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From detention cells to the stage

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Playmaking for Girls works with incarcerated girls to write and perform short plays

Every summer, recently released girls publicly perform some of the girls' plays

More girls are in juvenile justice systems; few rehab programs exist for them

Georgia's juvenile justice department recently stopped working with the group

(CNN) -- It starts at the mall, with a girl in a pink dress, browsing alone.

"Why is she at the mall?" a teen behind her sputters. "She ain't got no money."

Mona Lisa hears it. It's not the first time she's been picked on. She argues a little, tries to ignore them, but they bump into her and call her names. She wants to run, wants to be strong, wants all this to just go away.

At home later, the phone rings: "I just wanted to tell you, you should kill yourself," a voice cackles. "You're ugly and nobody will ever love you."

After a day like this, Mona Lisa believes what she's hearing. She grabs a handful of pills and climbs out the window. With voices in her head yelling louder and louder, she jumps.

Actress Alexis Lee crumples to the floor. The jump isn't real, the dress is a costume, the play is fiction, at least at the moment. But Mona Lisa and Alexis aren't so different. At 17, Alexis has been bullied and teased, been made to feel ugly, like she's nothing. She moved to escape terrible situations, only to be delivered into worse circumstances. She's got scars from where she cut herself, memories from when she tried to kill herself.

"The only way to have some peace for me is to not be here," she remembers thinking.

Alexis didn't write the play, called "Deep Within." That work was done by Noemi, Sabrina and Velicia, girls who lived, at least for a little while, in a juvenile detention center in Georgia. They participated in Playmaking for Girls, a theater workshop created by Atlanta nonprofit [Synchronicity Theatre](#) to encourage incarcerated girls to tell their stories and find their own voices.

Alexis knows only their first names, but she knows kids in detention centers do not usually talk about bullying, or suicide, what they were

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feeling at their worst or how they're going to get better.

"The majority of them probably don't have that outlet to speak and express on how they feel based on what's been going on in their lives, who did them wrong, and this is their chance," Alexis says.

She knows because she's been there, too.

'Not a 30-second sound bite'

A few times a year, Rachel May and Susie Spear Purcell walk into a room of 20 girls who won't talk, won't make eye contact and can't be bothered with theater games or fairy tales. The directors have two days to cajole them to write short plays and act them out.

Their message is consistent: We care about you, and it's important for people to hear what you have to say. Your story matters.

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Lauren Irby prepares in the dressing room before a performance.

NICK SCOTT/CNN

Inevitably, May said, within a few hours, they're writers and actors. They're acting, actually, like girls.

"They'd suddenly go from what you expect really tough, criminal, thug-looking girls would look like to 15-, 16-year-old girls who were really excited and proud of something that they've done," said May, the producing artistic director for Synchronicity.

The workshops began about 10 years ago, when Synchronicity raised a production of "Breath, Boom." The play by Kia Corthron follows girl gangs in the Bronx through decades of violence, manipulation, abuse and emotional warfare, if they survive that long. The show's cast wanted to reach out to girls in Atlanta, girls they knew were in similar situations, whose real lives were like the ones actors portrayed on stage. They organized a workshop inside a Georgia juvenile detention center, and it only took a day for the theater pros to decide they couldn't stop then, after just one.

"It sparks this light in them that they do matter," says Spear Purcell, the Playmaking for Girls program director. "Their voice matters and they can speak up and they don't have to do it in a negative way. Even through continuing horrible, hard situations ... they do have a voice."

Since then, the theater group has returned to Georgia juvenile detention centers several times a year to help girls write plays about drug addiction, rape, abusive parents and cheating boyfriends, but also plays about finding love and making amends.

"When you meet these girls, they're funny and they're smart and they're articulate and they're confused and they're mixed up and they're complicated," May said, "but they're not a 30-second sound bite you can just easily dismiss."

At the close of each detention center workshop, the Playmaking for Girls instructors wish the actors well, and say they hope to never see them there again.

