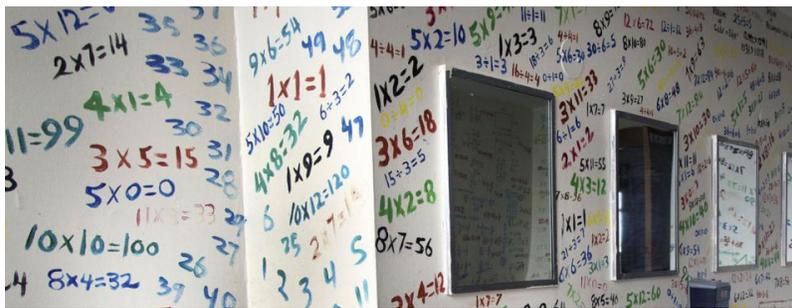


http://poststar.com/news/local/states-of-incarceration-mount-mcgregor-stories-are-part-of-national/article_1bbb8c44-7bf1-55d0-ae9e-c8e0c9b857e7.html

States of Incarceration: Mount McGregor stories are part of national exhibit

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'States of Incarceration' Public Events

- **7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 14, at the Tang:** After Incarceration: Stories from Those Who've Lived It
- **Noon Friday, Sept. 15:** 'States of Incarceration' Gallery Talk
- **7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 21, in Gannett Auditorium:** Kek la Magoon: Behind the Headlines
- **7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 28, in Davis Auditorium:** Stories That Speak to Us: A conversation with Piper Anderson and Sylvia Ryerson
- **9 a.m. Saturday, Sept. 30, in Murray-Aikins Dining Hall, 2nd floor:** Mass Story Lab: What is Prison For?
- **2 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 30, at the Tang:** 'States of Incarceration' Gallery Talk
- **3 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 30, at the Tang:** Rikers: An American Jail Screening and Q&A
- **7 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 5, at the Tang:** Poetry Lab with Cara

'He actually turned his life around while he was in prison. He started teaching about recovery, he started teaching about safe sex, HIV prevention, he got his degree, certificate, whatever they call it in Religious Studies.'

— Marcella Anderson, wife of a man incarcerated at Mount McGregor, 2015 interview, taken from "States of Incarceration: A National Dialogue of Local Stories"

SARATOGA SPRINGS — When a prison closes, the once heavily guarded and locked institution goes dormant, leaving little trace of those who lived and worked, sometimes for decades, within its barbed borders.

Their departed stories — some tragic and gruesome, some hopeful and transformative — are mostly relegated to the minds of their owners and the echoes of a deteriorating and abandoned building.

That's partially why a group of Skidmore College's public history students and their professor set out to resurrect the tales of those whose lives were dramatically altered after the 2014 closing of the Mount McGregor Correctional Facility in Saratoga County.

Mount McGregor, a medium-security prison in Wilton, was one of 13 state prisons to close. At the time, there were 320 employees and 422 inmates.

"We were able to tour Mount McGregor ... after 18 months it was really deteriorating," said Isaac Selchaif, now a Skidmore senior, who has been with the project since its inception. "It was super

Benson, Johnny
Perez, & Sean
Dalpiaz

- 6:30 p.m. Friday, Oct. 6, at the Tang: Accelerator Series: Mass Incarceration and the Prison Industrial Complex

cold (inside). There were giant (pieces of) chipping paint that had fallen off and was on the ground. In some places, the inmates had painted the walls, and some was beautiful and some disgusting. There were all these mathematical equations painted in bright colors.

“It gave me an eerie sense,” he said.

The students interviewed former staff and prisoners, researched the history of incarceration in the state and visited the vacant, sprawling expanse of 100 buildings situated at the top of the mountain on 325 acres.

“They developed a human connection to mass incarceration,” said Eric Morser, an associate professor of history at Skidmore, who has headed the initiative.

As part of a traveling national exhibit and interactive dialogue — “States of Incarceration: A National Dialogue of Local Histories” — the stories of the people of Mount McGregor have been shared visually in many states over the past year. And this weekend, the entire exhibit, along with the Mount McGregor portion — “Closing a Prison, Deferring a Dream: What’s Lost When a Prison Closes?” — has returned to its Skidmore roots for a month-long exhibition that opened Saturday at the Tang Teaching Museum on the college campus.

On Friday afternoon, Selchaif, Morser and Morser’s son, Nick, saw the exhibition for the first time. When they entered the room at the Tang, they were quickly drawn to the photos and stories, pointing out and talking about what they recalled.

“There’s Johnny,” Selchaif said, pointing to the image of Johnny Perez, who had been an inmate at Mount McGregor for 13 years. Perez now works to help other former prisoners re-enter society.

And as they wandered through the vast exhibition, their energy was palpable.

