

# Beyond the Walls

## Jericho Circle Project Newsletter

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### JCP Intensive Training at FMC Devens (June, 2005)

For the third time in as many years, the Jericho Circle Project sponsored an intensive (32 contact hours) training for inmates at FMC Devens—a Federal Bureau of Prisons facility in Ayer, MA.

Building on the work that has taken place in weekly groups at the institution since September 2001, thirteen volunteer facilitators came into the institution to do “deep work” with inmates over a period of three days.

The experience offered inmates a chance to look within and develop insights into how they could take responsibility for “re-authoring” their lives. Since coming to the institution over 4 years ago, JCP has involved over 40 skilled outside facilitators in groups and intensives that have changed the lives of more than 75 inmates. The intensives have supported “inside” men in making the journey to higher levels of integrity, accountability and emotional awareness. These experiences have also transformed the “free” men who go inside, helping us to discover the “prisons” we live in and the keys to unlocking our own truth.



Volunteer Facilitators at Devens III

### Native Americans Invite JCP Men to a Sweat Lodge “Inside the Walls”

When young men underwent initiations in traditional societies, they were obliged to “cross over” into a new physical, emotional and spiritual space. Movement into this space symbolized a shift from youth to adulthood, from the ways of children to the ways of mature men. Accompanying this transition was an understanding that as initiated men they were expected to become mature, responsible and accountable members of their community.

The challenges facing men in prison are similar to those facing uninitiated men in all societies. The question they face is: How can they be supported in becoming trustworthy and valued members of the community? This problem is especially vexing when men have committed crimes against their community and “fallen from grace.”

The intensive trainings that Jericho Circle organizes for men behind bars are intended to be initiatory experiences for incarcerated men. The goal of these initiations is to support men in making major changes in their lives— shifts that will empower them to embrace new directions and begin living more purposeful lives. As part of our effort to assist men in taking this leap forward, we approached the Native Americans at the institution with an unusual request: We asked them if they would be willing to invite men taking this important journey into their sacred space (the sweat lodge).

As agreed to and defined by the Native Americans at the institution, the purpose of this experience was to offer healing and purification to men who were on a journey to “shed their old skin.”

The collaborative sweat was an unqualified success. Native and non-Native men alike came to appreciate the power and significance of “crossing over” the lines that separate all of us as they shared the mysteries and gifts of this sacred experience and place.

## “Daddy Stories” at FMC Devens



The Jericho Circle Project has received a grant from the Helen and William Mazer Foundation to develop a pilot program for more meaningful communication between male inmates and their children. One of the most valuable forms of contact between fathers and young children is the “bedtime story.” Fathers who have had the opportunity to read stories to their children can testify to the beauty and intimacy that is created during these moments. Even though they may be separated by bars and physical distance, it is possible, through the medium of videotape, to bring fathers and their pre-school children together in this way.

Currently, fathers are being videotaped reading stories in English and Spanish and showing accompanying pictures to their pre-school children. Books are made available to the families at home, along with the videotapes, so that children can follow along with their father’s narration. Inmates participate in pre-taping sessions to acquaint them with the stories and prepare for their videotaped reading.

After receiving consent from the families involved, Inmates are selected based on criteria such as length of sentence, distance from home and frequency of visits. The video “love letters” that these fathers send can help maintain a life-line between imprisoned fathers and their children who have been left behind.

### “A Sentence of Their Own”: Children of Men Behind Bars

The unprecedented level of incarceration in our society has had disastrous consequences for families and especially children. One of the pains of imprisonment that men experience is separation from their children.

Fathers behind bars find themselves estranged from their sons and daughters with predictable results: children have little contact with or understanding of their fathers and incarcerated fathers find they are powerless to offer direction, mentoring and nurturing to their children.

The impact of separating incarcerated men from their children is far reaching on both sides of the bars. Studies have shown that inmates with close ties to their families and their children have more success at reintegration and lower recidivism rates upon release. On the other hand, the negative effects of disconnection on children are well documented. Research has shown that separation of young children from their parents and associated trauma can result in emotional dissociation, regression, depression, anger, and a variety of antisocial behaviors among the children.

“Daddy Stories” is a program that is designed to acknowledge and address the needs of children with incarcerated fathers—a growing and increasingly underserved population.

### Men’s Circles at Hampshire County House of Correction

Beginning in 2004, the Sociological Initiatives Foundation and the Gardiner Howland Shaw Foundation have funded a Jericho Circle Project Program entitled “Closing the Circle: From Community to Prison to Community.” The project seeks to bridge the gap between men’s circles meeting on both sides of the walls. JCP has established viable and effective groups inside institutions by “importing” the techniques and insights of community men’s circles. The intention of this project has been to “close the circle” by ultimately bringing inmates who have experience in groups on the inside into support circles in the communities to which they return.

