

## Carnegie Hall brings more than musical harmony to SC prison

*By: MEG KINNARD (AP)*

BISHOPVILLE, S.C. (AP) — One of South Carolina's most dangerous prisons is also home to beautiful music, occasions when gate alarms and tower sirens are replaced by guitar riffs, beat box rhythms and the strains of Vivaldi.

Thanks to a partnership with a chamber ensemble affiliated with Carnegie Hall, several dozen inmates at Lee Correctional Institution will be putting on a concert Saturday they've written themselves. Organizers and inmates say the rehearsals and the performance encourage harmony, not only in their music but also in learning to work together.

"Our mission is really to bring meaningful music-making experience to all people, regardless of their previous exposure or expertise with music," says Claire Bryant, a Juilliard-trained cellist and member of Decoda, the chamber group, who grew up in Camden, a city about 25 miles from the prison.

Since 2014, Bryant has been returning home with Decoda, teaching Lee inmates not only to create music of their own but also how to work in partnership. She and a handful of other musicians mentor

the men in groups of four or five for up to eight hours a day, exploring genres of music and the songwriting process. In all, they'll end up with more than a dozen finished pieces for their concert.

An existing music program at Lee provides select, well-behaved inmates the opportunity to learn guitar, drums, bass and even the cellos and violin. During their week together, Decoda artists show the men others, such as the bassoon. A jazz singer is also accompanying the group for this trip.

"Everybody is on stage, whether they're playing a tambourine or taking guitar solos on one of the songs," Bryant said. "They're finding their role and their voice that they feel comfortable with. They're participating."

Lee, a maximum-security prison with nearly 1,500 inmates, holds some of South Carolina's most violent, longest-serving offenders and has been known for riots and brutality. In the last several years, there have been two large insurrections, including one in which an inmate overpowered a guard and used his keys to free others from their cells in a six-hour standoff. Two officers were stabbed during a fight last year.

And in 2010, an officer overseeing the prison's anti-contraband efforts was shot and wounded at his home in an attack police said was orchestrated by an inmate using a cellphone smuggled into the prison.

After their five-day workshop, inmates and Decoda musicians perform for other inmates, prison staff and local officials. This year's

program is called "Seasons of Life," inspired by Antonio Vivaldi's classical work "The Four Seasons."

Earlier this week, several dozen inmates sat in Lee's visitor room in front of a makeshift performance space. A handful of microphone stands stuck out above the closely-shorn heads of the men, clad in tan correctional uniforms, their eyes on the stage. A few at a time strode to the front, performing original pieces of song, spoken word, even rap. They backed each other up, picking up guitars and sliding behind keyboards to perform musical accompaniment, often without any prior practice, creating a free-flowing jam session.

"It gives meaning to my life," said one of them, a lifer named Randy — state prison policy dictates that inmates be identified using only first names.

Randy had no musical experience but now practices guitar about an hour each day and said he has embraced other self-improvement opportunities, such as alcohol treatment programs.

"To be able to sit on a stage with world-class musicians is something you can't put into words," he said.

Rob, another inmate who plays with the group, said he grew up playing rock and blues guitar and sees the program as far more than just a way to hone his skills.

"It brings a lot of guys out of their shells," he said. "It really gives every man a voice. It basically transcends music and the way we

interact with each other."

To organizer Bryant, the musical exposure is a way to try to ensure that the men, most of whom will be released, are productive, well-balanced members of society one day.

"I think the arts have special powers that other forms of education and exploration don't tap into," she said. "That's everything from problem solving, conflict resolution, a sense of accomplishment, empathy — it's not teaching empathy, it's more empowering the empathy that's inside of all of us."

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