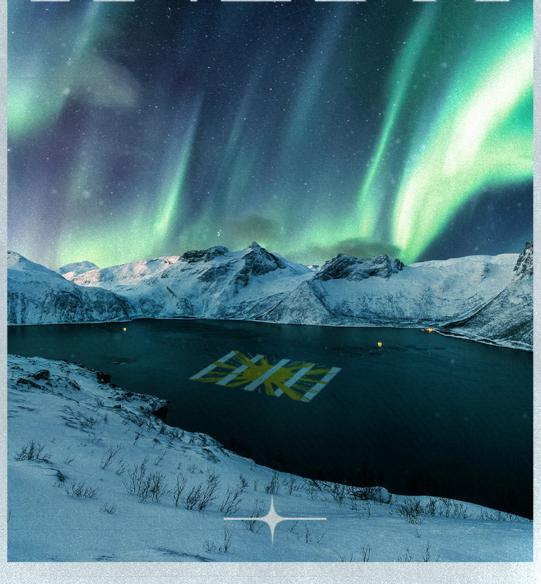
当然床

VOL 2. ISSUE 1 2025 FPEP POST



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Keri Watson, Michael Kostis, Stan Andrisse, Jayen Patel, Rick Brunson, Christie St. Vil, Orion Ludwick, Sarah Aaron, and Brandon Brown for their valuable contributions to the FPEP magazine. Thank you for the hard work and devotion of all our volunteers, teachers, and staff.

Most of the artwork, essays, and poems included in the magazine are by currently and formerly incarcerated students from around the country.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The FPEP post is the student-run magazine of the Florida Prison Education Project, an initiative of the University of Central Florida that provides higher education to incarcerated students in seven different correctional facilities in Central Florida. In this issue of the magazine, we share stories from across the nation. We delve into current issues facing incarcerated people, like the hurricanes that recently swept through Florida and the Southeast, and we offer testimonies from incarcerated people and ideas for community rehabilitation from colleagues in the Northeast. You'll also learn about FPEP's podcast "The Unheard Society," produced by UCF faculty member Rick Brunson with students from the Nicholson School of Communication and Media and the Central Florida Florida Reception Center, and you can learn how to get involved with the Florida Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (FCHEP), a statewide consortium of stakeholders interested in mass incarceration, higher education in prison, and reentry work. Thank you for all your support!

EDITOR: Aiya Messina

DESIGNER: Yaseen El Ghandour

A publication of the Florida Prison Education Project

	Hurricanes and Incarceration Aiya Messina	04
	The Power of Peer Mentorship Community Building in Higher Education for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals Stan Andrisse, Ph.D.	06
	Igniting the Flame: A Call to Action Michael Kostis	07
S	The Harsh Reality of the School-to-Prison Pipeline Jayen Patel	08
	Bridging the Divide Orion Ludwick and Sarah Aaron	10
	Behind the Door Brandon Brown	12
쁘	If These Walls Talked Anonymous FPEP Student	14
	Voices Behind Bars Why I'm an FPEP Volunteer Rick Brunson	16
	Voices Behind Bars Finding Humanity in Unexpected Places Christie St. Vil	17
	How to Get Involved	18

HURRICANES AND INCARCERATION

Aiya Messina

Aiya Messina is a Criminal Justice student at the University of Central Florida, where she works as the FPEP Program Coordinator. She is passionate about incarcerated people's rights and the much-needed reformation of the criminal justice system.

Hurricane Milton in October 2024 required a lot of preparation, it was a Category 5 hurricane with a predicted catastrophic impact. Tampa Bay was in evacuation Zone A. Evacuation was mandatory, and emergency services were clear that anyone who chose to stay would be on their own. Despite being in the direct path of the storm, Manatee Jail was not evacuated. This was a stark reminder that incarcerated people live, and die, at the whim of the state. While the people in Manatee Jail made it through Milton unscathed, the same cannot be said for those left incarcerated during other storms.

During Hurricane Helene in early October 2024, the incarcerated men in Mountain View Correctional Institution in Spruce Pine, North Carolina were left in their cells for five days with no running water or lights. Some reported that after

the toilets backed up, they had to defecate in plastic bags, and were left in their cells with a few inches of sewage water flooding the floors. Avery Mitchell Correctional Institution in the same town faced the same conditions and evacuated only a day earlier than Mountain View.

During Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, the people incarcerated in Orleans Parish Prison in Louisiana faced unimaginable horrors. Juveniles as young as ten were housed in OPP, left there by the Sheriff who ignored the Mayor's mandatory evacuation notice. They went days without food, water, and ventilation. Juvenile girls were housed with adult men, people spent days up to their chests in flood waters, and armed correctional officers were left on the roof with orders to shoot anyone who tried to escape the flooded buildings. After days of this, some 6,500

people were finally evacuated to outdoor yards at other Louisiana facilities where they were left unprotected from the elements and other incarcerated people with weapons.

The same explanations are given every time for leaving incarcerated people where they are. Evacuations are complicated; time-consuming due to the layout of correctional institutions being built in complete opposition to large amounts of people leaving at once, and expensive as the state has to figure out where to house everyone in a secure facility. There is truth to all of this.

During Hurricane Rita in September 2005, Texas spent \$9.5 million to transport 9,825 incarcerated people, youth offenders, and parolees to out of state facilities. Only \$1.4 million of this was refunded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Still, this is a drop in the bucket compared to the \$2.5 billion that Texas spends on its correctional system each year.

CAN YOU PUT A PRICE ON HUMAN LIFE?

Would it be less expensive if there was a solid evacuation plan in place, and it was not all so last minute? In a country where at least fifteen states spend more on corrections than education every year, why is this the monetary line that the government refuses to cross? The fifteen states in order of the largest gaps in spending per student and incarcerated person are California, New York, Connecticut, New



Jersey, Rhode Island, Vermont, Massachusetts, Alaska, Oregon, Maryland, Colorado, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and New Mexico. Incarcerated people are some of the most vulnerable during natural disasters. They are powerless to prepare or make decisions for their own safety, their lives left up to the state's decision of what the cheapest, easiest option is. Committing a crime does not negate the value of life and justify inhumane treatment.

The next time you are preparing for a hurricane and worrying about potential damage to yourself, your home, and your loved ones, remember that there are tens of thousands of incarcerated people in Florida feeling the exact same way, but they are powerless to do anything about it.

THE POWER OF PEER MENTORSHIP

Community Building in Higher Education for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals *Stan Andrisse, Ph.D.*

Stan Andrisse is the founding director of Prison Cells to PhD (P2P) and the author of From Prison Cells to PhD: It is Never Too Late to Do Good.

At From Prison Cells to PhD (P2P), we have witnessed firsthand how peer mentorship and community building are transformative tools in helping formerly incarcerated individuals pursue higher education and meaningful employment. Many of our scholars, myself included, have experienced the isolation, stigma, and challenges that come with navigating life after incarceration. Education has been a key in unlocking doors, but it is peer mentorship and a supportive community that have empowered us to walk through them.

When individuals are released from prison, they often face a complex array of obstacles—stigma, lack of resources, unstable housing, limited employment opportunities, and a history of disconnection from formal education. But with the right support network, they can overcome these barriers and build meaningful futures. That's where peer mentorship comes in.

Our program pairs those transitioning out of the justice system with scholars, educators, and professionals who have been through similar experiences. This bond is unique, as it goes beyond traditional mentorship: it's built on shared experiences, struggles, and triumphs. Mentors offer more than just academic guidance; they offer hope, encouragement, and practical advice that is informed by lived experience. This mentorship doesn't just empower the mentee; it creates a reciprocal relationship that strengthens both mentor and mentee alike. For many incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, mentorship is a lifeline—a reminder that their past does not define them and that they are capable of success.

Beyond one-on-one relationships, creating a broader community of support is equally essential. At P2P, we foster an environment where our scholars can thrive by connecting them to like-minded individuals who



understand their journey. Through workshops, group sessions, and cohort-based learning, we build a network of peers who uplift and inspire one another.

This community is critical in combating the sense of isolation that justice-impacted individuals often feel. By creating a space where people can openly share their stories, struggles, and achievements, we are helping to normalize the pursuit of higher education for individuals with a criminal record. When our scholars see others with similar backgrounds achieving academic success and obtaining meaningful employment, it instills a belief that they can do the same.

The impact of this support is evident in the results: over 80% of P2P scholars are employed or enrolled in higher education, and many have gone on to become leaders in their communities. Higher education is a key stepping stone to reintegration, offering new opportunities and career paths for those who have been incarcerated. But education alone isn't enough. By pairing academic pursuits with mentorship

and a supportive community, we can ensure that our scholars are not only prepared for the classroom but also for longterm professional success.

Through the combination of education, mentorship, and community building, formerly incarcerated individuals are not only transforming their own lives but are also giving back to society in profound ways.

