

UNIMAGINABLE ISOLATION:



STORIES FROM  
GRATERFORD PRISON



The Village of Arts and Humanities is a non-profit art based organization centered in a particularly impoverished section of North Philadelphia. Founded by renowned artist Lily Yeh, for over fifteen years the Village has sought to revitalize the community through the arts. Through a broad range of arts, educational, social, and economic development programs, the Village impacts over 10,000 individuals yearly.



For over 30 years, the Painted Bride has offered Philadelphians a space like no other to experience leading-edge contemporary artists, both established and emerging, with distinctive voices that reflect the rich cultural mosaic of our city. It is the Bride's mission to "work with artists to create and present programs that affirm the intrinsic values of all cultures, the inspirational and healing powers of the arts, and their ability to effect social change.

# *Unimaginable Isolation: Stories from Graterford Prison*



**Gerald Mayo, Self Portrait**

# Unimaginable Isolation:

I have been involved with prison inmates in Pennsylvania since 1991, first corresponding with them and then conducting art workshops in prisons. In 1997, I had the good fortune of seeing "The Red Clay Country," a video film by Kevin O'Neill, who is an artist, film maker, and poet. The tape contains interviews he has conducted with prison inmates in Graterford and his own poems about prison. I remember vividly how I was struck by the power of the images of the prisoners in brown uniform on the screen and the urgency and immediacy of their words. I felt compelled to go into Graterford to meet these men and to hear their stories.

In April 1998, working with the prison authority and Lifers, Inc. in Graterford, I formed an artist team composed of Gerry Givnish (visual art), Glenn Holsten (video/film), and myself (multi-media) to go to Graterford to conduct workshops. We named our workshops "Story-telling through painting and video."

The continuous three-year effort of the artists and lifers working together has resulted in a

## Corridor at Eastern State Penitentiary

stunning exhibition currently on display in the historic site of the former prison, the Eastern State Penitentiary from May to November, 2001. This show is one of four parts of the city-wide exhibition titled "Unimaginable Isolation, Stories from Graterford." The other three parts will respectively open in the fall at the University of the Arts, the Painted Bride Art Center, and the Village of Arts and Humanities.

We are taking on the highly controversial prison issue at the Village of Arts and Humanities because we see that the prison population is an extension of our community and communities similar to ours. The Village is located in inner city North Philadelphia, the so called "Bad Land." We have so many families torn apart by poverty, crime, and incarceration. I witness mothers and fathers pining for their sons and daughters, and I see our children cry for their parents locked away in prison. The purpose of the Village is to build community through innovative arts, education, construction, and social programs. Yet, as we work hard to build people, strengthen our youth, reconnect families, and reconstruct this community, we witness powerful forces at work to tear our community asunder. The mission of the Village is to do justice to the people we serve. There is no choice but to look at the prison issue face to face. Thus the purpose of this city-wide exhibition is to make the invisible visible, to reconnect the broken, to heal the wounded, and to know that we are all connected. We feel that the prison system is a reflection of us and our society at large.



# Stories from Graterford Prison

The culminating event will be a public forum to be held at the University of the Arts on September 25, from 5 to 8 pm. It will contain an invocation, songs, five short presentations, and a recitation of inmates' poems by teens in our youth theater. The presenters will include myself, Superintendent Donald T. Vaughn of Graterford, Professor Paul Eisenhower of Chestnut Hill College, Professor Lori Pompa of Temple University, and a representative from the organization Murder Victim Families for Reconciliation. The reknowned poet Sonia Sanchez will open the occasion with her words and poems. We aim to explore the issues of crime and punishment through art. We aim to listen and recognize the pain and suffering of victims of crime and that of their families; we aim to honor the humanity and talent of men in Graterford. They are people who think, reflect, feel and have capacity to love.

-Lily Yeh  
Executive Director  
The Village of Arts and Humanities



Portrait of William "Sonny" Gravely  
by Nyo Chong, a former Graterford inmate

## *Suave's Testimony*

I was born in New York. Bronx, New York, 1969, July 11. To a mother named Rhea Gonzalez. We grew up in the Bronx, six sisters, one brother. My first memory was rough. Because we grew up in a neighborhood where gunshots was every night, drug dealers, prostitutes. I grew up thinking that was life. The first instance that I can remember was my father beating my mother. I was like five years old. It was Thanksgiving Day. My father was an alcoholic, he still is. He threw the turkey on the floor, started arguing with my mom, and then he just started beating her. That was the last time he ever beat my mom, because since then they separated. I lost all respect for my father. And I ain't seen him for years. I could never, after that day, call him "Pop." I call him by his name every time I talk to him.

