**Conversations in Social Justice:**



**Prison Partnership Project: On the Out**

**Podcast transcript**

Series 3. Episode 3.

*In this podcast, Researchers and Practitioners, Paula Clark and Jess Robson introduce to staff and students the work and research of ‘On the Out’ - a new sister project from, The YSJ Prison Partnership, which explores the gaps in creative provision in the City of York for women and girls who are at risk.*

**Paula Clark**

We are Paula Clark and Jessica Robson, both research assistants and theatre practitioners on the York St. John Prison Partnership Project and we job share. We are bringing you this podcast today to introduce to staff and students the work and research of, *On the Out*, a new project which explores the gaps in creative provision in the city of York. For women and girls who are at risk.

**Jessica Robson**

*On the Out,* is an extension of the York St. John University, Prison Partnership Project. The Prison Partnership is a collaboration between York St. John University and two female prisons, New Hall in Wakefield and Askam Grange just outside of York.

**Paula Clark**

It brings together two different kinds of communities in a transformative learning experience through creative collaboration in the arts.

**Jessica Robson**

It explores perspectives and perceptions of women in the criminal justice system. Beyond media myths and social stigma.

**Paula Clark**

We hope that by the end of this podcast, you'll know more about On The Out the reason it exists, and know how to connect with us. Jess, tell us a bit about your background and your practice.

**Jessica Robson**

Oh, my goodness, where do want me to start? Do you want me to start from like when I was a student?

**Paula Clark**

Yes, tell us from the beginning

**Jessica Robson**

So, I actually went to York St. John's University a I worked as a student on the York St John University, Prison Partnership Project. I was always really interested in working with women and working with people that might not have actually had access the arts before, I was really interested in seeing how we could facilitate kind of ways that we could work alongside community members, or alongside people that are not like actors or trained actors, and just have that real life experience. But also people who benefit from the arts and the engagement in the arts. So, I approached Rachel, in my second year of university on my theatre BA degree, and I said, look Rachel, I really want to come into prison, which is not something that you say that often to people really. And I pestered her and pestered her via email and tried to find an opportunity to go visit the project and the work. And so in my third year, there is a module called, Contemporary Performance Practice, it was Contemporary Theatre Practice at the time. I decided, actually, I'm going to go into the prison of a yearlong period. So, in my third year, in that project, I went in with a group of women students, and we founded a theatre company. And we ran workshops at Askam Grange Prison, which is an open prison in York. It works on like a trust basis and some of the women work in the community, and do volunteering things. So we went in every week, and we just kind of took drama workshops in and had lots of fun with the women, we explored songs and the things that they were really interested in doing. So it ended up we went in and we said, look, we want to create something that looks at how women fall through the gaps in the systems. And we want to kind of show the mainstream audience of someone who might not understand what it's like to be in prison, and the ways into prison, and what it's actually like, instead of having that kind of mentality of just, you know, lock them up and throw away the key because that's, that's a really kind of old thing. And actually, not many people think about, Oh, I wonder what it's like in prison. I wonder what, you know, what, what it's like to be there, and what's the journey into that or what's like leaving prison. And so we decided to kind of embark on this like research project, and we went into court. So we went into court hearings, and setting public galleries to kind of really understand the kinds of things that people those women might have experienced. And then a Clean Break bought a plate up as well called Sweatbox. So we had the opportunity to kind of feel like what it was like to be in a prison van and all these different experiences. But what it led to was us creating a performance about the stigmas around women being in prison and women leaving prison for a mainstream audience or kind of policymakers, people that might not understand it, people that we wanted to challenge. And then we made a performance with the women, and which we created something completely different, which was like a celebration of how the women had come on, and kind of gained so much more confidence and self-esteem and these group work and skills. And they performed on campus, we got the women release on temporary license, they were able to come with an officer to campus and perform. And it was the most amazing thing I've ever done. We had like a university audience. And at the end of the performance, we were singing with all this type of thing. We had a standing ovation, and I don't think I've ever seen that at York, St. John University. And I think that was the moment where I was like, wow, this really is kind of like the work I want to do it. I can feel it making a difference. And so with that, I kind of was like, right, I don't want to leave the project yet. How can I stay on the project? So me being me and trying to think of ways I could stay and I enrolled on to the MA applied to theatre degree. And I continued developing this work, which I did over the next two years. So I decided to do it part time so I would have as much kind of practice and experience working with Rachel, working the different teams at York St. John, and different people in the prison in New Hall and Askam Grange. And so we just carried on. And then from that I started working as a professional and just kind of had this journey of student to professional. And I've literally been working on the project ever since. And I don't think yeah, it's been quite a journey. But it's it feels really great to be still doing that type of thing.

**Paula Clark**

Jess, that sounds like an amazing opportunity that you had there as a student, wonderful training, and access to all that real life practice.

**Jessica Robson**

So what drew you too? What was the interest? And what was the draw to this project? And yeah, what is it that you bring in?