In their words

“We are undergraduate students who knew little about prisons. We conducted interviews with formerly incarcerated men, volunteer teachers, prison officials, and other people tied to Mount McGregor to tell a personal, human story about the struggle to survive life behind bars in a medium-security prison. We hope to encourage a dialogue about the best way to help incarcerated people overcome the challenges they face behind bars and as they re-enter society.”

— Displayed in Skidmore College’s portion of the ‘States of Incarceration’ exhibit

“When you can give it a narration, it’s easier to identify with and it amplifies their stories,” Selchaif said.

“States of Incarceration” is the culmination of the work of 500 students, 20 colleges and universities and others who share in a profound unease about the state of incarceration in America.

Two years ago, each team set out within their individual communities to find answers as to why the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, wondering how this happened, and to spark a dialogue in local venues about where the nation goes from here.

There are still 2.3 million people spending big chunks of time behind bars in state jails and federal prisons in the U.S., a rate more than five times higher than in most countries around the world, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization exposing the broader harms of mass criminalization.

Among the ranks of the imprisoned, there is an unbalanced proportion of people of color (nearly 50 percent). Additionally, women are the fastest-growing incarcerated population, with their numbers increasing by 832 percent since 1977.

In New York, as part of a statewide effort by New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo to cut back on the state’s prison population, the number of inmates has dropped by nearly 6,000 since 2011. But there are still more than 53,000 serving state sentences in New York and another 35,000 in local jails and federal prisons.

The Local Public History Project

It’s been two years since students in Eric Morser’s public history course at Skidmore College first began gathering stories about the people of Mount McGregor, about those who were there before the state prison closed in July 2014.

Prior to the fall course, the Humanities Action Lab at the New School in New York City approached Skidmore, inviting them to participate in the national “States of Incarceration” project aimed at forging new relationships and dialogues and hopefully creating a new lens from which to view this nation’s approach to incarceration.

What drew the New School to the Saratoga Springs college was the John B. Moore Documentary Studies Collaborative at Skidmore. “The collaborative teaches students how to tell different stories,” Morser said.

For their role in the national initiative, Morser said they decided to build it around the public history course he teaches.

“History is theoretical and this is an opportunity to demonstrate it and work as public historians,” he said, adding that the public history course is designed to take history out into the broader world.

Students interviewed people related to the prison, but getting to those people might not have been possible without the assistance of David Karp, another Skidmore professor who had previous contacts at Mount McGregor.

“David helped establish connections,” Morser said. “As we started doing the interviews, more and more people came forward and it took on a life of its own.”

The way Morser explained it, the first semester class contributed a single panel to the national exhibit, but it continues to grow.

“In the aftermath of the first course, I began to offer a workshop course for three or four students who did more interviews, transcribed the interviews, helped with the exhibit and gave gallery talks,” he said. “We now have four panels in the exhibition that has been traveling the country visiting the institutions that contributed a local story.”

Isaac, Meaghan and the people of Mount McGregor

Close friends Isaac Selchaif and Meaghan McDonald, both Skidmore seniors, had no connection to mass incarceration prior to working with Morser and the “States of Incarceration” project.

But over the past two years, after interviewing several ex-prisoners, some who are still serving time, and the people who work with them, they have learned a great deal and believe that the U.S. penal system is broken.

The system in itself is sinister, Selchaif said. “There are no little stories,” he said. “It is more and more eye-opening as we delve more into this project.”

According to McDonald, there is an effort to humanize incarceration, but it does not go deeply enough.

“A lot of crimes stem from addiction and the opioid crisis and from poverty,” she said. “When you see a father who misses their child’s first birthday, it forces you to humanize it.”

McDonald continued.

“There is a long list of reforms that are not working when applied,” said McDonald, who in addition to her ongoing work with the Skidmore project spent her summer working at a county prison in Pennsylvania. “I spent every day of this summer with inmates. I have been evaluating their programs and I made recommendations to the county about ways to help them rehabilitate. ... I thought I had a good understanding, but my outlook is much bleaker after working inside a prison.”

Both students talked about issues tied to re-entry that they said came up again and again in their interviews.

Selchaif brought up Johnny Perez. “He’s an incredible man,” he said, talking about what he has learned about re-entry from Perez. “When

someone leaves prison, they are given a bus ticket and \$40. Then you go.”

McDonald shared similar information. And they both have learned about how hard it is for former prisoners to get jobs because of the box they must check on employment applications, labeling them as felons.

She told the story of Angel, who had been serving two different sentences, and she detailed his struggle in meeting the rules of release and his eventual acceptance as a student at Columbia University.

“I very much support the (axiom) society should be judged by how it treats its lowest,” McDonald said.

The exhibit runs until Oct. 10 at The Tang Teaching Museum.

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