I grew up with that hatred, and I still got that hatred for him. He used to beat my brother. I got a brother that he made somewhere else. And I used to watch him beat him. And man, that used to hurt me. And I always told my brother, "Hey man, when you grow up man, I want you to whip his butt." He's not part of my life. She was the one that was there when I first got in trouble, when I first fell off my bike, when I first went to school, kindergarten. My mom was there; my pop was never there for the little things in life. Pop was somewhere else drinking.

**Time** moves with a faint ticking sound that is at once comforting and reassuring.

But as the seconds stretch to minutes and to years, the ticking becomes a relentless, hammering thud. It is at first oppressive. And then it is maddening.

*Time.* Imagine it. Magnified. Pouring through the prism of a lifetime. Refracting and breaking off into tiny pieces of nothing.

*Time.* For the lifers of Graterford, trapped in its never-ending cycle, the ticking seconds clap like thunder, falling like the tears of their families, cutting like the pain of their victims.

*Time.* It is the barrier that stands between lifers and the world. It is the sustainer of their unimaginable isolation.

Over *time*, the lifers' names have been erased, overwritten with lifeless numbers. To reclaim their humanity, they've reached back through the time they've lost. Within the brush strokes and images before you, they've rediscovered their names:

Muti Ajamu- Osagboro, Nicholas Spel Dematteo, *Mister* Odom.

There are more names than these—many more. And most of the names belong to men from Philadelphia. It wasn't always this way. It took *time* for things to come to this.

In 1989, there were but 1,858 lifers in Pennsylvania's state prison system. Ten years later, there were 3,616, and 53 percent of them were Philadelphians. Today, the number is even larger.

As a community, we accept it. But the acceptance, like the reality, came with *time*.

We cried for these men once; screamed out in courtrooms as they were shackled and led away. But the cries faded, even as the number of Philadelphia lifers nearly doubled.

Today, the screams of wives and mothers that reverberated through the halls of the judiciary are but echoes. The prisoners names are nearly forgotten, like whispers from a not-so-distant past. We hear these names and they sound familiar: Antonio Howard, Tyrone Werts, Trevor Mattis, Mukham.

We raised these men. Wiped their noses and taught them to walk. Laughed and cried as they grew into adulthood. Pulled them away from beckoning street corners. But when the struggle became too great, we let go. And so did they.

In *time*, we gave them to the corners, to the county, to the state. We relinquished them like treasures we had lost the wherewithal to maintain. We were glad to have them out of our midst. Glad to forget the pain of caring. Glad to give them over to time. But our gladness quickly turned to grief.

As these men disappeared behind prison walls, entire communities became ghost towns. The laughter faded like swirling smoke. The bond we shared gave way to shackles. The joy we felt was snatched away. We lost ourselves in nothing. And then we cried.

*Time after time after time.*

The men we lost have tried to find themselves in the works that stand before you. Look closely, and you may find them, too.

But it will take *time* to feel the heat of Jaabar Boyd's burning flame; *time* to find the knowledge in Clarence Odom's floating books; *time* to experience the simple dignity of Tyrone Werts' dead-on stare.

*Time* is what gives us the mettle to take up the challenge presented here. It is what allows us to see these men for who they really are. It is what lends them humanity and makes them whole. It is what heals the pain they've suffered and caused.

*Time*. For the lifers of Graterford, it is the never-ending barrier that stands between them and the world.

Today, with these works, they will break through that wall. And then, together with us, they will end their unimaginable isolation.

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Would I love to have a relationship with him? Yeah! But I think my pride won't let me. And I think he sense that too. So he stay away from me.

I always looked up to my mom, and she encouraged me to "write your father, talk to him, call him." But I don't want to deal with it, cause I think it's too painful for me. She's like the whole neighborhood's mother. If you had trouble with somebody you come to my house, you can stay in the house. She picked people up that we didn't even know, gave them food, share her money with them. When she had to put the father hat on, she was a little rougher. You know she'd try to discipline us. I feel that she's suffered enough because of us. She ain't have a life of her own. We took her life. Cause there was six of us. She not only cared for me, but all my sisters. She never had a life. I'm the fifth one. I got a twin sister. My sister's name is Eva Gonzalez (laughs). She's more wild than me. Real sensitive. She got her own caring ways. You know, she come every other week to visit me. She always care about her little brother. But man, all my sisters, we kept a tight family.

