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Workers

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April 2011. Vol. 15, No. 2. – Community Arts Behind the Walls: Grady Hillman

BY CULTUREWORK, ON APRIL 20TH, 2011

In the current issue of *CultureWork*, Grady Hillman chronicles his experience visiting the Oregon State Correctional Institute (OSCI) with a cohort of university faculty, graduate students, and community arts leadership. Their goal was to meet with the OSCI Crochet Club, a prison group that crochets blankets, caps, and other fabric items for needy organizations outside the prison. Hillman explores the surprises, contradictions, and self-reflections that arose from the experience.

Regards,

Julie Voelker-Morris
Robert Voelker-Morris
Editors

Community Arts Behind the Walls

[Grady Hillman](#)

(Note: Below article links open in a separate browser window or tab)

In January, I visited the University of Oregon (UO) as a guest of the Center for Community Arts and Cultural Policy (CCACP) (<http://ccacp.uoregon.edu>) in a three day stint organized by my good friend, Lori Hager. Lori, Assistant Professor within the Community Arts Concentration of the Arts & Administration Program at the UO, and I have known one another for several years and worked together through the

Community Arts Convening and Research Project

(http://www.mica.edu/news/community_arts_convening_and_research_project.html). I received an M.A. in Linguistic Anthropology with specialization in Folklore a long time ago, and I've always cited Lori as another rare example of anthropologist turned community arts activist (or *animateur* (1) , a term I learned which describes me according to the flyer announcing my visit). It always appeared to me that the contemporary community arts field has derived its major strands of articulation from arts education (curriculum-based), sociology and social work (therapeutic and social change methodologies), and the old guild model (master artist/apprentice structures) while I felt like anthropology had a lot to offer.

Many community arts programs are grounded in our commonality, the kindred nature of human experience and the egalitarian desire to share the artistic tools of expression to those of us who are marginalized. (2) That is a noble and functional construct. The anthropological approach—at least my version of it—accepts this but goes beyond to recognize the “otherness” of those whom we work with in alternative settings, and that they have as much to teach us as we do them. The University of Oregon CCACP programs exemplify this approach. Prior to visiting Eugene for my lectures and workshops, I had the serendipitous opportunity to have dinner with Lori; John Fenn, Assistant Professor in the Media Arts concentration of Arts & Administration at the UO; and Doug Blandy, Department Head of Arts and Administration and Associate Dean for the School of Architecture and Allied Arts. Over wine and Thai food, we enjoyed a lively inter-disciplinary dialogue about community arts. I remember most clearly Doug's summoning of the spirit of Paolo Freire whose educational outreach philosophy asserted that educators learn more from their students than the students learn from the educators. Doug founded the Institute for Community Arts Studies which became CCCAP, and he'd extended this educational mantra to students and faculty working in community settings. I also found it unique that the Institute for Community Arts Studies was the historical umbrella not only for the Center for Community Arts and Policy but also the Oregon Folklife Network.

Lori's invitation for me to visit Oregon was not based on our friendship or collegial regard, but because I have spent some 30 years developing arts-in-corrections programs in the United States and abroad. Over the past few months, there had been a convergence of Oregon academic and community interest in this field, and she wanted me there to help explore, discuss, and share information, but also, to serve as a catalyst for meaningful dialogues and cooperation. The strands of collaboration were led by Kelley Totten, Assistant Director of the UO's Center for Intercultural Dialogues (which had just initiated a three year Peace and Prisons Initiative; see <http://unesco.uoregon.edu/>); Melissa Crabbe, Assistant National Director of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program (see <http://www.insideoutcenter.org/home.html>); Steven Shankman who wears many hats as Director of the Center for Intercultural Dialogue, the UNESCO Chair for Transcultural Studies, Interreligious Dialogue, and Peace, and member of the Steering Committee of the national Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program; and, Lisa Gilman, Program Director of Folklore Studies from UO with sponsorship from the Oregon Folklife Network. My stint in Oregon fulfilled this anthropologist/community arts activist's dream of a personally ideal organizational array.

