



The Labyrinth

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(We are students in the AAR class and in the Social Justice Pathway)

Why this matters?

- CA has 34% of U.S. homeless population — 70% were once incarcerated (CDCR, 2023).
- Many leave prison with no housing, no income, and no support.
- *“They don’t fail from lack of effort. The system doesn’t give them a fair shot.”* — Alicia Garcia, WeHope (2024)
- Experts say stigma and discrimination make reentry really hard (Milestone 2).
- Stories create empathy — not just stats, but real people with real journeys.



Our project:

- Vision: Share stories to humanize reentry and offer hope
- Steps: Research → Interviews → Storywriting → Design → Presentation
- Allies: WeHope, case managers, artists, AAR classmates
- Obstacles: IRB limits, outreach to incarcerated people
- Prototyped a multimedia journal + tested it with peers
- Most powerful victory: hearing real change in empathy



Alicia Garcia: CEO of WeHope



Mark Duggan: Stanford professor

Project Elements

- Recruited Freelance Artists through Gunn’s Multimedia and Art Classes
- Start Drafting Stories
- Go through several revisions of our articles
- John Doe art, JR story, The Marshall project, Art as a Tool for Incarceration.

Do you want a way to promote your art, utilize it for a social cause, and get involved in a student run project about criminal justice?

Become an artists for activism journal/magazine, The Labyrinth!

We are looking for both **commissioned** and **independent** artists who want to share their art!



SCAN ME

The Labyrinth

BASIC STORY FDP: News, Featz, Sports, etc.

Name:
Story topic:
Assigned word count:

Background information: Why is this issue relevant and/or timely? What recent events have led you to write this article? Why should readers care?

Angle: What is the main focus of your story?

Date of event (if applicable):

Interview plans

“After nearly 30 years of incarceration, the feelings of being forgotten weigh heavily. We are the disenfranchised, the marginalized, the cast-aways. True, as I often tell others, I did this to myself. I blame no one but me. Yet I long for a second chance, the opportunity to be re-interwoven back into the fabric of America from which my crime ripped me.”

For so many affected by incarceration in the U.S., rehabilitation suggests a return —to who you were before, or to some earlier, purer version of yourself. But what if that version never got the chance to exist? What if the world you’re expected to reenter is the same one that failed you in the first place? For many people leaving prison, reintegration isn’t about slotting back into society’s expectations—it’s about rewriting them altogether. Traditional pathways—employment, housing, education—often remain blocked by stigma and systemic barriers. But there is **one** path that carves through that noise, offering a space to heal, speak, and resist: **this approach is** art.

Whether on walls or in digital **forms**, art becomes more than self-expression. It becomes reintegration on your own terms. It makes the formerly incarcerated visible: not as statistics or redemption projects, but as creators, architects of something both personal and political. Art says: “I’m still here”. I always was. This truth is the backbone of the work of

Results:

- Wrote powerful, personal articles for our reentry magazine
- Prototype shifted peer perspectives on incarceration
- Poll revealed common stigma toward formerly incarcerated people
- Stories showed both success and systemic barriers
- Planning to distribute magazine at school and local organizations (Palo Alto City Library, Palo Alto City Hall, Jewish Community Center, Project WeHope Center), along with online

DRUG ADDICTION & PATH TO PRISON

At 44 years old, Cherie Mason, a mother of four, isn’t raising her kids. She’s serving a 12-year prison sentence for giving birth to a stillborn baby. At the age of 38, Cherie was living in the woods, and addicted to drugs when she found out she was pregnant. At this point in her life, she had no one to turn to or lean on for help. “When I found out I was pregnant, I didn’t know what to do. I was in a bad place. I didn’t have any options.”

Despite her situation, Cherie felt something shift. “That baby gave me a reason to live,” she said.

Cherie tried to stay clean, but addiction isn’t something you can just walk away from. “Addiction is a disease,” she said in an interview from Eddie Warrior Correctional Center. She didn’t have access to rehab, support, or even a safe place to go. “There’s nowhere safe for a pregnant woman who’s using to go,” another speaker in the interview added.

She gave birth to a stillborn baby in 2017. A year later, while watching TV, she found out she was being charged with first-degree manslaughter. “The death of my child was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to deal with,” Cherie said. “I didn’t plead guilty because I felt like I was guilty,” she explained. “I pled guilty because I knew in Oklahoma, especially in a small town, they were gonna find me guilty anyway.”

Cherie’s case isn’t rare. Since 1989, more than 50 women across states like Oklahoma, Alabama, and South Carolina have been charged after experiencing pregnancy loss while struggling with addiction. These charges are often harsher in small, rural counties. “It was up to the DA,” said her daughter. “And he basically said he was making an example out of her.”

For the privacy of our anonymous source, we will refer to them as _Mark_.

Born and raised in San Francisco, Mark was incarcerated at the age of 46. At this time, he was a father of 2 kids, an active synagogue member at Betham, and working in the field of engineering. He has always had a love for the outdoors, particularly hiking and backpacking, along with exploring areas, from Mexico to Guatemala, by air.