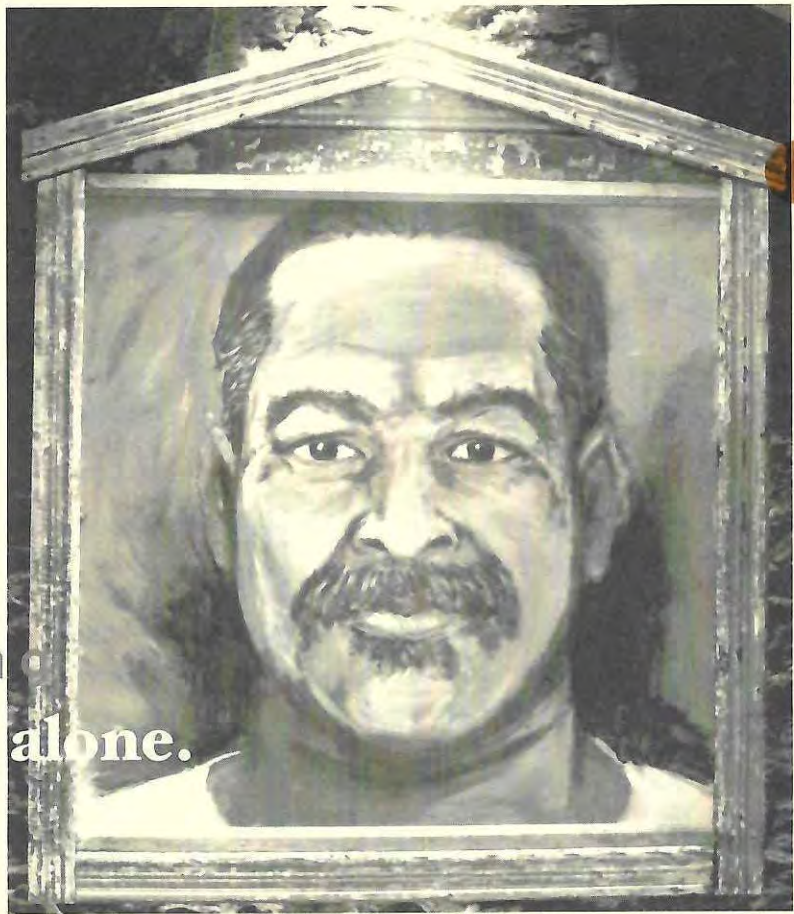
When I was twelve years old, I was in juvenile hall, so I thought life was rough. You gotta be a gangster, you gotta create an image, you gotta make other people respect you. That was life for me, cause I grew up in that environment. Well, I started getting in trouble when I was ten years old. That was the first time I stole, I snatched this lady's pocketbook and my cousin got caught and he told.



Luis Suave Gonzales

I am so tired of  
*dreaming*  
 WAITING  
 wanting  
 hoping  
 so tired of doing it alone.

*-Gerald Mayo*



Portrait of Tyrone A. Werts by Clarence Odom, frame by Tom Beckett



# I Reserve

I want to Reserve those parts of me  
that contain memories,  
that help me become a positive minded  
individual,  
free in my heart and soul.

Where I can be a man with plans and  
goals.

Where I can feel the wind again, and  
hear the clearness of sound,  
and understand the difference of evil  
that lurks on the ground.

And the beauty of the pleasant smell of  
plants  
and flowers of the forest.

I Reserve these things.

For the struggle to know endurance and  
unity.

To avoid the misery of my mistakes,  
and to trust the essence of love I can  
create.

- Jerome (Jabbar) Boyd

Self Portrait by Nyo Chong



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Because we wanted to be part of the "in-crew"  
in the neighborhood. And to be in, you had to  
have the image "he s down for whatever." And  
by snatching the pocketbook, that was like  
major stuff.

