



My Turn: Moving from Art into Action

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A LOCAL CUSTOM

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Through November 20th, the Fireside Lounge at UVM's Davis Center plays host to two powerful art exhibits - - one national, one local -- that explore the impact of incarceration on parents and children.

"Interrupted Life: Incarcerated Mothers in the United States" has toured universities and colleges across the country to introduce the lives of incarcerated mothers and their families as well as the policies and politics of incarceration in the United States.

In addition to the traveling exhibit, home-grown materials focused on the effects of incarceration on Vermont's children and families will be on display -- including artwork, writings and photography produced by women incarcerated at the Northwest State Correctional facility in St. Albans Town and a video created by Vermont teenagers that tells the story of what it is like to have a parent in prison.

The opening reception, featuring a talk by the exhibit's curator, Rickie Solinger, will be held on Thursday, November 12th, from 5:00 – 8:00 p.m.

The purpose in bringing the exhibit to Vermont is two-fold: to cast new light on the impact of incarceration on children and families and to generate a broader discussion of alternatives to imprisonment for nonviolent offenders, who make up eighty percent of the women in our state prison.

In 2007, nearly two thousand Vermont children were affected by their mother's incarceration. When mothers are incarcerated, their children are often left in situations where their needs are misunderstood, where poverty prevails and where they suffer emotional neglect and abuse. They are among the most at-risk, yet least visible, populations of children. They must often leave

behind all that is familiar (parents, schools, siblings), are not always told the truth about where their parents are, and many lose contact with their parent. The stories of these children and their families are the stories of your friends or neighbors -- perhaps even a family member. But they are stories that are most often told in quiet confidence.

Interrupted Life and its companion local exhibition do much to bring these stories to light and to remind us of the collateral consequences of incarceration on families, on mothers, and, most importantly, on their children. This alone would have justified bringing the exhibit here.

But the community-based organizations, academics, policymakers, philanthropic foundations, and others who pooled their resources to bring the exhibit to Vermont had an additional interest: to inspire a broader public conversation about incarceration and its alternatives.

The United States leads the industrialized world in incarceration. In fact, the U.S. rate of incarceration (762 per 100,000) is five to eight times that of other highly developed countries. Vermont has demonstrated, on any number of fronts, unusual vision. Why not apply our state's creativity to re-thinking our system of criminal justice?

"Art," mused Beverly Sills, "is the signature of civilizations." Art is also a medium that expands our capacity to care about issues we may know little about. While the haunting pieces on display at the Davis Center bear our collective imprint, they do not have to bear the signature of future generations. Visit the exhibits. Think about their implications. And lend your voice to a growing discussion of viable alternatives to prison.

Vermont Works for Women

is a 501c3 nonprofit organization founded in 1987 to help women and girls recognize their potential and explore, pursue and excel in work that leads to economic independence.

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