Another sponsor of my visit was Tim Hicks, Director of the Master's Degree Program in Conflict and Dispute Resolution at UO. Lori had touted me as an expert in arts and restorative justice and Kelley thought Tim's program might want to sign on as a co-sponsor of my visit. The invitation evoked an e-mail dialogue. Tim's initial contention when asked to be a sponsor of my visit was that the link to conflict resolution was thin, that our definition of "restorative justice" was different from that of his program's which applies to a process "in which an offender takes responsibility and everyone involved is helped to be able to move forward from an injury in as constructive and healing manner as possible." He acknowledged the healing quality of the arts. I agreed with Tim that there were two different definitions of "restorative justice." One he applied based on a process of Victim Offender Mediation. Mine was grounded in the use of cultural and traditional practices to mediate between offenders and the communities they'd injured with the intent of restoring offenders to their communities as members in full standing after "giving back" through the creation of art which demonstrated an understanding of the values of that community.

Since our initial correspondence, Tim and I have discovered convergences of our practice models in our parallel work in Northern Ireland, and we've continued to correspond about his on-going work with water management disputes in Kenya and my interest in the arts-in-restorative justice practices in New Zealand and Australia informed by traditional Maori and Aboriginal culture.

My visit was packed with similar potent dialogues that I'd like to say emanated from my lectures; however, the seminal event that set the stage was a visit to the Oregon State Correctional Institute (OSCI), a medium security prison for men in Salem. Melissa and Kelley had set up a visit with the OSCI Crochet Club, a prison group that crochets blankets, caps, and other fabric items for needy organizations on the outside. Nineteen of us—faculty members, students, and leadership from the sponsors—were to meet with an unknown number of inmates. As it turned out, almost all the inmate artists from the prison crafts shop had turned out, prepared an elaborate display of material and visual art, and were ready to meet me, the prison art expert. They were as surprised by our numbers and composition as we were by the sophistication and variety of their work, and that 31 of them were joining us.

Melissa, an expert at college/prison collaboratives, organized a "wagon wheel" ice breaker that I can only describe as something like a hybrid of circular speed-dating with square-dancing *call out* questions, mostly about personal experiences with the arts. It worked well to subdue nervousness on both sides. I then organized the group into a large circle with everyone individually introducing himself or herself along with a brief statement about why they'd come or a question they'd come to have answered.

While Melissa and I recorded the various themes of their responses, it became apparent to me that there was a significant dynamic presenting itself. We had the townspeople, the prisoners, who were in need of cultural planning assistance, and we had the visitors from outside who had training, if not always a lot of experience, in community arts planning. The townspeople seemed to have interests that followed three somewhat distinct themes: expansion of arts programming in the OSCI and other prisons, using the arts as a vehicle for "giving back," and professional arts

development by being more engaged with the professional arts world outside.

Apart from my work with arts-in-corrections, I also have been developing cultural plans for towns and cities based on their historic, cultural, and artistic assets. I had never done it before in a correctional setting, but that's what wanted to happen at the OSCI—a town meeting planning session. To summarize the process, we held three break-out sessions of self-selected townies and outsiders around the three big issues. Guided questions asked the break-out sessions to go beyond wants to strategies for successful outcomes, an action plan. There were recorders and facilitators in each group and a report out to the larger group. Groups found the process to be extraordinarily successful, all learning from one another, and all empowered by the utilization of individual knowledge and experience to a common purpose.

There was no time for me to return to the OSCI after we left to debrief with the folks who live there. However, it was apparent that something truly significant had happened for the students and faculty who made the journey. Prior to my visit, Lori's graduate students had read some of my articles and posited a series of questions for me about arts-in-corrections programs. On our way to Salem from Eugene to visit the OSCI, I made the ride in one of the vans with a group of students and faculty and was able to discuss some of the policy and cultural issues about prison work. However, on the way back after the visit with the same students, there was a strange quiet with intermittent attempts at discussion but nothing that satisfied. They were struggling to find language that adequately described the fresh experience; it was personal now and not theoretical.

The next morning, a Roundtable Discussion was scheduled for me with the same students. This was also attended by faculty and students who had not made the trip. We even had an entire University fabric arts class present to hear about the OSCI Crochet Club. It immediately became apparent that the students who made the trip were ready to talk about it, needed to talk about it. They had crossed the liminality between cultures, found counterparts on the other side who lived in a very different world, had found a common language in art-making, and come back changed by the experience. One topic that immediately came up was their visceral response to meeting the men at OSCI. They had traversed a labyrinth of security to get into the prison, only to enter a vast illuminated corridor with lines of convicts walking along the walls. The Corrections Officer who was leading our group firmly ordered that we get in single file in the middle of the hallway but stay at least 5 feet from the prisoners and not to make eye contact. Thirty seconds later, we turned into the Education room which was packed with thirty plus prisoners, milling around in close quarters and we were making room for ourselves within their group. Several students remarked that they felt panic and had to overcome a flight response. They were bewildered by the contradictory conventions of the space and thrown off by the abrupt riptide of constructed identities—on this side of the door dangerous convicts, on that side fellow artists. What were the roles? In the turbulence of that reality mix, they discovered much about themselves, about the people they met, about the criminal justice system, and about the power of art to bring coherency to lives in conflict. Freire's mandate was satisfied.