The long-term objective of this project has been to see whether the seeds of emotional literacy and social responsibility planted within an institutional environment will bear fruit. The broader vision motivating this project has been to assess ways of “exporting” the work done inside to community settings.

At HCHOC, inmates returning home receive training in emotional awareness, anger management, non-violent communication and conflict resolution. They also have an opportunity to develop a vision and action plan for their reentry process and beyond.

Out beyond ideas  
of wrongdoing and  
right doing,  
there is a field. I'll  
meet you there.

When the soul lies  
down in that grass,  
the world is too  
full to talk about.  
Ideas, language,  
even the phrase  
*each other*  
doesn't make any  
sense.

Jelaluddin  
Rumi

## New Jericho Circle Program Begins at MCI Cedar Junction

Beginning in January of this year, the Jericho Circle Project began facilitating weekly men's circles in MCI-Cedar Junction (Walpole). The circles consist of 10-14 inmates and 2-3 facilitators. This innovative program was an important step forward in our collaborative work with the Massachusetts Department of Correction. JCP is especially pleased to be part of programming initiatives in the D.O.C. in general and at this institution in particular. What makes this development especially noteworthy is that there has been little, if any, programming of this nature at this institution for the better part of a decade. MCI-Cedar Junction is a Level 6 maximum security institution and is widely regarded as one the "toughest" prisons in the state system. If an "orchid can grow" in this "sidewalk," who knows what new blossoms may take root elsewhere in the "Prison Nation."

## Facilitator Training Workshop: "So You Want to Go to Prison!"

Part of the Jericho Circle Project mission is to encourage the development of skilled facilitators in communities where men feel called to go into local prisons and share their gifts with men behind bars. In February of this year, JCP provided a training workshop to 6 men on Cape Cod, Massachusetts who were seeking to serve inside men at a local correctional institution.

The training experience included an opportunity to explore challenges associated with "crossing over" and serving as a volunteer in a prison environment. Specific skills required to facilitate groups in correctional settings were also experienced and tested. Returnees from local institutions were part of the effort, offering a real life check on the difficulties of seeing and living life "on the inside." At the end of the day, men had a deeper appreciation for what it means to truly "go inside" to find their truth.

## First JCP Intensive Training to take place at Bay State Correctional Center in July, 2005

Bay State Correctional Institution has been a home to weekly Jericho Integrity Circles since September of 2002. During that time, approximately 30 inmates have received certificates of completion in our 8 week programs. This number is especially striking in that these groups are completely voluntary and the average daily population of this institution is only in the vicinity of 250-300 men.

What makes working at this facility so rewarding, is that the majority of the men incarcerated there are "long-termers," having spent many years inside. Our team at Bay State are deeply appreciative of the opportunity to help these men create a supportive environment where they can safely explore their shadows and gain insights into their pasts. As men who have "grown up" behind bars, they have a unique understanding of the "walls" that have separated them from their loved ones, their communities and themselves. In being willing to "bring down the walls" each week, both inside and outside men have come to understand how much we still have to learn and grow.

On July 23rd and 24<sup>th</sup>, JCP will be offering an intensive workshop to a select group of those attending our weekly circles. The intensive will provide an opportunity for men to go beyond the "small scoops" they have taken in the 2 hour weekly groups. It promises to give everyone involved a chance to travel the "road less taken"—the road within.

"Everyone is here because of a mistake. Most of the mistakes were dreadful, catastrophic. Now we have frozen you in your mistake, marked you forever, held you captive, discarded and hated you for your mistake. You've essentially been forced to become... the walking daily embodiment of your mistake, held in the monument constructed to punish mistakes... Week after week, I come in and watch men search for their dignity and in their search struggle to give voice to the guilt, the anger, the sorrow, the fear, the despair that has formed around your crimes and your lives in prison... There is the mistake, it is one moment, it is in the past, it is ruined, it cannot be changed; then there is the man."

Adapted from Eve Ensler's Prologue to  
"What I Want My Words to Do to You."

## Where do your dollars go?

Donations fund each of the following:

- Support for volunteers
- Materials and supplies for circles and events
- Lodging, travel and meals for out-of-town facilitators
- Support for returning inmates (See the "Spartacus Fund")
- Materials, labor and travel to support "Daddy Stories"
- Facilitator training workshops
- The development and application of research tools to assess and improve our work

"Who would you be if you had never held back even one tear?"  
Sobonfu Some'

## JCP Establishes the "Spartacus Fund"

The Jericho Circle Project has created a special fund to provide financial assistance to men returning to their communities from prison who choose to enroll in a New Warrior Training Adventure. Men who have been part of JCP integrity circles and/or intensives behind bars are eligible to receive support upon their release and enrollment in a Mankind Project Weekend.

Two men who participated in circles inside institutions were supported by this fund in the last New England NWTAs in April. For more information about how to become part of this effort, contact us at the address below. We will be happy to tell you more about how we are supporting ex-offenders in their reentry and building bridges between circles inside and beyond the walls.



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