

# NDTAC Program Spotlight Series



## Arts in Correctional Education

The arts come in many exciting forms—whether it’s theatre, music, dance or visual art. They’ve always been celebrated as a dynamic force in education, fostering creativity and providing a unique outlet for student expression. But their impact goes beyond the classroom—especially in correctional education, where the arts offer powerful opportunities for personal growth and transformation. Fine arts can positively impact students’ educational performance by fostering creativity and imagination, improve critical thinking and problem-solving skills, build confidence and self-esteem, and assist with stress relief and well-being. These benefits help to enrich students’ educational experiences and foster a well-rounded education. In this Spotlight, we delve into two innovative correctional programs that are harnessing the power of fine art to inspire change, ignite creativity, and support the success of incarcerated students.

### Ms. Toni Toney: Using Art to Transform Lives at LB Wallace School



For nearly a decade, Ms. Toni Toney has been the heart and soul of the art program at LB Wallace School, a unique educational facility run by the Alabama Department of Youth Services. This school serves up to 156 young men who have been adjudicated into the program, offering them a chance to change their futures through education. Before stepping into the world of corrections, Ms. Toney was a public school teacher but her path was deeply personal. She reflects on her family’s history, sharing how her great-grandfather and others were incarcerated. “He was once in jail, and now I work in jails, bringing hope to future generations,” she says. Her powerful journey, coupled with her passion for art, was recently featured in [\*the Life Behind the Fence: Echoes of Incarceration\*](#) exhibit at the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery.

Ms. Toney’s art classes are more than just lessons in painting or drawing—they are moments of transformation. Six times a day, students rotate through her classroom, each one given the chance to explore the world through creativity. Ms. Toney’s goal isn’t just to teach art, but to open her students’ eyes to the endless possibilities around them. She wants them to see the art in the world and feel empowered to talk about it: “I want them to take what they’ve learned and use it in the real world,” she explains, aiming to help her students develop tools to regulate their emotions and express themselves in healthy, meaningful ways. One of Ms. Toney’s most memorable moments with a student illustrates her approach perfectly. After a tough family session, one student returned to class visibly upset. Instead of assigning him a standard art task, she gave him the freedom to express his emotions asking “What color are you feeling?”. The student immediately chose red to symbolize his anger. Then she asked him, “How do you see yourself right now?” In response, the student drew a young man in tears, overwhelmed by his emotions. This moment, simple but profound, demonstrated the power of art as a therapeutic tool—an outlet for feelings that words alone can’t capture.



In another unforgettable lesson, Ms. Toney and her students took on the challenge of tattoo art. Using everyday materials like masking tape, saran wrap, and acrylic paint, the students created molds of their arms, then decorated the sculptures with tattoos they designed themselves. The finished pieces became an eye-catching display, their arms extending out from the hallway wall—a visual reminder of the students’ creativity, strength, and individuality.



Ms. Toney’s commitment to her students doesn’t stop in the classroom. She actively provides them with opportunities to share their work beyond the walls of the school. Several of her students have submitted their art to the Montgomery Museum of Art, and the results have been remarkable. Not only have multiple pieces been selected for display, but two have been sold! One piece was purchased by the museum itself, and a second was snapped up by a patron before the museum had a chance to buy it. For the students, having their art seen and appreciated by others is an incredibly motivating experience—it’s a tangible way to see their potential and envision a brighter future.

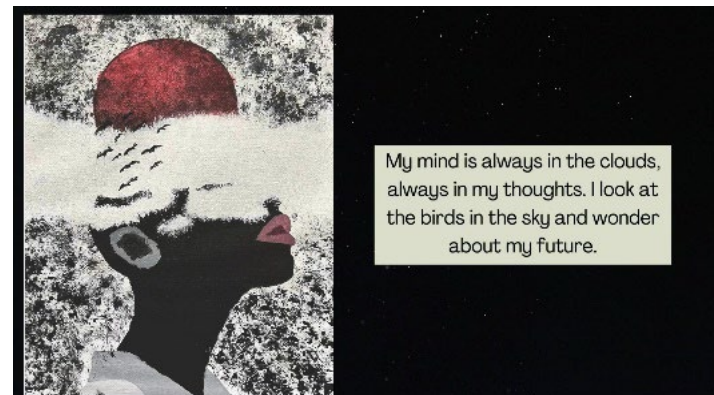
Throughout her work, Ms. Toney remains focused on the deep, lasting impact that art can have on her students’ lives. She sees it as more than just a skill—it’s a way to process emotions, express identities, and find healing. “You may be in a situation where art is able to save you,” she tells her students. For them, these words offer a beacon of hope and a chance to rewrite their stories.

