

CORRECTIONAL THEATER PROGRAM PROFILE

In 2001, the then Department of Correction and Rehabilitation Secretary Víctor Rivera González, whose background included not only law, but also theater as part of his university days, hired four actors (three male actors for male prisons and one female for the women's main prison, Vega Alta), to teach theater in different penal institutions, as part of a strategy created to bolster rehabilitation efforts. Due to different causes, less than two years later only the lone female actor and director, Elia Enid Cadilla, remained in charge of both male and female groups.

From the very beginning part of Cadilla's duties included revision of all plays created, to ensure the message conveyed agreed with the need to educate, prevent and rehabilitate, and the transition from directing theater and helping the inmates create their plays to directing the whole program flowed naturally into being. The Correctional Theater Program – with the motto and title "Tú Decides" (You Decide), has kept on developing non stop. Fortunately, every single succeeding Secretary has believed in the Program and it is now possibly the most visible symbol of rehabilitation within the correctional system. It's a repertory theater group, alternating several plays constantly, according to the audience and its needs. Some plays are staged only seasonally or for special events.

The Program stages plays (with an open exchange of ideas, questions and answers between actors and audience at the end of each performance) in public and private schools, universities, churches, government agencies, communities and all kind of community service organizations; in theaters, school gyms, libraries, basketball courts, and any apt (and sometimes not so apt) space available for the purpose. We collaborate with the Dept of Education, the Police of Puerto Rico, the Office of the Procurator of Women, and many other institutions and agencies, with emphasis on children and youth, but with the understanding that education, prevention and rehabilitation is for everyone.

Composed of males and females since 2012, when Cadilla's proposal to integrate both genders was finally accepted, the main group goes out sometimes five and six times a week to perform. The males are housed in Bayamón 308 and the females in the Bayamón Rehabilitation Center for Women, close by. Other groups in different jails stage plays which Cadilla supervises periodically, but do not perform outside the prison except on special occasions or for students who visit the prisons for a learning experience.

The plays are created by the inmates from their own experience, with Cadilla helping them to structure the texts (sometimes adding scenes that reflect some of the participants' own lives), supervising and directing them for staging. The themes include risky conduct, peer pressure, alcohol and drug abuse, faith and its impact on their lives, the “easy money” lure, dysfunctional families, and any other factors they have deemed instrumental in getting them into prison, as well as those elements they feel have changed their lives. The performances have great impact among all audiences and the constant requests oft outstrip the Program's capacity to satisfy the need for the group's “interventions”, as school officials and even police officers request their services pretty often.

In 2018, we staged 100 performances throughout Puerto Rico and in 2019, we performed 128 times. The group also does community work, like rehabilitating structures that house abused children, elderly people or battered women, and sometimes all the group does, like in the aftermath of Maria or right after the earthquakes at the beginning of 2020, go to communities undergoing hardship to perform light sketches and make people laugh, and at the same time provide free haircuts and styling, or help bedridden folks by listening to them or even helping change their bedsheets.