

Telling Our Stories

Rev. Nora Jacob

UrbanMission Community Partners

NBA Incubate Initiative Affiliate Ministry

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Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. - Isaiah 43: 8-19 (NRSV)

The Bible is filled with powerful stories – stories of people broken and healed, of people seeking freedom from oppression and discrimination, of the vulnerability and struggle of people figuring out our relationships with God. It speaks into our human desire for connection, meaning, and hope.

And it offers an alternative vision of God making a way in the wilderness and creating rivers in the desert, sharing through Jesus Christ how love and forgiveness might bring the Kingdom of God on earth.

The importance of telling our stories – from ALL sorts of perspectives – underlies the Freedom Art Project, a restorative justice initiative of UrbanMission Community Partners (UMCP). UMCP is now in its second year as an NBA Affiliate Ministry.

UMCP held its 2nd annual *InsideOut Art Show* in mid-October, a two-evening showcase for visual stories in the form of paintings and other art works. This year's theme, "The Distance Between Us," was selected by incarcerated artists at the *California Institution for Men*. Our show more than doubled in size from last year, as word has spread among artists and community members alike about this channel for communicating stories from an often-neglected perspective.

This year, UMCP received original paintings and also tiny painted "art rocks," hand-beaded jewelry, and hand-crafted baskets from a total of 22 artists – 17 who are currently incarcerated, and another five, formerly incarcerated, who are now positively involved in our community. A brief biographical statement written by each artist added written words to the visual images.

Here is the statement and painting, *Breaking the Cycle*, donated by Stan Hunter, one of the artists inside:

"Learning how to paint and draw some 20 years ago literally changed my life. Having struggled with low self-esteem and no sense of self-worth, I could never find anything that provided me with a sense of value about myself. Creating beautiful paintings and drawings completely changed this. I now feel I have value. I belong, I am able to connect with others. I finally realized that I didn't need drugs to be happy, I just needed a paint brush or a pencil.

An even larger aspect of this transformation for me is teaching others to paint and draw. I get excited seeing them experience the same transformation, and then teaching someone else. It's my way of giving back everything I've got to offer."



Breaking the Cycle, by Stan Hunter (18"x24" acrylic on canvas), 2017

And this, *Sentenced in Two Different Worlds*, donated by another currently incarcerated artist, Arnulfo Vargas:

"I have been painting for about four years and used to go to an art show in San Francisco for six years. Before I became a painter, I was doing colored pencil and ink as well as pop-up. However, my main experience came from when I was a teenager: I would do murals on freeways as well as behind buildings, with spray cans - what we call graffiti art, not tagging.

I give thanks to all those who have been supporting me with becoming who I am now. Not the same person I was when I came in, but a new creation with new values as well as principles and thinking differently, donating paintings to different organizations.

Sentenced in Two Different Worlds is of our granas who miss us, and us thinking of them, and why we are not there to take care of them instead of them being in a convalescent home. They are with strangers, as we are too."



Sentenced in Two Different Worlds, by Arnulfo Vargas (18"x24" acrylic on canvas), 2017

Immediately following the end of this October's *InsideOut Art Show*, we relocated it (by invitation) to a nearby community art gallery -- because public interest continues to grow around the stories and art of artists who have experienced imprisonment. And at least two new and major opportunities for the *InsideOut Art Show* - and the storytelling that comes with it -- are in the works for 2018.

The *InsideOut Art Show* raises awareness of how art and creativity can transform lives. We also raise funds to support art programs and restorative justice circles inside prisons, and to support victims' rights programs.

And at the end of the day, we invite our viewers and our world to consider these questions:

- Are we to be defined by the worst thing we've ever done?
- Or can we believe that "a new thing" is truly possible through God's love and the forgiveness of Jesus Christ?

For more about the *InsideOut Art Show*: www.insideoutart.org

To learn about *UrbanMission Community Partners*: www.um-cp.org

*The NBA incubates new ministries, supporting social entrepreneurs of faith who are serving their communities in a variety of innovative ways and empowering these Disciples-led health and social service projects to focus on growth, impact, and sustainability. Learn more at **nbacares.org/incubate** or by contacting Rev. Ayanna Johnson Watkins, Director of the NBA Incubate Initiative, at **awatkins@nbacares.org**.*