And I got caught. They let me go. I  
went and cut my cousin up. I sliced him with a  
razor blade because he told on me. So I was in  
juvenile hall for that for eighteen months.  
While I was in juvenile, I learned a whole lot of  
things about life. When I went in, I ain t smoke, I  
ain t do nothing. When I came out, I was a drug  
addict. I was smoking weed, dust, "devils"  
which is cigarette cocaine. The juvenile hall I  
was in, that was like a little prison. You had to  
be tough. If you wasn t tough, you wasn t gonna  
be in population. You know, I had respect for  
my mom, but, you ain t gonna tell me I can t  
go out till 2 o clock in the morning or more. I  
ain t been here for eighteen months. You  
ain t telling me nothing. You get big up there. I  
wanted to experience that. When I went in, I  
was a nobody. When I came out, I was all big,  
big-honed, big hair. I thought I was the man. I  
came out big, gained a couple of pounds, look-  
ing all cute. That s when my life took a turn. It  
changed everything about life.

My definition of a man now is some-  
body that s responsible for their family, gonna  
be productive, somebody that s gonna abide  
the law, somebody that s gonna work, that s  
gonna respect other people, that s my defini-  
tion of a man. I came to terms with that  
definition sixteen years behind these walls.

# Tortured Gardens

-Gerald Mayo

Somewhere in every prison  
there is me  
a beast epic of poems  
stories  
songs  
or just question marks  
reminders  
keepers of frozen times  
in frozen places  
planted like weeds  
and untended to grow as we will

We can tell you of sweet boxes  
without making you heave your guts raw  
as they did us  
or of slanted peanut boxes  
which balled us up  
pressing our knees to our chests

but how  
do we make you know the pain  
of not being able to strengthen your spine  
after being released from one

We can tell you what it's like  
in airless dark cells  
longing for a sight of light  
but we could never prepare you  
for how painfully blinding light is  
when you haven't seen it for so long

Or of years spent in isolations  
creating imaginary worlds  
ending in dead ends

We would be hard- pressed though  
to explain our panic, strangeness out of placement  
when mingling again with others  
when put back into populations.

Oh, we can tell you about violence.  
But we would not be able to make you  
feel our blood mixed with someone else's blood  
in our eyes  
our ears  
all over our persons

Oh how the taste and smell of fear and death  
Stay with you  
haunting your senses  
even when you're asleep

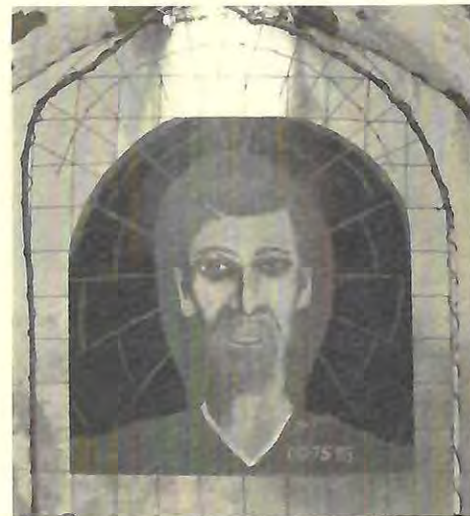
We can tell you about blinding rage  
So intense you develop stomach cramps  
until you explode  
into self- destruction

Do you really want to know  
what it is like to fight for your manhood  
what it is to be used as a pacification tool  
by administrators  
to control some sex- crazed maniac  
they're scared to death of  
and we are willing to kill

We can tell you what it's like  
to have the wisdom of a guru  
tempered with the mentality  
of a beast.

to be fire-hosed down  
wet and naked  
exposed to freezing temperatures

in open windowed cells  
dancing and jumping around  
not in joy  
but to keep your blood from clotting  
What we cannot do is explain  
how we outlive  
outlast  
out- endure  
the tortures inflicted  
years in ---- years out  
and like the wild weeds we are  
grow time and time again  
gracing these tortured gardens  
with our beings



Self Portrait by Samuel Phillips

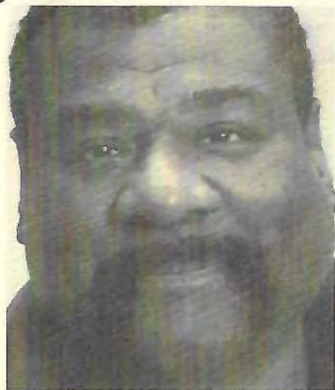


**Self Portrait by Anthony Howard**

I had a whole lot of time to think about what a man is. Even when I first started doing my time, I still had that same mentality I had in the streets. And from time to time, I'd still catch myself slipping. But I know better than that.