“You meet neat people out in the woods and you get away from the draw of the media,” he said. “You find people out there who are just enjoying life, and (they are) fun to meet and talk to.”

According to Mark, what he values the most is his family. He loves to get together with his kids and grandkids. Whether through spending time with them through traveling or celebrating holidays, he prioritizes the closeness of his family greatly.

“Well, first thing, of course, is family. We’re all very, very close and active together, and we have mutual friends as well from long ago, and so it’s just one big happy family”

For _Mark_ being inserted into the prison system came as a shock. As soon as his first trial, he detected issues in the system that didn’t seem right. “One of the issues had to do with a prejudicial jury instruction that occurred during my trial. These are standard jury instructions. The judge decides we’ll give this one and that one and this one, but it was one in which there was a lot of controversy.”

After his conviction, he was initially put into the California Medical Facility in Vacaville, where he spent the next few years. According to him, it was a softer environment compared to San Quentin, where he was moved to later and worked as a law clerk.

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During his first years in prison, he was immediately denounced for his positivity, and humorous nature. He was once told, by his fellow inmate, that he had to “give up the joke telling”. After this experience, and others that highlighted this unfamiliar culture, he quickly learned and adapted to harsh prison life.

“To me, (that) was perhaps one of the biggest challenges, because you couldn’t just go out and shake hands with somebody who was a stranger,” he said. “You don’t know which gang he belonged to or what he was thinking about you at the time. So in that sense, it was a protective environment.”