Peer mentorship and community support are powerful tools in addressing the complex challenges that formerly incarcerated individuals face. At P2P, we believe that education is the cornerstone of successful reentry, and when combined with the support of a community that understands their unique challenges, our scholars are equipped to succeed.

As we expand our efforts, we invite others to join us in this mission. By continuing to build pathways for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, we are working toward a future where everyone—regardless of their past—has the opportunity to thrive in higher education and beyond.

Interested in becoming a peer mentor email michael.kostis@ucf.edu.

IGNITING THE FLAME: A CALL TO ACTION

Michael Kostis

Michael Kostis is a University of Central Florida alumnus, with a BA in Political Science and Sociology. He currently works as the Co-Coordinator for the Florida Coalition of Higher Education in Prison, building statewide connections and helping other Florida colleges and universities create their own prison education programs.

Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel - Socrates

To be human—what does that truly mean? As mass incarceration continues to grow in the United States, this question lingers in my mind. Our prison system is upheld by a narrative that constantly reminds both those impacted by the justice system and the broader public that incarcerated individuals are less than human. They are isolated and deprived of essential experiences that define humanity—one of which is education.

Education is the lifeblood of any thriving society, and it is a moral imperative that we extend it to those who have been denied it the most. For those who are incarcerated, education can become the key to reclaiming a part of themselves that was buried—whether by their past mistakes, their actions, or by circumstances beyond their control. But education alone isn't enough. We must pursue a complete transformation of our broken criminal justice system through bold, policy-driven action and grassroots movements that ignite change.

These movements must relentlessly pressure our elected representatives, on both sides of the aisle, and raise the collective consciousness of society to confront the injustices we face. The road ahead is steep, the obstacles immense, but the fight for justice must never end.

To succeed, we must act together, as a united and unwavering front. Florida is home to many organizations dedicated to addressing mass incarceration and transforming the criminal justice system, but they cannot win this battle alone. Without true solidarity, our efforts will ultimately fall short. It is not enough to simply work within the cruel system as it stands—we must fight to transform it.

The Florida Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (FCHEP) brings together the many organizations and stakeholders dedicated to making structural change within Florida's carceral landscape. A network of higher education institutions, non-profit organizations, and correctional facilities dedicated to providing educational opportunities and support services for incarcerated individuals and returning citizens, FCHEP promotes high-quality educational programs that are accessible to incarcerated individuals and system-impacted people throughout the state of Florida. Whether you are a legislator, educator, justice-impacted individual, are working within an organization representing justice-impacted individuals, or are a member of the Florida Department of Corrections, your allyship is vital. Together, we can break the chains of indifference, expose the flaws of the system, and spark the change that Florida needs. If you are interested in becoming a member of the coalition, reach out to alexander.alvarez@ucf.edu or michael.kostis@ucf. edu. We cannot do this without you!

THE HARSH REALITY OF THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE

Jayen Patel

Jayen Patel is a senior at Hillsborough High School in Tampa, Florida. He is in the IB program and is interested in the humanities, math, and sciences. He is highly committed to social problems like educational STEM inequality and mass incarceration.

I went into Teen Court with an open mind. I was volunteering, but it was much more than just fulfilling my required volunteer hours. I wanted to be on the ground, learning the mechanics of the justice system and engaging with my community.

I know the school-to-prison pipeline is an overwhelming force at my high school, where I frequently witness fights, drugs, and arrests. Seeing peers fall into the trap of the criminal system, I wondered how I could get involved as a high schooler in making a change in this system. I found the Hillsborough County Teen Court through a quick Google search, which advertised holding young offenders of the law accountable through a jury of their peers.

I wondered what was different about this peer-led approach as opposed to the traditional adult jury in a criminal proceeding. When I attended my first session I realized how different it was from my assumptions. The teens had already admitted guilt. Our role wasn't to determine innocence but to assign sanctions that would steer them away from prison and prevent a permanent mark on their record.

What truly set this system apart was its focus on restorative justice. Instead of being condemned by a judge in a courtroom, teen defendants faced peers who sought to help them understand their mistakes and make amends. It wasn't just about punishment; it was about offering a path to redemption.

This sense of redemption resonated with me deeply. Every time I walked out of a Teen Court hearing, I felt like I had contributed to something bigger than myself. I wasn't just learning about the system; I was part of a system that allowed a peer to continue their life with growth instead of being shut down by mass incarceration.

