches, people learned how to make a match out of a light bulb and some toilet paper. There are books that have been published, probably under the table, that teach people who are going into prison how to take care of themselves and how to create condom. Surprise, surprise: There's sex in prisons. There are drugs in prison. People [in prison] have learned some amazing things.

Those skills are transferable, except for one thing, and that is: We're branding people and we're giving them a life sentence, whether they're locked up or not. Your CORI passes with you when you walk out the door, and it stays with you forever. I don't think this is new. I think we've [recently] discovered it. All of a sudden, we're hearing all this Michelle Alexander stuff—and, thank God. She wrote a wonderful book. I think this has been true since we started, since I started in the system. I think we have kept prosperous an industry that builds itself on denying people the opportunity to succeed, and putting obstacles that are so concrete, literally and figuratively, that it is no wonder that people have developed community industries that have nothing to do with legitimate business, and have learned how to take care of themselves in ways that, in many other cultures, would be applauded.

We don't treat addicts in prison. We don't raise families in prison. We don't do a whole lot of education in prison. This is not new. This is the same. Now what's happening, I think, is that we have come to a place where, perhaps for the wrong reasons, we can turn this around a little bit. It's very expensive to keep somebody locked up. It costs \$45,000 a year to keep someone in prison. It costs Span \$8,000 to keep someone out of prison for a year. Let's do the math. It's really that simple. I think if we saw a different population, if most of the folks in prison looked like me [white], instead of look[ing] like Gary [black] and Danny [Latino], that wouldn't be the case. And I believe that to the bottom of my feet. I believe that's true.

I think that we have a responsibility to build community that does not look at social issues as a disease and does not look at folks who have social problems as maniacs. That is pretty simple. So I'm not sure we've come a very long way. I think we've got a language that we didn't use to have.

Span was an agency that we developed specifically to work with folks who were reintegrating from incarceration. Nobody knew what we were talking about. We got money from drug treatment departments. We got money from mental health funders. We got money from community-based organizations that were trying to register people to vote. We just happened to write grants [for] the entire population that we were serving, and there were people who were coming home [from prison]. It was like we flipped. Now reintegration rules everywhere. “We’re thinking reintegration 24 hours a day.” It’s amazing, and still, this is not considered a worthy population. I don’t think that’s any different, either. I think that that is one of the things that has really continued. I tell you as someone who has to raise money to make this stuff happen: Show me a sick kid, you know, they’ll give me a million dollars; show me sick adult who’s locked up—see you later, forget about it, it’s not important.

ANDREA CABRAL: Well, it is very much grounded in notions of punishment. People forget the country was founded by Puritans. Nobody did punishment like them. [laughter from audience] You gossip, so now you’re going to sit in stocks on the Boston Common, and people are going see you and you’ll be humiliated. The notion of our punishment comes from [the idea that] once you are punished you will feel duly chastised, and you will not do it again. Well, that’s completely antithetical to human behavior. I know cigarettes are bad. How many people are still smoking? Everybody knows cigarettes are bad. [laughter from audience]

Of course, it’s antithetical to human behavior to think because something is bad for us or because others tell us we shouldn’t do it, that we will not do it. It’s why abstinence doesn’t work. So our desire to punish also comes from our desire to blame and cast judgment because it is a distraction from the things that we probably should be working on with ourselves. That’s why reality shows are really popular, because it’s great to sit in your house—and it started with Jerry Springer and Ricky Lake and all the rest of them—and think, you know what, I don’t have a job, I’ve got a really bad life, and my boyfriend just left me, but I’m not her. [laughter from audience] That’s why we watch

reality shows, to say I'm not her, alright. And now they're an industry unto themselves. That I think is a problem for us, too. It just, for some reason, makes us feel better to always to be able to compare our lot in life with that of someone else. The more you hold them back, the further ahead, somehow, in people's minds, you seem to be.

During the discussion period, a man who was once incarcerated had praise for the conversation about reentry issues. He compared the psychological trauma of being in prison to being a soldier in war, and said he works, supports four children, and goes to therapy, which he once had thought of as taboo. Another man indicated he had a tough time while incarcerated in the Suffolk County House of Correction and vows never to return. Andrea Cabral responded that the institution has changed and predicted the change would last because correctional officers tend to keep their jobs a long time, and once they have established one way of doing their jobs, they will repeat that pattern for a long time. She said that it is why it is very important to make the right hires.

In response to a woman's question, Cabral said reentry is handled by correctional institutions during incarceration and then private organizations like Span after release. She said that young offenders between ages 17 and 25 are the hardest to get focused on reentry issues. "They're busy learning to be tougher. At that age...that's what is important, what they look like in other people's lives." Garry Little said women in that age range are more receptive than the men.

Daniel Cordon said he tells younger offenders who have been released: "Listen, I don't really care what you do. I did my time. I don't get paid extra money if I work with you, if you decide to go out and do whatever. Just so you'll know, here's what you got coming or this is your option." Cordon said giving them options stokes a "flame of hope" and gets them engaged. The Haley House, Cordon said, screens applicants for its program based on their participation in the limited programs inside prison, efforts to build family relationships, and commitment to striving. So far 24 men have been through the program, and only 2 have returned to custody. The Transitional Employment Program is always fully subscribed, Cordon said.

Lyn Levy said Span serves about 1,000 people a year. She and Cabral noted about 30,000 to 33,000 inmates are released in Massachusetts every year, with only 3,000 coming out of state prisons. The rest come out of county institutions. Levy said young released prisoners do understand the consequences of returning to incarceration. “I don’t believe anyone wants to go back to prison. Start there. It can make difference,” she said. Levy, remembering Cabral’s question to her about what has and has not changed, said the prison experience remains unchanged since Span started in 1974. “Prison doesn’t work. Folks know prison doesn’t work.”

This content was recorded on September 18, 2012, as part of Dialogue, a panel discussion hosted by the Boston Center for the Arts that examines social issues through an artistic lens.