

Incarcerated women's stories come to life on stage at TheatreWorks

By Michael Lollar

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Her parents hadn't talked to each other for 30 years until her mother showed up to see Taketha Wilkins' experience as part of a play. It was in prison, where Wilkins said she is serving an eight-year sentence for robbery.

The play, "Prison Stories III," was performed a month ago inside the Shelby County Correction Center in preparation for a public debut Thursday at TheatreWorks. Stories bottled up for years pour out in the play. They are stories of pent-up anger, death, meth labs, beatings, babies, prison food and, oddly, a joy in sharing the saddest stories.

"It made me feel like my voice matters. I had been holding in my story for so long," says Wilkins. In the play, she tells of a father who was a wife batterer and terrorized her and her brother as well. Her mother stood between the father and the children, begging him to leave the children alone. "Beat me," she pleaded. Unable to speak up as a child, Wilkins says turning her terror into words in a play gave her strength. "It made me express myself. It made me a better person."

And it gave her mother the courage to confront the past. "It helped her talk to my dad about things they had went through a long time ago," says Wilkins, who is in a transitional unit for women who will soon complete their sentences.

Enter Rev. Elaine Blanchard, storyteller, writer, nurse, ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and winner of a Jefferson Award for voluntarism. Blanchard grew up in a household with two brothers and a father. The brothers got along with their father, but, for Blanchard, it wasn't so easy.

"I was well-fed and there was a roof over my head, so everything is relative. But I grew up in a rigid, judgmental and misogynist environment. I was pretty much dismissed. I grew up feeling like I was invisible. My inspiration to go to the prison and listen to women's stories comes from the pain of being dismissed, neglected and forgotten," says Blanchard, an unpaid volunteer.

She proposed "Prison Stories" to give women a way to "set free" their stories as part of a play. It is an aspect of the prison's 3 R Project (Rehabilitate, Renew, Reconnect), a federally funded program to help women move from structured prison environments to sudden freedom and resist the temptations that landed them in prison.

Blanchard enlisted actresses to play the roles of inmates, while veteran actor, writer and stage director Jerre Dye helped her tie the women's stories into a cohesive

production. All are volunteers.

Inmates who took part also volunteered. Each installment of "Prison Stories" includes 12 inmates who sit in a circle two days a week for 16 weeks and talk about themselves and issues. Blanchard assigns each group to read two books, a coming-of-age novel, "Their Eyes Were Watching God," by Zora Neale Hurston, and a Zen writer's guide, "Writing Down the Bones," by Natalie Goldberg.

As they discuss the books, the women open up about themselves, says Blanchard. At night, they keep a diary. Themes tend to repeat with each new group -- body image, food, mothers, unintended pregnancies, life in prison and violence. "Almost everybody has been abused physically and sexually," says Blanchard.

Actress Courtney Oliver, who plays two of the women in "Prison Stories III," says the process seems like a form of group therapy for the inmates. And the scripts often point to a common theme. "Their crimes are committed out of necessity. It's always down to money, needing to pay for yourself or your kids." And, she says, the women seem to seize on humor as a coping mechanism. "They want to laugh so badly. Prison is a horrible place. They miss their families, their children, their parents or other loved ones."

When the stories come together in a single play, Oliver says, "It's a serious, funny, dark and wonderful piece."

Actress Janie Crick says the play is "raw," but "heartbreaking and inspiring at the same time. It proves the women are real human beings. They have lives. They're people just like us who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time or got caught up in something they shouldn't."

Among the latest group, inmate Barbara Ball, 64, is serving five years for aggravated burglary. Her son died of leukemia at 13, and a sister was killed. Ball says her grief turned into an expensive drug habit to numb the pain. Nikita Jefferson, 33, is serving four years for aggravated assault. She was 9 when her 7-year-old sister died of random gunfire in their neighborhood.

"I had never talked about it. I just kept it bottled in," she said, until she began to write about it as part of "Prison Stories."

Akisha Shaw, 35, serving two years for theft of property, found a willing audience to finally talk about insecurity and doubt. The play tells of her father, who is white, wanting little to do with her because she is black.

The stories come together unlike the narrative story line of a traditional play. "It's more like a photo album of life, or a quilt," says Blanchard, with each of six actresses having two voices onstage.

While the justice system hopes to reduce repeat offenses through the project, the inmates say they have found an immediate benefit. Ball says inmates seldom trust each other and sometimes argue. But when they share their stories they learn they have problems in common and learn to trust.

Or, as Blanchard puts it, "People are people wherever you go."

-- *Michael Lollar: (901) 529-2793*

Women's stories shared on stage

"Prison Stories III" will debut at 7 p.m. Thursday at TheatreWorks at 2085 Monroe. The play is a production of theater company Voices of the South. Admission is by suggested donation of \$20 per person with proceeds to fund books, notebooks and pens for female inmates whose stories are the basis for the play.



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