I urge all high school students who may be interested in learning more about the justice system and the school-to-prison pipeline to locate their local teen jury and participate. The feeling of knowing you've helped steer a peer away from prison is incredibly rewarding. It's not just about ticking off volunteer hours; it's about playing an active role in reshaping someone's future.

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

Orion Ludwick and Sarah Aaron

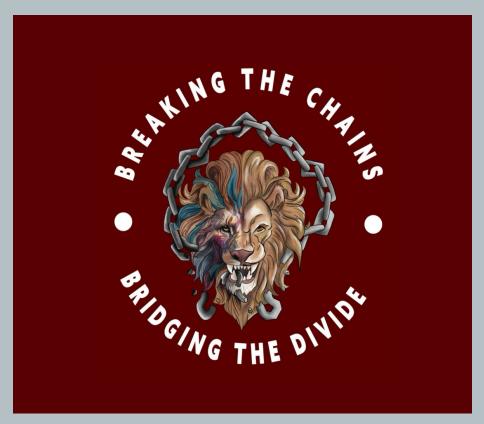
Orion Ludwick is an incarcerated student in Maine who participated in an inside out program with high school student Sarah Aaron. They participated in the same class, one inside the prison and one in a traditional school, collaborating together and learning from each other's perspectives.

Orion: Nervous jitters don't begin to describe what someone in prison feels when they are going into a class with a bunch of high schoolers, let alone a prestigious high school in New York. On the first day of class, I met my artist counterpart, Sarah, and the rest of the group. I didn't realize at that time how enriching this experience would be for both sides. Talking about American literature was not only thought-provoking but challenging; in every class, I got something from the students as they shared their thoughts and ideas. I didn't just see them as high schoolers anymore; I saw them as fellow scholars, individuals who had their own ways of doing things, quirks, likes, dislikes, and styles. Each student I interacted with gave me hope for future generations with their intuitive and driven focus. They were so open to exploring concepts and talking like friends who hadn't seen one another in a long time.

When I was approached about working with Sarah on the cover of our book and t-shirt logo, I was elated. I remember what it felt like when I saw something I created in print for the first time, and I was so excited to be a part of that for her.

I was pleasantly surprised in a meeting in person with the group how wide everyone's interests truly were. We wrote a song together as a class in the music room, some of the girls learned some drum beats and basic guitar, and HM's very own Ari played the piano for us as well. Watching the students play corn hole, eat food, and talk, it was something so beautiful that I truly believe I will remember it for the rest of my life. This experience made me want to reach out and talk to other schools about doing similar programs.

Sarah: When I first heard about the class from an assembly video exhibiting photos



from the previous year, I knew I wanted to sign up. I had never heard of a class like this before, and I thought it would be a great experience to have discussions with people who I wouldn't usually have the opportunity to converse with and learn from. At first, I was nervous (having no idea they would be as well) at the concept of meeting with people who are currently incarcerated. However, as soon as we started talking, it felt incredibly natural, and we were able to bond and have great discussions as a class. The most exciting part of the course for me was working with Orion for the first time and subsequently seeing the design we created, with the words "Breaking the Chains - Bridging the Divide" written on t-shirts we all wore and an on the cover of

anthology of everything we had written as a class. This experience taught me so much, not only about literature but also about our own identities, collaboration, and the importance of recognizing and checking our own internal biases. I'm so excited for this class to continue and for other students from Horace Mann and Maine to work together in the future.

Sarah: After going back and forth quite a bit over email, Orion and I decided we wanted to create a design that brought together both halves of our world while "breaking the chain" between us and the stigmas against people who are incarcerated. We also decided on Orion designing the left half of the lion while I did the right.

BEHIND THE DOOR NARRATIVE

Brandon Brown

Brandon Brown is the first person in Maine's history to get his Master's degree while being incarcerated. This article details an art project he and Jeremy Hiltz created to remind the public about the people behind prison doors.

Sometimes the most powerful art can come from the strangest of places—from pivotal moments of suffering where one starts to process their experience of pain and heal from it through artistic expression and the creation of something beautiful born out of struggle, as if the creation of beauty was an act of defiance. "Behind the Door," at its core, is one such piece of art—or a multitude of artistic expressions that has evolved through a partnership of two people seeking to understand their suffering and their success, and make sense of their collective experiences so that other people might also heal. So that we, as a society, might be able to heal.

In one dimension, the project is a podcast that started with a radical act of empowerment. Jeremy Hiltz, the founder and director of Recovery Connections of Maine requested that the Maine Department of Corrections gift him the cell door where he was incarcerated for 15 years before they began rebuilding the Maine Correctional Center in Windham.