But they do want to see them on the outside. A few years after the detention workshops began, Synchronicity created a one-week summer program for girls who had been released. It gave them something to do, a freer space to be creative and a public stage to show off the work they'd done. Girls memorized scripts, dances, songs and staging. There were costumes and lights, and a real stage to perform on. Volunteers brought meals for the cast, and the girls were paid \$100 for the week, if they showed up on time every day.

This is a world that usually casts them as bad girls, if it remembers them at all. Here, everyone gets a new role.

'We need to be heard'

It's the middle of the summer program, just a few days after they've met the first time, and a few days away from the show's opening. The girls are already blocking scenes -- when they'll enter, where they'll walk, which way they'll wave their arm. This is the last rehearsal they're allowed to carry scripts.

Some girls had written and performed plays inside the detention center, some heard about it later, from a sister who'd tried it, or a group home manager who encouraged it. This summer's show collects plays about a school bus-time machine, a mother-daughter relationship after rape, love between an alien and a human and daydreams of girls stuck in detention centers. Just like in other years, most plays have redemptive endings: Lessons learned, friendships saved, dreams achieved.

Every rehearsal starts and ends with an exercise in sharing. Tell us something you like about yourself. Tell us something you like about the person sitting next to you. Go around the circle, and tell us how you appear on the outside, and what you feel on the inside.

On the outside, girls say, they're calm, tired or excited.

"On the inside, I am scared," a girl says. Another: Nervous. Another: Excited on the inside, too.

Many have never met, but some know each other from high school or group homes they share. They don't always like each other; they fight over boys or gossip. The week is always punctuated by cliques, doubt, shyness, sass and stage fright. They cry in frustration, or shut down completely -- detention center eyes, glazed-over, expressionless.

An instructor commands the girls to take a deep breath. If you're anxious, breathe. If you're angry, breathe. If you're too wired and can't calm down, just breathe. They stand in a circle and count, breathing in unison.

Breathe in for four counts, the instructor tells them, hold it for eight, then let it out for 16.

"That's impossible," a girl says, just before she breathes in four, holds eight and lets it all go, long and slow.

"It was possible, right?" the instructor says.

They break into groups: Girls dancing, girls reading, girls singing.

To another side of the room, girls practice a poem, "From Girls to Moms." They mumble and stutter. They ask to change the words because they know -- they just know, OK? -- they'll mess up.

Do it again, the instructor tells them, and say them louder. Say the words so their own mothers can hear them, even if they're not around, and listen for the echo of your own voice. Yell from the pit of your stomachs, if you have to.

"When we speak, we need to be heard," the instructor tells them,



Rachel May, right, helped to launch the theater workshops.

NICK SCOTT/CNN

and the girls begin to bellow.

The girls identify easily with their characters, even if they play boys or teachers or parole officers. They've met those people, imagined what their lives are like. Some say they could have written these stories.

They were in detention centers because they stole, fought, skipped too many classes, ran away from home or had drugs. Some have been abused, or had their bodies sold. A few were never incarcerated, but learned about Playmaking for Girls from a sister or friend who was. Some committed no crimes, but wound up in detention because there was nowhere else for them to go.

In one play, "Real Life," Alexis plays a girl stuck in detention because her mom was sick, and her dad wasn't around.

In her real life, she escaped a bad situation with her mom, then struggled more at her dad's house. After she tried to commit suicide, a court tried to place her in a group home, but nothing was available. Until a bed opened up, she was stuck in detention, too. There's no use for a girl to say, "I don't belong here." Playmaking for Girls actresses say. If she's there, she wears the same uniform and keeps the same hours as everyone else.

"Everything is a system," says Alexis, whose father and group home manager confirmed her story. "I felt like nobody was ever going to pick me. I'm never gonna go somewhere."

Alexis feels free at the group home where she lives now, she says. It's helping her think clearly about getting a job and starting her senior year of high school. But this week, she's focused on her "detective work," as May, the instructor, calls it. Who are these characters? What's happening in their lives? How can actors express who they are and how they feel, even if they have only one line to say?

As actors, they have a choice about how to portray a character, May tells the girls. Right or wrong, they already know the world can judge people with just a glance. It's no different on stage.

