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Cultivating dreams

By Beth Ashley
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ARCADIO PENA is on his knees in the little garden, smoothing the soil, pulling up weeds.

Frank Barton stands to one side, surveying the flurry of flowers, a proprietary grin on his face.

Pena and Barton are among 20 San Quentin State Prison inmates who have helped create a small patch of beauty out of the gray cement and gravel of the Unit H prison yard.

They are part of the Insight Garden Program begun by Beth Waitkus, an organizational development specialist from Berkeley.

As a child, she gardened with her mother when they lived in a woody part of Connecticut; she still finds growing plants to be nourishing and a source of peace.

She wondered if prison inmates - by learning how to nurture flowers - might better learn to take care of themselves and the world around them.

She thought it might help teach the men personal responsibility and the value of working together communally. "A garden is part of a system, a metaphor for their place in the world."

Three years into the project, she is plainly delighted with the outcome, and happy to carve one afternoon a week out of her business life to meet the inmates and teach them how to design a garden and raise flowers.

"When things get crazy, I think - ah, Friday, I'll be in the prison garden."

On a recent afternoon, 12 inmates in prison blues file into an H Unit classroom and sit expectantly while Waitkus talks about the day's agenda and introduces her two assistants, architect and garden designer Bridget Brewer of San Rafael, and Kevin Sadlier, owner of Green Jeans Garden Supply in Mill Valley.

She tells them she is hoping to raise money for an after-care program, helping parolees connect with community gardens, get further agricultural schooling, or find jobs where they can use their gardening skills.

The men shared their feelings about the program.

"I go to four or five other classes," says Jeffery Blan, "but this is more like a treat. I get to do something I enjoy and to learn about something I knew nothing about."

Damian Martinez, who did gardening work before he entered prison, says he has been astonished to learn about the toxicity of most fertilizers and how important it is to garden organically. "Outside, we just fertilize and fertilize. I realize how wrong it is for the animals."

Sadlier, the volunteer instructor, says he is "on a mission to spread organic controls."

His mission apparently has taken hold. Inmate Mike Torres, who was an enthusiastic gardener before incarceration, says "I'm gong to have to throw out about 30 pounds of Miracle Gro when I get home."

Inmate Ronnell Riley calls the garden "a place of peace, a place of serenity. We all work together - it's beautiful. There's no arguing, no fighting, you're just part of the crew.

"When I get home, I will always remember these instructors. I will keep this garden in my heart."

Says Mike McPheeters: "It's fascinating to see things grow."

James Silvas: "My grandparents had orange groves and avocados. The garden brings back good memories, especially when I'm outside by myself. I can say a prayer and speak to my daughter, who is 12."

"I came to this class because I really wanted to learn something about gardening, to get back to the earth, and to nurture something besides myself," says David Johnstone.

Troy Bledsoe, who expects to be paroled in a few weeks, said he "did all the gardening at home. I always went into the garden if I was upset and would spend an hour or two hours out there. — Now, after work, I go out in the garden. It brings me back to reality. It gives me the feeling of home."

Frank Barton, teased by the others because he waters the garden so much, said he just likes "to see the plants look healthy. I can't explain, but there is something about that garden I love so much."

One of the men tells of a praying mantis the inmates discovered among the roses. They loved watching the creature, he says, but one day, to their great disappointment, it disappeared.

Learning about gardening and its lessons for inner growth has been an ongoing process for the men, Waitkus says. She has brought in a series of outside lecturers, including Jack Kornfeld of Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre and author/theorist Fritjof Capra, co-founder of the Center for Ecoliteracy in Berkeley.

The garden is an offshoot of the Insight Prison Project run by Jacques Verduin, recently honored with a Community Leadership Award by the San Francisco Foundation for his prison rehabilitation programs. The garden project is still closely associated with IPP, but now has its own fiscal sponsor, the Agape Foundation, sponsors of non-violent social change.

Waitkus says she faced "a lot of resistance" when she first proposed the garden: "It took 14 months to do everything we needed to do, to get through the prison system and win the approvals."

After that it took three days to "build" the 1,200-square-foot plot. "It was finally finished on a muddy, rainy day," hewn from the concrete of an otherwise plantless yard.

Both inmates and volunteers participated in developing the garden design. Sadlier advised on what plants would grow best in the bayside climate.

Waitkus says they fretted about what to plant. If it were vegetables, the gardening inmates would have access to better foods than the other inmates (a no-no), but "we weren't sure we could plant flowers. Then I ran into ex-warden Jeannie Woodford, and she said 'You can plant anything you want down there.'"

Now the earthen plot has been transformed with lush greenery, ornamental grasses, and a profusion of colorful flowers - roses, geraniums, calendula, verbena, heliotrope, anemones. "We also planted echinacea, and a number of other healing plants."

After class, the men show off the garden, pulling a leaf of lamb's ear to show its softness, pointing out the contrasts in colors, textures, heights of the plantings. A dirt path meanders among the flowers.

Elsewhere in the drab and vast prison yard, inmates play soccer, or gather in little groups for conversation. Each group is racially segregated: Latinos are in one group, blacks in another, whites by themselves.

"That is one of the great things about this project," Waitkus says. "It is the only place in the prison where all races work together. They have created a mutual respect."

Suddenly, one man hoots with glee: the praying mantis has reappeared. Other inmates gather round, their faces alight.

Waitkus watches, her expression intent, smiling.

"People behave badly out of fear and confusion," she says, "not just because they're bad people. Inside some of these men I see big hearts. They're not all big hearts, but I see the potential for change."

She says the garden has strengthened her faith in human nature.

"The flowers are blooming. People are blooming here, too."

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