After a fair amount of convincing, he was able to obtain the prison cell door that he was behind when he decided it was time to go through the transformation necessary to stop the cycle of substance use and incarceration that had come to plague his life.

Since getting out of prison for the last time, Jeremy has dedicated himself to creating treatment programs and opportunities that center on healing from trauma as the fundamental step to wellness and recovery. After going through his own journey of recovery after incarceration Jeremy decided to enroll in college and obtain a Certified Alcohol and Drug Counseling certificate so that he could serve as a guide for other people out of the darkness of substance use and the trauma of incarceration. In the years that followed he would create one of the State's largest recovery programs and eventually get into reentry housing and programming in partnership with the MDOC. This partnership was the pathway to him eventually obtaining his prison

cell door and embarking on a new journey of art and narrative transformation.

In the days after he picked up this door, Jeremy decided to enlist his good friend, Brandon Brown (another formerly incarcerated person doing advocacy and organizing around criminal legal reform) to brainstorm what impact they might be able to have with the door. The power of their relationship had budded over the period of 2 years since Brandon's release in 2021 and a multitude of conversations about the system and its effects on people and their stories of self.

Brandon's story differed from Jeremy's in many ways, but whereas their experiences diverged, the trauma of incarceration bonded them, as did their deep desire to be part of the solution for a broken system that continued to cycle their community in and out of incarceration and substance use as a coping mechanism for the trauma endured by those in our criminal legal system. For both men, education was a pivotal step in cultivating their understanding of these systems and their individual experiences within them. Brandon took his first college class ever 9 months into his 17-year prison sentence.

Eventually, he would go on to become the first person in Maine's history to obtain a Masters degree while incarcerated, finish half of his PhD while inside, and become the primary author of a piece of legislation that changed the face of reentry in the state. He was also the first person released to supervised community confinement once the bill became law, and he finished the last 30 months of his sentence in the community, where while still under supervision he continued pursuing his doctorate, taught

college classes, spoke at conferences across the country, and advocated for healthier systems for all people.

With Brandon's research and teaching focus being on narratives and the way they function in the criminal legal system, and Jeremy's deep expertise in recovery and trauma, they immediately began discussing ways the prison door could reframe people's experiences within the system, and society's understanding of who is in prisons, who is affected by substance use and mental health, and what healthier communities could look like.

On a whim, they decided to travel to New York and take photos of the door juxtaposed against the Statue of Liberty, our national symbol of freedom and acceptance.



Before leaving the city, they decided to place the door in the middle of Times Square (on a Saturday evening) to see what kind of conversation it could generate. What they witnessed was that people completely ignored the presence of the door and expressed no curiosity or acknowledgment of such a strange disruption to their walk through the city until they were literally stuck behind the door with nowhere to go. For Jeremy and Brandon, this became a fitting metaphor for mass incarceration, addiction, and many other social issues in the world today.

Since that day, they have embarked on a journey of narrative change using the prison door and a podcast as a vehicle for hard conversations that humanize people who are too often viewed as monstrous by others in our society. Traveling the door around the country and creating art based on the juxtaposition of Jeremy's actual prison cell door to symbols of freedom continues to provide opportunities to

provoke conversations with stakeholders from all backgrounds about what change looks like and how it can be realized through the arts, humanities, and transformation of oversimplified and harmful narratives around crime, justice, punishment, and so much more.







IF THESE WALLS TALKED

Anonymous FPEP Student

If these walls could actually talk, would they tell of my Christian walks, Or would they just up and say
That I had gone the wrong way?

I wonder what it would be, If these walls could tell on me. Would I come out as shining gold, Or would I be left out in the cold.

When things came up that I did not foresee, What would these walls have told on me? Would they have said that I acted bold, Or would I have wished.

That it had not been told?

Angry words that I had said, Would I want to go hide my head? Or just not want anyone to know, That my bad temper I did show?

Many things that we have done Would not have been a victory won Too often behind these walls things we did, That we'd rather have kept hid.

What would these walls say to you, By the time each day is through? Would you thank G-d for His Grace? Or just want to hide your face?

At the end of each and every day

If these walls talked what would they say?



VOICES BEHIND BARS Why I'm an FPEP Volunteer

Rick Brunson

Rick Brunson is a senior instructor in the Film and Mass Media program of UCF's Nicholson School of Communication and Media. You can listen to episodes of "The Unheard Society," a podcast co-produced by incarcerated students at the CFRC and students in the Nicholson School.