**Paula Clark**

I think it's difficult to answer this question without going to the reason, I don't want to do my life story Jess. But, you know, it comes from a real place. I think what's really interesting since I started working with you on this project is the amount of women that are doing social justice work, who have a similar story, or a similar way into the work, and this drive to do things that actually really have impact, maybe not on massive groups of people, but on individuals, and quite a deeper, meaningful level. And I have a background in working in community settings with adults. And with young people making theatre, all sorts of different work, I was a young person who had experienced by the age of 13, multiple instances of childhood homelessness, I was kicked out of home at 16 years old, I was a teenage mum. And you know, it's quite a thing to be written off by the world, and then to find your way back again. And my way back was through creativity, through feeling included and welcomed into a youth theatre it was for me, and how that had a completely transformational effect on my self-esteem, my ability to make choices and imagine a future for myself. And so yeah, social justice work working with people who are oppressed and marginalised. And in this instance, those are women.

Yeah, Jess so I suppose, we should talk a little bit about what we are working on right now. We have explained who we are, let's talk a little bit more about, *On The Out.* which is this a new part of the Prison Partnership Project that we are job sharing on. So, let's talk a little bit about how our research is taking shape. We have started working with two different groups of women, one group of young women in a hostel setting, and with an adult group of women in a hostel setting. Jess tell us a bit about your group.

**Jessica Robson**

Yeah, so my group kind of started as an initial six week project. And it was about kind of bringing women in, and students as well. So I think I've had two students in the first half, and then I had another student come in, who is volunteering on the project still now. And they've both been all three of them have been fantastic. But it's been a kind of bringing them in to kind of skill them up in facilitation and what it's like to work in this kind of territory of work. But what we found is that the women are so creative, and so talented. But because we're in the community, it's a little bit different to working in the community than it is for me when I've been working in prison settings. And I'm not saying that's the same at all, because it's obviously not. But you know, in a prison, you've got they come every week, and it's the same amount of people that tend to come every week, because that's the routine, that's like the routine of the day, it's what it's like, but in the community, you've got all the outside factors that you don't have in the prison as such. So you've got the access to, you know, going out, if they wanted to go out or, you know, they might have appointments in the city and be just busy and have family visits or whatever they're doing. lives can be quite chaotic. And I think when you in that setting, having something there like the creative arts is really nice. So there's been a nice kind of stable group of women that have been coming back every week, and they've been creating poetry. They've been exploring songs and lyrics and getting up and improvising, we've had some really funny improvisations, where the students had been performing alongside the women. And it's just kind of been like a really nice moment of building confidence and self-esteem. But you do have that kind of shift where, you know, people some people are in and out because they might have left the hostel and then they're not accessing the group anymore. So, it's finding how we can still access those access those women and maybe it's about you know, having a group on campus or something like that, where people can come after they have left the service but I think that's all in the doing that we can kind of find what works and what doesn't work and how we can improve it.

**Paula Clark**

*On The Out* is a new part of the Prison Partnership Project. That is right, isn't it Jess? It is kind of a sister project?

**Jessica Robson**

I suppose On the Out’s looking at the York St. John University Prison Partnership Project having a full wrap around provision, so it is not just catering towards women in prison but its catering towards women in the community as well and people who might have experience of the criminal justice system and homelessness or be vulnerable or anyone who might finds it useful and helpful to be engaging with other people.

**Paula Clark**

So, the idea is that we map the provision in the city and try and find the need for this creative space for vulnerable women and that we bring those women together on campus so that they also have the benefit of York St John and its resources, that could be the canteen, it could be careers advice.

**Jessica Robson**

Yeah, and I think with bringing women onto campus as well, it kind of breaks down “oh that’s York St John University place, that’s not a place for me” and kind of breaking that down and thinking, “this can be a place for me” and that they can feel comfortable about coming on to campus and using the facilities. That is kind of the bigger goal. So that we can integrate them into the learning community.

**Paula Clark**

And we have this lovely opportunity right now working with the younger group in the hostel and they have met now for 4 weeks. They are fantastic, aren't they?

**Jessica Robson**

So, fantastic. So much energy.

**Paula Clark**

And for some of those young people who are experiencing homelessness right now for so many different reasons, for them to be welcomed into the campus, for them to know that they are welcome to use the computers, to have some careers guidance, to go to yoga, to have a cheap jacket potato in the canteen. This is like a huge barrier that can be removed and um, especially in a way that a young person can imagine their future. Especially if we do it right and that’s what this project is all about. Yeah!

Can you tell me Jess what kind of benefits this work would have to a student who is studying applied theatre?

