

Finding Their Beat

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Creativity sparks youths at Santa Cruz County Juvenile Hall Dennis Morton goes to jail every week. The staff nods at him, hefty security doors unlock and swing open for him. He's a regular at Santa Cruz County's Juvenile Hall. Unlike most of the population in this lock-down facility for troubled youth, Morton is tickled to spend his afternoons behind bars.

He walks through a vacant courtyard where the only activity is three adolescents striking yoga poses with an instructor. All is quiet behind these jail walls, at least for today. A classroom door opens and Morton steps in. There, waiting for him, are a handful of kids: They're all dressed in khaki pants, blue slip-on tennis shoes and forest green T-shirts or sweatshirts. The girls have freshly scrubbed faces, free of makeup, with hair swept away from their faces. Morton exchanges pleasantries and grabs a seat in a circle of chairs.

The tall, gray-haired, jovial Morton is their teacher. Twice a week the founder of Poetry Santa Cruz enables these incarcerated kids to get excited about writing. Morton and his friend Jill Wolfson hand out sheets of writing topics for today's assignment. The kids can pick one of three choices to write about: 1. What won't be the same when you get out? 2. The greatest test. 3. Qualities in a partner.

The children pen their thoughts, either in prose or poetry, in response to a question, then at the end of the session Morton collects their work, takes it home, edits it and submits pieces to *The Beat Within*, a San Francisco-headquartered magazine for incarcerated youth that comes out weekly. If their work makes it through the screening process, as it often does, Santa Cruz jailed juveniles see their first names in print and their writings published, in *The Beat Within*, whose local arm is maintained by Morton and Wolfson (Wolfson founded the Santa Cruz edition).

"It shows me that even though I'm locked up, I still have things I can accomplish," says a 14-year-old girl who's scribbling away on her sheet of binder paper. She's answering question No. 1. "[*The Beat Within*] helps me express my feelings and helps me write my thoughts," she says.

Another boy in the room speaks up. He's hunched over a short essay, his pencil flying as it takes his internal thoughts and thrusts them onto a piece of paper. *The Beat* (as the kids call it) is "your best friend in here because you can talk to it," he says.

Clearly, Morton is no underachiever. His mission: get them to write about issues and deliver an outlet for expressing themselves. The willowy writer recalls a story of how his twice weekly visits to the Santa Cruz Juvenile Hall can positively shake kids up, perhaps even more so than a pair of handcuffs shackled on their wrists can. Why? Because handcuffs strip their freedom, while writing gives it back to them.

One of the boys currently behind bars at juvy is very troubled, Morton says. He's always on edge, emotionally. Whenever he gets back to the outside (freedom is the outside), it's not long before the cycle begins and he's back in the hall. Morton, who has formed a friendship with this kid, wrote about him to a novelist friend in Ireland.

"I e-mailed [my friend] about this boy because the boy had written a piece in response to one of the issues, and he called his piece, 'The First Bad Thing,' Morton says. "[My friend] said that's a great title and he's

gong to use it for a book someday, so I told this boy and he's carried it with him for two years. He's been particularly troubled recently and I e-mailed my friend and said that is one of this boy's most cherished events in his life. My friend e-mailed me right back and said, 'Tell him I will dedicate the book to him.' I told that to the boy just yesterday."

Morton says the boy's reaction was one of shock: His astonished eyes got bigger than quarters, his mouth popped open; he couldn't believe it. This troubled teen was ecstatic, particularly so because it made him feel important, which was essential considering that a week before, he'd written a piece about how he wanted to feel that someone loved him.

"I said, 'You know a lot of people you don't even know love you,'" Morton says. "'Think of my friend the novelist who is going to name a book after a title you thought of and is dedicating the book to you. He is thousands of miles away and he cares about you. You just don't know how many people care about you.'"

The Beat Within is clearly about more than just getting caged kids to write. It's about giving them hope for life back at home with their families, in group homes, at school, for the future.

"I tell them that most adults will never have the opportunity to have their voices heard or seen as these kids have a chance to do with The Beat Within," Morton says. "People walking up the street don't get a chance to write for a magazine that is seen by over 1,000 people."

The magazine, a loosely bound, no frills weekly edition, is a mishmash of poems and essays. No color, no gloss, no swanky layout, it's simply constructed. The content holds the flair. Pieces like this one written by a Santa Cruz boy:

Hi my name is _____ and I feel good in here because the staff treats me well and because I get along with the rest of the inmates.

The staff treats me well because I don't give them any kind of trouble and I've gained the trust of all the people in here. But I still feel desperate because they told me they were going to deport me and I don't know when they are going to do so, that's why I worry. I want to get out of here not mattering where they send me, the only thing I want is to get out of here.

The heart of The Beat Within started "beating" in 1996, and is published by San Francisco's bustling Pacific News Service. The staff there collects work from regional areas including halls in Northern California, Arizona, New York, British Columbia and Virginia. The readers are primarily the population who produce the content—the kids. The magazine includes essays, poems and art. In the back of each issue is a page called "The Beat Without." It features an essay from a former juvenile hall detainee, who didn't learn his or her lesson, and is serving time in prison.

"I like how [the stories in The Beat] help you along," says a 17-year-old boy in Santa Cruz's juvenile hall.

Like The Beat, Morton helps these kids along. He's been going at it for six years now. "The kids' responses range from despondency to ecstasy," Morton says. "I think they all love to see their work come out, but there are varying degrees of willingness to produce the work. Sometimes it's like pulling teeth, other times they can't wait to get their hands on a pencil." In essence, maybe these kids aren't that different from the typical writer.