

Wendi C. Thomas: Jailed women share stories

By Wendi C. Thomas

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The goal is not to fix women, but to listen and build a community of trust.

Silence and tears will be respected. And above all, every woman has a story to share.

So says storyteller Elaine Blanchard, who is teaching women incarcerated at the Shelby County Correction Center to tell their own stories.

And the power of listening can be transformative to women who aren't making excuses about how they landed behind bars but instead candidly share their lives' journeys.

"We can 'listen' each other into higher and better places," Blanchard explained Friday to a packed house at Voices of the South's theater in the basement of First Congregational Church in Midtown.

A rapt audience gathered Friday to bear witness to these women's humanity, in the first free world presentation of "Prison Stories."

The imprisoned women were given a voice by six performers: Leah Nichols, Debra Brittenum, Brooke Sarden, Sharon Pavelda, Maria Debacko and Jazzy Miller.

One by one, and sometimes in chorus, the performers spoke of knowing better than to, for example, "drink, drug and take off driving."

The stories were of the "glorious" food on the outside, the prison-issued shoes called "Jackie Chans," of a poignant reunion with a daughter who didn't recognize her mother.

Some of the stories were somber, such as the one about a woman who turned to stripping as a job, nervous to be nearly naked in front of leering men.

The story of a woman who, as a girl, saw her father shoot and kill her mother before shooting himself left the audience silent and still. The violence "invited her to be an abusive person."

Others prompted laughter, such as the one of a woman who was stopped by the police in Bartlett at night, and told the officer she was taking her son in the back seat to school. Problem is, it was her dog in the car, not a child.

The program, which will soon start its third class, began in January 2010 when Blanchard asked the county jail for 12 women.

Twice a week for four months, the women came and shared their stories.

"They came to recognize that they were women of great personal strength, because their stories matter," Blanchard said.

She describes herself as an actor, storyteller, writer, nurse and chaplain. But titles confine this petite, gray-haired bright light, whose spirit of kindness and active listening can be seen from across the room.

Why, some might ask, would you give witness to the experiences of women who have run so afoul of the law?

"That's a good question," Blanchard said. But she does because she believes God told her too. He called her to this work, and she answered the call.

But "Prison Stories" speaks to Blanchard, who has never been incarcerated or known many people who were, and her sense of feeling trapped in her own life -- by her gender, sexuality, rigid religion and childhood abuse.

"I know what it is to be held back by society and systems."

The program isn't religious or designed to be redemptive, although it can be.

"These are women who made mistakes and my hope is that if we show them their own creative potential and begin to value their stories that they won't be as quick to turn to their old practices and make the same mistakes.

"I also believe that when we go into the correctional center and help one woman, we help a host of children."

When Blanchard's storytellers are released, they're invited to meet her twice a week at Caritas Village in Binghamton.

So far, no one has come. But every week, Blanchard is there -- faithful to the commitment she's made to these women, knowing that these women need the support of the free community to make it.

"One day, we're going to have a group on Wednesdays at 6 o'clock."

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