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Rhode Island

Opening night in a grim place is full of hope

Calvin from Providence was an understudy.

"But one of the kids got out, so they put me in."

In prison drama — as in drama performed in prison — there has to be a lot of understudies. One actor's freedom can mean another's big break.



**BOB
KERR**

And on opening night, it was Calvin up there, playing an emotion in the production of *Everyman* in the cafeteria of the Rhode Island Training School.

It's a short play. It looks at a man's life, as the Grim Reaper

stands ready to take him away. The man checks in with Loneliness, Fear, Friendship, Love. The dialogue has a streetwise ease about it.

When it was over, the audience rose in a standing ovation. Parents of cast members finally had something to cheer about.

Then, the guests walked down hallways lined with residents' art to classrooms where residents read their poetry by the light of small lamps provided by Trinity Repertory Company.

It was last Thursday, and it was the biggest night of artistic expression ever at the Training School. It was a night when Rhode Island's artistic community came together to tap the artist inside the criminal.

In the middle of it, encouraging poets and actors through last-minute stage jitters, was Demian Yattaw, a substitute teacher at the school with a master's degree in creative writing and an idea that the arts just might help messed-up kids consider some other options.

↓ "They want something to do in life, a chance to pursue their own imaginations," Yattaw said.

So there are paintings and masks displayed along the hallways, poetry in the classrooms, drama in the cafeteria. The poetry is not the contrived stuff of poetry slams. It's as direct and uncluttered as a jail cell:

*The sounds of keys
As they close up my door
I'm left in tragedy
Like earth after war.*

"You're talking about people who have grown up in frustration," says Rene from Woonsocket, one of the school's new poets. "So of course there's going to be frustration in the poetry," he said.

Umberto Crenca says he's heard a lot of poetry recited that doesn't have the honesty of the poetry he hears at the Training School.

Crenca, the artistic director of AS220, the Providence art and performance center, has joined with other organizations in the state to find a place for the arts in the bleakness of the Training School.

"What if we had an AS220 behind walls?" he asks.

Thursday night, Crenca made a simple appeal. He is starting a book drive. He says the Training School has a nice library. There just aren't enough books in it. So he is asking people to donate art books to give troubled kids "more pictures, more windows."

There is no telling where the arts will go at the Training School, how big a part they will play in helping kids walk out of confinement and into something that works. School officials are still waiting on a federal grant application that would provide more arts training.

"We've been showing up regularly for a while," says Crenca. "That's what we're committed to, that we will show up. And that's what we've been doing."

For kids not used to showing up or having people show up for them, that is a very big thing.

Early Thursday evening, poets and actors who hadn't been either just a few months ago gathered in a room at the Training School before their work would go public for the first time. They talked about how Demian Yattaw has helped them, how they have found places to put their anger that don't involve a punch in the mouth.

One of the cast of *Everyman* said people have always told him he's a natural born actor. He said he loves drama and received awards for his acting before he came to Rhode Island and got arrested.

"But you can't sell drugs," he said, "and become an actor."

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