Sitting alone at a round white table in the chapel annex, a young Black man in blue prison garb waited quietly for class to start. Gospel music, turbocharged by pounding kick drum and clanging cymbals, crashed through the thin partition walling off the annex from the chapel, making any kind of conversation, much less instruction, a challenge.

It was the first day of the RTV 3301 Writing for Podcasts class at the Central Florida Reception Center's East Unit in southeast Orange County, a Florida state Department of Corrections facility that houses more than 5,000 men. The young man, Cliff, was the only student who showed up on this Friday morning. The rest were hindered by an unspecified "emergency traffic call," the chaplain

told me, and would not be there. So, it was just Cliff and me. I pulled off the lid from my clear, plastic tote full of class materials and got started. After briefly introducing ourselves, we went through the syllabus, talked about the learning objectives of the course, and I handed Cliff a textbook, a legal pad and some No. 2 pencils – the upper limits of technology allowed in a high-security correctional facility.

Then came the first writing assignment. To gain a sense of my new student's writing ability and to get him thinking about the process of wrapping his words around ambient sounds and spoken language, I prompted him to give me a single-page essay about "What Home Sounds Like to Me."



I left him alone with his thoughts and slipped into the sanctuary to sit with 50 other men to listen to the chaplain's sermon, "God's Plan Is Better."

After about 30 minutes, I returned to the annex to read Cliff's essay and discuss it with him. With careful penmanship, Cliff penciled two paragraphs that told part of his story. He's of Haitian descent and grew up in Fort Myers, where he lived in a house near the beach. He described the sound of coffee dripping from a coffee maker into a cup, and then stepping outside with the hot cup in his hands, putting it to his lips and feeling the pleasure of hearing the sound of the Gulf's gentle waves lapping up on the shoreline. Being a coffee aficionado and

avowed beach bum myself, I immediately connected with Cliff, and for the next 30 minutes, we swapped stories and shared our mutual affection for java and Florida's 1,350-mile coastline.

As the class period neared its end and Cliff had to return to the yard for the 11 a.m. count, we stood, Cliff shook my hand and told me, "For the last half-hour I have felt like I wasn't in prison. Thank you."

That's why I am an FPEP volunteer. No matter who we are or where we find ourselves, or whether we live in prisons of concertina wire or in a tangled web of pain from our own trauma or brokenness, we all crave the same thing a little freedom.

VOICES BEHIND BARS

FINDING HUMANITY IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

Christie St. Vil

Christie St. Vil is a UCF undergraduate student studying Journalism with a minor in Crime, Deviance and Law. A Haitian American native to Orlando, Christie is passionate about journalism as a means to amplify the voices of those who often go unheard, particularly in her home country.

I never imagined walking into a prison at just 20 years old, let alone stepping inside to teach those considered unworthy. We often learn that incarcerated people serve time for their crimes, but too easily forget they are still human, deserving of compassion, despite the laws they've crossed.

I worried about how I'd feel and if I could respect the people in prison. But my professor offered wisdom: "Just treat them like anyone else; they're still people, and they're already serving their time."

Teaching podcasting turned out to be so much fun. Their ideas were great, and their smiles were bright, showing they were more than their mistakes. In those moments, they reminded me that they are real people, able to share their thoughts, making our time together really special.

The world would hear their voices, but I would hear their hearts. This chance to teach audio journalism was unforgettable, a reminder of the value of every lesson we learn.

As an aspiring journalist, my mission is clear: Every voice matters, every story deserves to be heard, and everyone deserves to be treated as a human.

Florida Prison Education Project: cah.ucf.edu/fpep

Florida Coalition for Higher Education in Prison: cah.ucf.edu/fchep

Community Education Project: stetson.edu/other/cep

Institute for Educational Empowerment: mdc.edu/educational-empowerment

Exchange for Change: exchange-for-change.org

Florida Rights Restoration Coalition: floridarrc.com

Total Restoration Transformation Center: *trtcenter.org*

Operation New Hope: operationnewhope.org

Project 180: project 180 reentry.org

Formerly Incarcerated Convicted people & Families Movement: *ficpfm.org*

Florida Cares: floridacarescharity.org

Florida Department of Corrections: fdc.myflorida.com

Promising people: promisingpeople.com

Support the Florida Prison Education Project: cah.ucf.edu/fpep



For further information, please contact us

Phone: 407-906-1706

Email: FPEP@ucf.edu

Website: cah.ucf.edu/fpep