When I came, I didn't know how to read, I didn't know how to write but my name. So you know, I start seeing other brothers, I say "Okay, I want to learn that." And I knew I wasn't dumb. So I started educating myself, started realizing I need to respect other people, if I want people to respect me. I gotta give the same quality of respect. It was hell, cause I kept getting in trouble. My mom kept picking me up at the precinct. It was really the worst. Cause I was hooked on drugs, I was stealing, I was robbing, I started stealing from my mom. I started losing respect for my mom, cause I thought she was trying to put her foot down, and she was just really trying to protect me. I was running the streets. And today I don't know ten people that I grew up in that neighborhood, alive. And if they're alive, they're in jail somewhere, doing time. Cause it was the type of neighborhood.

I got to Philly because we snatched this guy's chain in school. He called the cops, I got arrested, my mom went to pick me up and they offered me eighteen months in job call. I said, "I'm not going there." So my mom said, "Okay, we're going to Philadelphia then." So we came to Philadelphia to my cousin's house. I liked it and I said I'm not going back. So my mom said, "Okay, we're staying here then."



Raymond Bennett Crawford, III  
#AF-5703



Anotnio "X" Howard  
#BY-3387

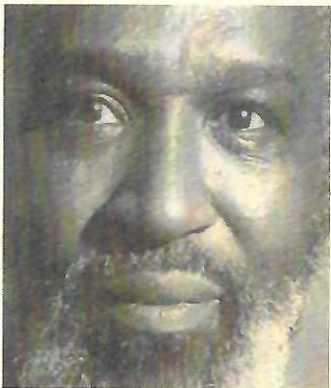


William "Sonny" Gravely  
#AF-9393



Muti Ajamu-Osagboro  
#AM-6021

Muhkam (Robert Haywood)  
#AY-1126



Tyrone A. Werts  
#AF-6337



Luis "Suave" Gonzalez  
#AS-0834





Trevor Mattis  
#BH-3126

Nicholas Spel Dematteo  
#BY-8058



Gerald Mayo  
#AP-8047



## All of the artists are lifers or long-term inmates.

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Two days later I got arrested for breaking into the store. That was like a warning. They let me go. I was at the youth study center for ten days. Three months later, I end up in jail with a homicide. I believe that if I had the right people telling me "Don't do this, don't do that," I probably would've listened. But I ain't never had that.

My favorite time of day? 10 o'clock at night. Why? Because that's when everybody' locked in, that's when I feel safe. And I know that I ain't gonna get nobody coming to my cell harassing me. Ten o'clock they all go home. The only guard that come around is the guard making sure I'm alive. Well ten o'clock at night sound like we living in the projects, and everybody's quiet. But yet you hear a woman screaming, people crying. You hear the crying, you hear the pain. That's when you really hear the pain of other people. And I was just talking to somebody, they got a young brother on my block. Every night he crying. And it was getting on my nerves. But I can understand that because he was young. And every night he'd get up crying, "I can't take this no more! I ain't do it. I don't belong here."

But most of us went through that. Some of us ain't holler it out, but when you lock in, ten o'clock, that's when you put that pillow over your head, that sheet, look at the pictures of you, get lonely, look at the pictures of what was. What could've been. And yeah, it's lonely, but it's the safest time.

*Special thanks to*

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## Calendar of Exhibitions and Events

**Eastern State Penitentiary:** Until November of 2001

An exhibition of multi-media installations that are collaborations between the instructors and the inmates. It includes sound, sculpture, and paintings, as well as documented writings by the artists.

**The Painted Bride Art Center:** September 7-20

Inmates' three dimensional, multimedia artwork will be exhibited in this Center City gallery space. Video documentation of the workshops at Graterford will allow the exhibition audience to witness the creative process.

**The Village Gallery:** September 17 – October 31

This exhibition will provide a more personal view of the inmates in the intimate gallery at 2526 North Alder Street. Poems written by inmates will be accompanied by works created by Village youth.

**The University of the Arts:** Sept. 15-Oct. 15

This exhibition will display forty 6 to 8 foot tall banners and quilts incorporating inmates' paintings of themselves, their situations, and their life stories. A 20 minute video capturing interviews with inmates about their personal lives will add a richness to the audience's experience of their artwork.

**Public Forum:** University of the Arts Sept. 25 5-8pm

Coinciding with the exhibitions, a public forum will be held at the University of the Arts on September 25, 2001. The forum will include community dialogue as well as powerful personal experiences with poetry recitation and songs interspersed with discussion and dialogue.

This project was made possible with funding from the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, the Dolfinger-McMahon Foundation, the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, and Eastern State Penitentiary.

