

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/dispatches-from-t-r-u-e/looking-back-toward-a-better-future>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

This post was written by James, a mentor in the T.R.U.E. unit at Cheshire Correctional Institution. T.R.U.E unit mentors are people serving life without parole sentences at the Connecticut Department of Corrections. Through a competitive application process, 10 mentors were selected to live and work on the unit with the young adults. Mentors received training through Connecticut Department of Correction, Vera, and the Motivating Individual Leadership for Public Advancement (MILPA) collective over the course of eight weeks to prepare for this unique and trailblazing role.

The purpose of this blog series is to allow you to gain an appreciation for the T.R.U.E. program through the words of those of us who have been blessed with the opportunity to be a part of this unique experience.

In future posts, I will write about the day-to-day life of a mentor and some of the experiences I have had in the unit. For now, I want to talk about the programs overall importance.

The Youth Offender Program, or T.R.U.E. program, is unconventional, radical, and desperately needed. It is an opportunity to change how the country sees mass incarceration and create a new narrative for promising young men who are also convicted felons. The T.R.U.E. program is dedicated to the reclamation of moral integrity. Inherent in this mission is the recognition of the dignity of all prisoners in general, and the men in this unit in particular.

For years *we* (as collective members of society) have been programmed, through political and social rhetoric, to dehumanize one another. This dehumanization is a burden borne by people of color for centuries. Prisons are spaces where the dehumanization of people of color has withstood the test of time, and is ingrained in our collective history.

The war on drugs has become the new Jim Crow, and our collective humanity has suffered as a result. If you have read Michelle Alexanders book, *The New Jim Crow*, then you have some idea of what prison has become; you know something about the institutional racism inherent to the criminal justice system.

What prison is in theory and what it is as an actual lived experience are two different things; similar to theorizing about love as opposed to experiencing love first hand. Love is trust, respect, understanding, and growth, among other things. Prison is about the same things; but only if you are in prison in Connecticut; only if you are in Cheshire C.I.; only if you are in the T.R.U.E. unit.

In a groundbreaking approach aimed at changing individual lives, CT DOC has created a mentoring program for young men who have made a conscious decision to change their lives. The program depends upon the collaboration of two groups of people that have been more divided than the Republicans and Democrats of recent years: prison guards and long-term prisoners.

What has brought us together is the futures of a generation of young men that have been caught in the vicious cycle of mass incarceration, which has plagued urban communities since the 80s. Without acknowledging and accepting this past, it is impossible to reach the full potential of our future.

It is the programs mission to see these young men reach their full potential. As a man that has served 17 years, it is incredibly disheartening to continuously see young people destroy their lives and the lives of others.

As a prisoner that has undergone a fundamental change in how I process and experience life, I feel obligated to help these young men make the same types of changes in their lives that I have made in my own. All of the mentors reflect on our past lives, our past selves, and we want these young men to do better, be better in their futures, just as we have become better versions of ourselves.

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