## Rise & Thrive: Celebrating Resilience Through Art

For the past two years, the West Virginia Schools of Diversion and Transition (WVSDT) have proudly participated in the annual Youth Justice Action Month (YJAM) by hosting a dynamic art show. This event, a key feature of Charleston, WV’s larger FestivALL celebration, brings together artists and organizations from across the state to highlight the vibrancy of the arts community. Each August, WVSDT announces the theme for the upcoming art show and works closely with school leaders to provide students with the supplies and inspiration to create their pieces. This year’s theme, “Rise & Thrive: A Celebration of Resilience for Justice-Impacted Youth,” resonated deeply with the students. WVSDT’s commitment to this event was further supported with a \$4,000 award from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, making it their most impactful year yet.

*Students put forth maximum effort and really completed some brain work to develop ideas for how they could communicate brain growth and resilience in the form of art. Students provided effort into their ideas and to the minute details within their work. During the exercise, students collaborated and responded to peer work that allowed them to assure that the artist was communicating their intent. The teachers were great facilitators that allowed students to explore and create which allowed them to appreciate student abilities beyond pencil and paper. We enjoyed participating in this project and the feedback from the community was icing on the cake. -Educator involved in YJAM art show*

Overseeing ten juvenile detention centers and twelve residential facilities, WVSDT serves nearly 2,400 students annually, providing them with educational opportunities that extend beyond the classroom. This year’s YJAM art



show received over 100 submissions, each paired with a personal description of the work from the student artist. Educators working with students involved in the art show reported the program was a powerful outlet for them, allowing them to express themselves in unique ways. One educator reported, “The art show opportunity greatly impacted our students. They were excited by the ability to vote for favorites and then to actually see the feedback and to receive their pieces back was much appreciated by them. It gave some of our students an



opportunity for recognition they don't receive academically.”

The art was displayed at the Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation, where attendees were encouraged to scan a QR code to leave feedback. The response was overwhelming—students received a total of 545 pieces of feedback, a testament to the power of their work. Examples of feedback included:

- ❖ *I love seeing the positive self-talk in your artwork. You can do great things, your artwork included!*
- ❖ *Your artwork is beautiful. Your future is brighter than what the birds in the sky can carry!*
- ❖ *You did an amazing job! You are important!*
- ❖ *Your art is beautiful! You will NEVER regret being and staying sober. Life is so much more beautiful when your mind is clear. You are very talented.*



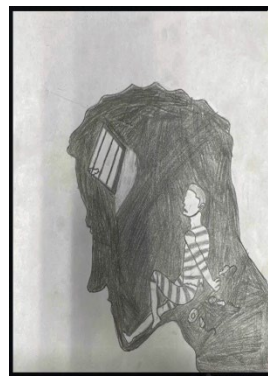
I have been through a lot but I know that I can work on it.



A painting to show how creative you can be. You can do anything in this world you put your mind to.

Looking ahead, WVSDT’s leadership team is committed to continuing their involvement in the arts. The program not only showcases the incredible talent of students but also gives the public a glimpse into the transformative power of creative expression. In a setting where much of the students’ time is dedicated to credit recovery and catching up on missed coursework, this program provides them with a much-needed opportunity to engage in hands-on learning, while offering a constructive, therapeutic outlet for self-expression.

Explore the full collection of artwork from this year’s YJAM event at: [WVSDT YJAM Art Show 1.mp4](#)



Everybody goes through rough times, but there's always light on the other end. It's just up to you if you're going to rise up, set goals, and look into your future so you can thrive to get out and become something great.