**Jessica Robson**

Yes, so some of the students come on who are interested in this kind of work. They come onto the project and they kind of develop their facilitation skills and we look at how we work in a trauma informed way, and how we work in a gender specific way, and what that kind of looks like and how we can make sure the groups feel safe and create safe environment for the people that are being creative in that space. For the students it’s looking at how we scaffold a workshop in order to get to the main activity or what their goal is. So instead of just jumping into full long improv that feels quite exposing, its looking at how we can scaffold in order to enable the group participants to feel able to get to that moment and it does not feel scary or, actually, they can opt in and out, you know, if what it is that the students are doing isn't working for the group, they can look at how do we adapt an exercise to benefit the group or to fit the group better. Whether it's a different creative outlet, whether is writing, whether it's something that enables someone to create in any way possible if they were struggling with that. And for the students I think it’s a really good opportunity, especially since having lockdown, they have had two years of not being able to go into the community and, you know, some of the projects that they have come onto, well, this project that they have come onto, is the first time they have done in person facilitation, in person practice, and to be honest, if I had been a student at that time I wouldn’t be doing the things that I am doing now. It's almost like gold dust, it sounds cringey saying that, but it is kind of, it's really, what do you call it? Like a rich tapestry of experience that they get from working alongside a service or a practitioner and the women. It’s what the women get from them but also they get from the women. So I think that’s kind of how I would explain the student experience. And it's to build your skills and your skillset and learn how to work when things quite don’t go right and throw your workshop plan out the way, but also to understand the territory and to kind of open up conversations around homelessness and women in prison and all of those issues that we kind of deal with on the Prison Partnership Project.

**Paula Clark**

So, if I were a student now who was thinking, “ooh I think I might be interested in this work, but I'm not sure how I feel about it, I haven’t done anything like it before?” What would you say?

**Jessica Robson**

I would say, “give it a go”, you have nothing to lose, you might be a bit nervous about going into work in the community or into the prisons but give it a go you have nothing to lose and if you really didn’t like it you could always leave the project, but we obviously want you to stay on the project if you can. But it’s a fantastic opportunity. I think It's such an individualised experience and don’t think many universities have this offer, especially in the provision and the complexity, not the complexity but the longevity of the project. This project has been running since 2013, not the On the Out project, but the Prison Partnership Project. So there is just this wealth of experience of weekly practice and you get a lot of parachute projects; there is nothing wrong with parachute projects but this look at how do we sustain a group? How do we work together on a week-to-week basis and develop those relational ways of working with the women?

**Paula Clark**

What do you mean by parachute projects?

**Jessica Robson**

Parachute projects are those really short projects that might be like a 3-day residency and there is nothing wrong with that but it’s a very different model of working. And I think the Prison Partnership Project with working in a trauma informed way, they work in weekly practice and it's about a sustained practice, it’s about how do we work with women and see them along a creative journey rather than jumping in with a project and then leaving.

**Paula Clark**

I think it’s really important to mention as well the reason why we are making this podcast, we really want to share this research and open this project up to the university community. So whether that’s to staff or a particular department that has an interest in this area of research and social justice or whether or not that is students who actually think that this is something that they really want to get involved in, to grab the opportunity and take part. How would they get in touch? How would anyone get in touch with us if they wanted to find out more?

Jessica Robson

Well they could get in touch with you or me, so its [p.clark2@yorksj.ac.uk](mailto:p.clark2@yorksj.ac.uk) which is Paula’s email or [j.robson3@yorksj.ac.uk](mailto:j.robson@yorksj.ac.uk)

**Paula Clark**

Thank you. And finally, Jess, if there was one moment for you that was the moment you decided, I love this work, I want to do this for my professional life? What was it?

**Jessica Robson**

Oh that’s really hard because like, there is a moment, there is a particular moment but it’s a buildup of moments. But I will tell you this one moment. I was working on the Prison Partnership Project and we were looking at a particular play and with the response part of this the women were responding, they were drawing pictures, they were creating their own island and this one woman drew a picture of a mountain and it was like a rickety mountain and there was loads of like gravel at the bottom of the mountain and she placed herself right at the top of the mountain as like she had got to the point where she needed to and the whole group helped her create this image of helping her get up this mountain but she was like, it's not just a straight kind of uphill there are little rocky bits along the way and actually getting to the top of the mountain is really really tricky. And then when we asked about the gravel we said, “what's the gravel” and she said, “that was all the broken bits of me.” And it really hit me like really hard. When we had obviously tried to help he get to the top of this journey through drama in all this fantastic improvisation. We were like literally stepping on chairs and all sorts, um it was really funny at the time but also really moving. We said, “Does it still belong in that picture” and she just picked the picture up and ripped it in half and she put the gravel really far away and the mountain really away from the gravel and it was just beautiful. I said, you know, myself and Rachel said, “what can you see when you are at the top of the mountain?” and she went, “I can look back at where I have come from” and I was just like, ”Ok, this is it.”

**Paula Clark**

Oh, thank you so much for sharing that.

**Jessica Robson**

No, it's cool

**Paula Clark**

Join us next time when we will be speaking to Rachel Conlon, Director of York St John Prison Partnership Project and Senior Lecturer in Theatre.