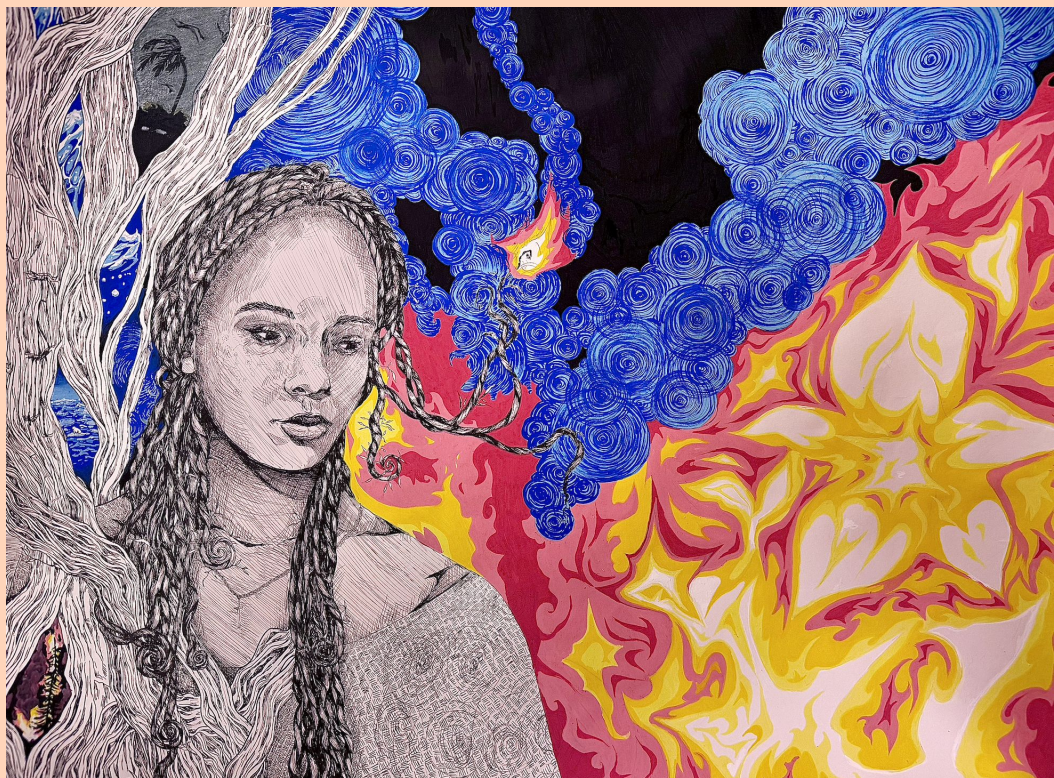
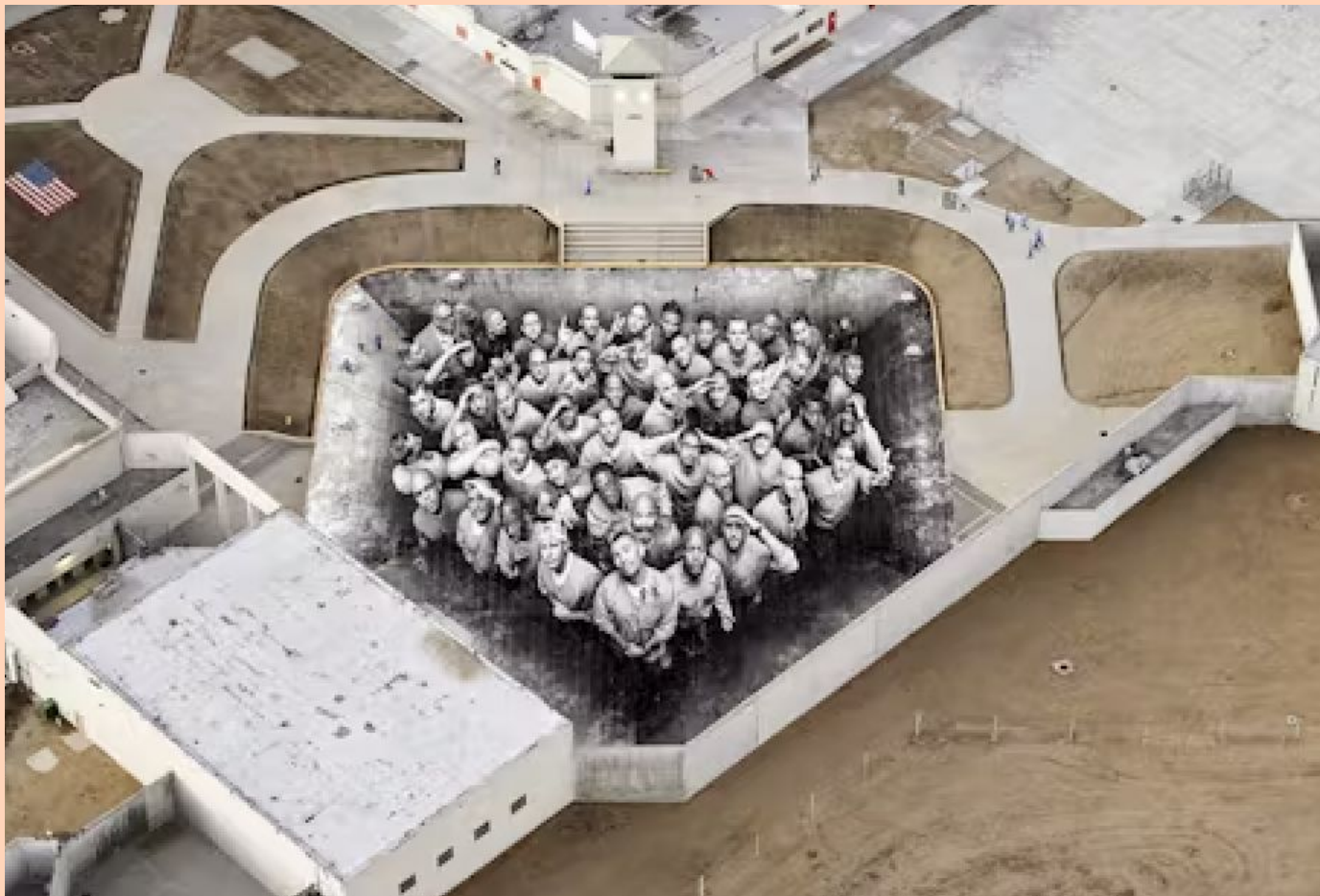
Mark was forced to construct rules for himself to safely navigate through this new system: making sure he didn’t act “too smart”, avoiding eye contact when walking through corridors, abiding by the cultural code of not interacting with inmates of different races, and more.

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Life on “the inside” was vastly different from his life prior; however, despite the challenges he faced, “hope” was something he always held on to, and aimed to spread unflinching. For example, he organized holiday dinners in the prison for him and his fellow inmates.

“I like to tell jokes, I’m a positivist, that’s my nature,” he said. “You ask who I am: I believe in humor, (that) if you laugh you’ve already got problem number one (fixed)”.

In the country prison, before being convicted, his curiosity about the system grew. His legal work journey officially began when he started reading books in the Law Library in the county prison, prior to his conviction. His impactful life’s work continued when he began working in the Prison Law Library while serving his time in San Quentin. “I worked in the law library, and so I had access to the books, and I was able to help a lot of people...”He mentions San Quentin as a model for rehabilitation, noting that they’re teaching inmates skills like computer coding and providing educational opportunities that help prisoners become “somebody and be proud of themselves and know that they can succeed by doing positive things.”




Our Biggest Takeaways:

- Reentry is harder than most people think — even basic needs aren't guaranteed
- Authentic stories change minds more than statistics ever could
- Stigma is a huge barrier, even in our own community
- Creating change takes teamwork, patience, and care



What's Next + Our Call to Action

- Write more stories by talking to new people
 - Connect with local reentry organizations to learn more
 - Expand our magazine's reach
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- Call to action: Read. Listen. Challenge your bias.
 - Community should challenge negative stigma, give in to empathy & support reentry
 - Project Continuity

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- **Ms. Firenzi**
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Sources:

<https://www.jr-art.net/project-list/tehachapi>

Audrey Berger