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Dancing Behind the Walls

Last Friday, we sent staff photographer Bob Collier to the women's Taconic Correctional Facility to shoot pictures of inmates who had been taught to tap dance by Peekskill teacher Mary Johnson.

Collier reported he passed through razor wire, three locked gates and a long tunnel in order to find the dancing girls. The auditorium at the facility was crowded with prisoners — most of whom in for drug arrests — who applauded energetically their talented colleagues at the hour-long show.

“It was a moving experience,” said Collier, and we assume he wasn't referring just to the tap shoes.

Mary Johnson, and other local folks who volunteer their time in prisons, help humanize the punitive jail setting. They carry with them, past the guards and the gates, the message that inmates are worth caring about and that their unique talents and skills can enrich us all.

Even a hard-boiled news photographer.



Photo by Bob Collier

Front row: teacher Mary Johnson. Middle row: [blurred] Back: [blurred]

Tapping Feet at Taconic Jail

By Carole Stewart McDonnell

On Friday, I went to jail.

Not that I'd done anything illegal. Rather, I showed up at the Taconic Correctional Facility in Bedford to witness a tap dance recital by female inmates who had been taught by Peekskill dance teacher Mary Johnson.

Dance Review

The recital called "The Cabaret" was produced in cooperation with the prison's Comprehensive Alcohol and Substance Abuse Treatment program and was a first for the women's facility.

Johnson, whose studio is at 2125 Crompond Rd., is a teaching artist in the Westchester Art's Council residency artist program, which means she is on their roster as someone accredited and talented enough to teach in schools, mental health institutions and correctional facilities — anywhere the healing discipline of the arts may be needed.

I must admit I'm jaded. All I could think was that I was going to waste a morning seeing something amateur and heartfelt, but boring.

Instead, I got a renewed insight into the power of art and art therapy. It's a paradox, but true, that artists sometimes get so caught up in their little enclaves they forget how art, pure and simple, can affect life.

Johnson's been teaching in the Peekskill area for two years (her studio phone no. is 737-9514) and before that on Long Island. At the prison, she volunteered her time for seven weeks, teaching tap to seven inmates for about 6 hours each week.

"I loved it," said Johnson. "A lot of people think tap dancing is easy, but it's not — and it forces you to work together. The women had to put aside any dishar-

mony or mood swings. Through all the obstacles, they did it, and did it with respect and dignity."

Seeing those women up there dancing, giving their all, trying hard to hold back tears of self-esteem they'd probably never felt before, was eye-opening. One woman, especially, caught my attention. She was in the back of the revue and had a large invincible smile on her face. She was so proud, she lit up the room.

Professional artists are taught to make the hardest task of discipline seem effortless. These girls, being amateurs, hadn't developed that. The obvious delight they had in themselves — they had persevered, and now they were being applauded — was charming.

It was refreshing, too, to see the reaction of the audience, made up primarily of fellow inmates. These were not society matrons or folks who make it a point to see performances frequently — they were women separated from art and life by barbed wire and high chain-linked fences. But their response to seeing people like themselves dancing, performing and entertaining them, was to spur on the performers.

"You go, girl; you can do it!" they cried to the stage.

The dancers were [blurred]

[blurred] played piano. Joyce Green sang.

As Mary Johnson said in her message before the start of the program, "There is no such thing as a problem without a gift for you in its hands. You are never given a wish without also being given the power to make it true."

Dancer [blurred] echoed that sentiment.

Johnson, [blurred] said, had given her "a memory to believe in."