"You have to kind of decide who you are," May says.

Here, there's a chance for girls to act out the way their stories should have happened, to have the ending they wanted.

'Why are we doing this?'

Now, like always, the majority of juveniles arrested are boys. But in the 1990s, the rate of arrests increased more for girls for most types of offenses. By 2004, girls accounted for 30% of all juvenile arrests, according to the [U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and](#)



Playmaking for Girls performances include costumes, props, lighting and sets.

NICK SCOTT/CNN

Delinquency Prevention.

Girls aren't necessarily committing more crimes, according to the [Girls Study Group](#), a research project the federal juvenile justice office launched that year. Rather, research suggests zero-tolerance policies and mandatory arrest laws could affect them more.

"The way we respond to girls is different," said Stephanie Hawkins Anderson, principal investigator of the Girls Study Group. "It's actually society's response that perhaps people are less tolerant of girls' behavior."

Some factors increase the risk of delinquency for all kids: Family dynamics, high-poverty or high-crime neighborhoods, lack of involvement at school or in community-based programs. For girls, early puberty, sexual abuse, depression and anxiety and romantic partners uniquely increase their risk, according to the Girls Study Group.

There is no universal reason why girls end up in the juvenile justice system -- "The stories were many, but they were different," Hawkins Anderson said -- and there's no easy fix.

When Girls Study Group researchers looked for programs designed to reach girls in the juvenile justice system, they reviewed 61 across the country, and only 17 had published evaluations. None were rated effective -- most didn't have enough evidence to say whether they worked, or didn't exist long enough to collect it. In almost all cases, programs lacked money and staff needed to keep track, Hawkins Anderson said.

That doesn't mean programs for girls aren't working, Hawkins Anderson said; they might be improving girls' lives, but not in ways researchers can easily put a number on.

"What we don't want to do is lose hope," Hawkins Anderson said. "If they don't even have hope that they can get better, do better, be better, why are we doing this?"

In 10 years, Playmaking for Girls instructors never measured whether their work keeps young women out of the juvenile justice system, or whether it improves grades, gets girls into college, finds them jobs or improves their body image.

Girls use the plays and performances to reintroduce themselves to the public, said Maisha Winn, the Susan Cellmer chair in English education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Winn, who wrote the book "[Girl Time: Literacy, Justice and the School-to-Prison Pipeline](#)" about her experiences with Playmaking for Girls, said the girls knew incarceration, even in youth, could limit the schools they can attend, jobs they'll be hired for or the

apartments they rent.

She believes completing Playmaking for Girls can help girls set a new course for themselves. For some, it's a chance to model positive behavior. For others, a chance to work positively with a group of girls. For still others, it's meaningful practice in reading and learning.

"They all understood the power of being a writer or an actor," Winn said of the girls she interviewed. "These kinds of labels trumped the label of being 'delinquent.'"



Program Director Susie Spear Purcell walks actresses through a script during Playmaking for Girls rehearsal. NICK SCOTT/GNN

If there's a measure for success for the instructors, it's that they put together a play in one week. They see success in the hugs, tears and applause from parole officers, judges, group home managers and moms in the audience. Detention facilities ask them for more workshops, they say. Almost always, the girls say it changes their lives. Instructors know the girls change theirs.

Instructors constantly remind themselves they're not really fixing anything -- they're a theater group, not a homeless shelter, rehab center or courtroom. They have a network of agencies to call when they know of a problem, but there aren't resources to track where girls go after the final bow.

The girls often fall out of contact as they move between group homes, detention centers and relatives' homes. When they have phones, they'll call Spear Purcell, even years later: to say hi, to announce they made it to the next grade, to ask if they should leave a guy who hits them.

They all have her phone number, and that, at least, never changes.

'Pray for God to shut doors'

On show day, the girls are jittery. They dance in the wings before dress rehearsal, then snap at each other during the break. Some glow -- they nailed their lines at the last practice, and they know they're going to rock. Others are panicked, reading again through scripts, stumbling over scenes they used to know.