Many of the same students and faculty who visited OSCI are still at work with Kelley Totten and Lisa Gilman who are working in collaboration with the Oregon Folklife Network to create an exhibit of the artwork from OSCI to open at the *Cascadia Symposium on Prisons, Peace, and Compassion* (3) near Seattle May 20-22. I am gratified that our exercise in cultural planning behind the walls is bearing fruit.

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1. For more about animating in community arts see Smith, Mark K. (2009). *Animateurs, animation and fostering learning and change. The encyclopaedia of informal education*. Original published 1999. Retrieved from <http://www.infed.org/animate/b-animat.htm>. [\[back to text\]](#)

2. As Lori Hager and Arlene Goldbard have well-documented, the community arts field has deep roots in the settlement houses of the late 1800s which served new immigrant populations, the Works Progress Administration with its arts outreach during the Great Depression (much of it in the arena of folklore), and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of the 1970s which recruited artists to work in homeless shelters, hospitals, senior centers, and prisons among other non-traditional venues. [\[back to text\]](#)

3. Learn more about the upcoming conference at http://unesco.uoregon.edu/programs/ppc_may2011.html [\[back to text\]](#)

Hillman is Director of the Center for Community Arts at Texas State University-San Marcos and has worked extensively as a resident artist, program administrator, and arts consultant for local, state, federal, and foreign agencies in the development of arts programs for community settings. From 1999 to 2002, he was Technical Assistance Provider to a federal initiative Arts Programs for Young Offenders in Detention and Corrections, a Discretionary Grant program of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). From 2002-2004, Hillman served as a consultant to another federal initiative partnering the National Guild for Community Schools for the Arts, the Arts Endowment and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Creative Communities. Hillman has published extensively in the area of community arts and humanities programs including two monographs for Americans for the Arts: *Artists in The Community: Training Artists to Work in Alternative Settings* (1996) and *The Arts and Humanities as Agents for Social Change: Summary Report of the 4th International Congress of Educating Cities* (1998). In 2002, he published *Arts Programs for Juvenile Offenders in Detention and Corrections: A Guide to Promising Practices for OJJDP and the NEA*.

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3 comments to April 2011. Vol. 15, No. 2. – Community Arts Behind the Walls: Grady Hillman

Scott

May 18, 2011 at 5:54 pm

Grady's work is well known for making a difference in people's lives. He is able to make something beautiful from something people have thrown away. Keep up the great work Grady!

Jax

July 25, 2011 at 1:25 pm

It sounds Grady Hillman has a lot to contribute to the field. He is a smart individual who can transform the lives of people that others wouldn't.

CultureWork

October 6, 2011 at 11:31 am

HOOKS, YARNS AND BARS, an exhibit about the group of incarcerated men at the Oregon State Correctional Institute that Grady Hillman write about above, will run October 17 – 21 in the LaVerne Kraus Gallery on the University of Oregon campus. The exhibit highlights this group of men, Crochet 4 Community, who spend 12-14 hours a week together crocheting hats, blankets, scarves, booties to give to people in need locally and globally. The show highlights their crocheted items, other works of art, pictures within OSCI and interviews describing how being a part of Crochet 4 Community has had a positive impact on these individuals lives.

UO Folklore and MFA graduate student Lyle Murphy has curated this iteration of the exhibit. Many of the items in the show will be available for purchase. The money will go back to the Crochet 4 Community group, enabling the members access to more materials in order to create new items for donation. There will also be a yarn collection box in the gallery that will be given to the group at the end of the exhibit. For more information, please contact Lyle Murphy at lyle@uoregon.edu. The exhibit is co-sponsored by the Oregon Folklife Network, the Center for Intercultural Dialog, and the Folklore Program.

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