

Prison Stories Lends Ear to Women Behind Bars

By Aisling Maki

[Elaine Blanchard](#) has a reputation in the Memphis community as a gifted storyteller, but her greatest gift seems to lie in her willingness to listen, particularly to those who are listened to least.

Blanchard goes to great lengths seeking out the stories of society's most disenfranchised individuals. She's spent a summer living with homeless African-American men at The Open Door Community in Atlanta and crossed the border to hear the stories of low-wage women workers fighting for economic and environmental justice in Tijuana, where she listened through a Spanish interpreter.

Nearly two years ago, Blanchard approached the Shelby County Division of Corrections requesting that she be allowed to listen to women behind bars – 12 at a time, who would sit with Blanchard in a circle twice a week for 90 minutes at a time, over a period of four months.

“I told them I wanted to listen to the women's stories and help them be better listeners to each others' stories,” Blanchard said. “And they said, ‘Yes.’ I think most people go to jails to save souls. I just wanted to listen, and that was different.”

January 2010 saw the birth of Prison Stories, a long-term project inviting women in prison to openly communicate their stories of family, motherhood, violence, crime, love and loss.

The program has been supported by ArtsMemphis for the past two years, receiving grants as a community outreach project of Voices of the South, a Memphis based nonprofit theater company that creates, produces and performs theater representing diverse Southern perspectives.

The project also brings in guest artists and writers to the prison, including Commercial Appeal columnist [Wendy Thomas](#), Memphis Flyer staff writer [Chris Davis](#) and Voices of the South artistic director and playwright Jerre Dye.

“The women live in an environment that insists they're not trustworthy,” Blanchard said. “This is an experience where they are trusted and can trust themselves and each other and build a bond within that circle that strengthens as the months go by. As more stories are shared, people risk more and connect more. And there's a lot of crying and laughing that happens in the circle.”

The women in Blanchard's class are no strangers to sexual abuse, domestic violence and poverty. Many became pregnant before finishing high school, often through sexual assault. One woman had borne children at ages 12, 13 and 15, and all three of her pregnancies resulted from rapes.

For most of these women, Blanchard is the first encouraging mentor who's ever walked into their lives.

“Going to the prison and allowing the women to share their stories and experience their stories being valued, and giving them an opportunity to imagine a new and better and improved story for their future is healing – not only for them, but for the city of Memphis,” said Blanchard, who hopes that her work will bring healing and a sense of human value not only to the program's women but to the 48 children they have among them.

Blanchard has invited the Memphis Child Advocacy Center to bring its Stewards of Children

workshop into the prison this semester to educate the women about child sexual abuse.

“It is my hope and prayer that I’m impacting those children positively by listening to and valuing the stories that their mothers tell,” Blanchard said. “I believe stories are our legacy; they’re what we leave to our children.”

Blanchard can relate to feeling disenfranchised. She said she can “identify with people who are locked up because I’ve been trapped so much in my life.”

“As a woman, I was diminished and shamed in a very religious misogynist family, and then married a man who mirrored that,” she said. “I believed that those fences were meant for me and that I had nothing to give, that I was a troublemaker and a problem – and then I began telling stories.”

She said her gift for storytelling and writing made her feel valuable, giving her, for the first time, a sense of purpose and belonging.

Blanchard studied theater and earned a degree in philosophy from the University of Tennessee at Martin. She also went to nursing school and worked as a registered nurse for 22 years, primarily with people recovering from chemical addictions.

“That’s probably where I got some of my compassion for people who get in trouble with the law; Most of the time, there’s an addiction involved,” she said.

Blanchard later received a Master of Divinity from Memphis Theological Seminary, and though she still delivers guest sermons at local churches, she believes sharing her stories outside church walls has a greater impact.

When each semester of Prison Stories comes to a finish, Blanchard stages two performances – one inside the prison and one outside – using local actors to tell the women’s stories.

“The women in the prison are so supportive of those women whose stories get told because it’s their story too,” she said. “The people on the outside are curious when they walk through the door and a little off balance when they leave because they realize the stories were more normal than they’d expected.”