"My number one word -- patience," says Lauren Irby, an actress who recently graduated high school. "I get irritated in a hot second. We all have a lot of different personalities. Just try to be patient. You would want somebody to do that for you."

The dressing rooms smells like crispy flat irons and hair products. They put scarves in each other's hair and stare into space while going through the dance moves. The instructors duck into a restroom to apply eyeliner and lipstick

Since the dress rehearsal, people keep asking Alexis if she's ever



Playmaking for Girls actresses hug during "A Mother and Daughter's Relationship."

NICK SCOTT/CNN

acted before. They say she should keep going. Nobody's ever told her that, she says.

Alexis thought of Playmaking for Girls as a one-time thing. She is a math geek. The sciences are always her favorite classes. Nursing seemed like a good job for those skills, like a job where she could help people. But telling stories for an audience helps in ways she didn't understand before.

"Miss Susie," Alexis asks, "do you think, like, certain things you've done in your life kind of opened your eyes?"

Spear Purcell listens closely. An actor's life is a hard one, filled with disappointment, uncertainty and struggle, she tells Alexis. She should go to college, get into a nursing program and pursue theater as she studies. That way, Spear Purcell says, she has set herself up to succeed. If it's meant to happen, it will.

"I always pray for God to shut doors," Spear Purcell tells her. "'You just shut it hard to let me know because I'm going to keep going until you do.'"

The girls perform to a full theater, to mothers, grandfathers, group home managers, aunts, sisters, nephews, friends, parole officers. If anybody messed up, nobody noticed. The crowd laughs when the alien girl marries her human boyfriend then insists he moves to Mars. They applaud when girls -- still in character -- muse about what they'll be when they get out of a detention center. They weep when a bullied girl jumps from a window to escape the memory of her tormenter's words.

"Even though I'm not this Mona Lisa character, it enables me to release some of the stress," Alexis says. "I can put all the negative energy and bring this character to life."

By the last bow, everybody knew what it was like to be Mona Lisa, to be Alexis, or maybe Noemi, Sabrina or Velicia. She's sure of it.

'Our mission, no matter what'

Days after the public Playmaking for Girls performance, CNN called the [Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice](#) for comment about the theater program. Spokesman Jim Shuler called back to say the department would not participate in the story. The department's top leaders were not aware CNN had recorded Playmaking for Girls rehearsals inside a Department of Juvenile Justice facility where parole officers work with recently released youths. (None of the girls in Playmaking for Girls' summer program were in the care of the Department of Juvenile Justice. All had release forms from Playmaking for Girls signed by their guardians.)

Because Playmaking for Girls had not sought permission from the



Lexus Reeves performs a play written by incarcerated girls.

NICK SCOTT/CNN

state office, the department severed its relationship with Playmaking for Girls, and planned to implement a process to screen all volunteers working with the juvenile justice system. Synchronicity Theatre is allowed to reapply to work with youth incarcerated in Georgia.

A written statement sent by Shuler said "DJJ considers the policy violation by Playmaking for Girls an egregious one. Fortunately, DJJ did not have any youth participating in the program this year and no Georgia youth identities were compromised by the violation committed by the 'Playmaking for Girls' instructors. However, DJJ now declines participation in that project where the DJJ Communications Policy was violated and the program elements were obtained by news media in an unauthorized manner.

"Meanwhile, DJJ will have no further relationship with the Playmaking for Girls program."

Playmaking for Girls directors say they're deciding what their next steps will be. They'll continue to work to give girls a voice, they said, although the program might take a different form than it has for the last decade.

"We have had an amazingly positive relationship with the Department of Juvenile Justice for nine years and our biggest aim is to help the female youth in their facilities," Spear Purcell said. "We are saddened by the recent outcome and we will do all we can to work with them to help Department of Juvenile Justice serve the females in their population and make a difference.

"We remain hopeful and positive that our program makes a difference in the life of youth today, and that is our mission, no matter what."

Should young people incarcerated in youth detention centers have access to therapeutic programming? Or should youth facilities more closely resemble those designed for adults? Let us know what you think in the comments below.

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