



# BOND STREET THEATRE

peacebuilding, empowerment & healing through theatre

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## Creative Arts Prison Program

## Interim Report – May 31, 2015

**Organization Name:** Bond Street Theatre  
**Program Title:** Creative Arts Prison Program (CAPP)  
**Grant Amount:** \$41,125  
**Contact Person:** Joanna Sherman, Artistic Director  
**Address:** 2 Bond Street New York, NY 10012

### 2) Recap briefly what outcomes the program was designed to achieve:

The *Creative Arts Prison Program (CAPP)* gives women, who have been deeply debilitated by tragic life experiences compounded by the inequities of the Afghan justice system, healing activities to release anger and stress, a safe environment to discuss issues, and the motivation to take control of their lives and speak out for justice. In addition, they learn stimulating and creative activities to enjoy with their children who are incarcerated with them. As a result, participants gain the mental and emotional strength to manage their lives during incarceration, build their self-esteem and self-reliance, and are better poised for successful re-entry into society upon release.

The overarching goal of the CAPP is to incorporate effective theatre-based programming into the rehabilitative process for women and girls in the Afghan justice system, and make these methods widely available to prisons and outreach facilities throughout Afghanistan. To that end, the CAPP is:

- a. Training our Arts Partner, Simorgh Theatre of Herat, an all-female theatre group, in theatre-based practices that aid prison and post-incarceration populations;
- b. Improving the life skills of incarcerated women and girls by presenting a structured program that improves their mental and physical health, expands their imagination and problem-solving skills, and builds their motivation and self-esteem to ease their reentry into society;
- c. Providing creative and healing activities for incarcerated women to enjoy with each other and with their children;
- d. Training women within the prison to teach these methods to others to ensure program continuation.
- e. Conducting the program in four facilities: the Herat Women's Prison (140 women ages 18-85 years), the Juvenile Correction Center (13 girls under 18), the Child Support Center (78 children of inmates, age 7 and older), and the OMID Women's Shelter (15-20 formerly incarcerated women).

### 3) Has funding changed for this program?

No.

### 4) Is your Program situation different than presented in the approved proposal?

No.

**5) What challenges are you facing as you move forward with this project? How are you approaching these challenges?**

a. A primary challenge is in understanding and coping with the intense emotional environment of the Women's Prison. Although the physical space provided for the women is not so unpleasant, the women have little hope for a better future, and many are depressed and suicidal. Self-inflicted burns and cutting is common, especially among the younger inmates. Hearing their stories is heart-breaking and their lack of access to justice is frustrating. Conducting the workshops in this intense environment is challenging, yet also immensely rewarding when we see how the women brighten and come alive in the workshops. They smile and laugh freely. They told us:

*“You are so kind to us; other people don't care about us. You are like a dream to us.”*

b. Attendance in the workshops fluctuates daily, which makes continuity difficult. Some of the women are immobilized by depression and don't show up for days; some are debilitated by chronic health issues from stress or grief. The prison staff does not force women to work or to participate in activities. Although we would like continuity, we have to be flexible and patient with the women's ability to participate. We encourage them to just come and watch, knowing that a few will inevitably join in the fun after a while. In addition, women are released and new women arrive on a regular basis, and two of the most talented women from the initial workshops were just released.

Given the women's daily challenges, we are impressed with their steady engagement so far, and we have a core group of 10-15 women who participate in every workshop and are very motivated. Other women are joining as we go along. Some of our most dedicated workshop participants are the women who have the longest sentences or await a death sentence. For these women, the workshops have a tremendous effect on their ability to cope. Physical exercise greatly improves the women's mental attitude. We even play children's games which give the women, perhaps for the first time in their lives, a chance to laugh and play with freedom and joy.

c. An additional challenge is in accessing accurate information about the legal process that puts the women in prison in the first place. We have the stories relayed to us by the women themselves, which often change from day to day, and we met with social workers, psychologists, prison staff, and even the local Human Right Commission. When discussing the reasons these women were imprisoned and what options they had for a fair trial, the responses varied considerably. There was a perceptible resistance in acknowledging the reality of rape, and it is near impossible for a women or girl to prove her innocence. The two most prominent issues are these: it seems that a person is guilty until proven innocent, and “self-defense” is not upheld in a court of law.

**6) Have you revised you original objectives since the project began? No.**

**7) What progress have you made towards achieving your objectives? Please address each objective.**

**1. Training our Arts Partner:** We conducted a nine-day training for ten members of Simorgh Theatre of Herat, eight women and two men, focusing on developing a curriculum of theatrical exercises that can best be applied to the issues of incarcerated women and girls. We then directed six women from the group in a play titled “The Backbiters,” a story about a 13 year old girl who is about to be married against her will to an older man for a large sum of money. The six women play all the roles, including the male roles. We presented the play at each facility as a way to introduce the idea of story-telling and theatrical performance. We followed the play with a short demonstration of some of the workshop exercises that we would be leading.

The performances were also followed by a structured interactive session with the audience during which they can go onstage, speak directly to the characters, and act out their ideas for

solutions to the issues presented in the play. In the Women's prison, about 90 women gathered to see the performance out of the 140 women. During the post-performance interaction, the women did not hesitate to speak out. Many stood up to talk about their own personal circumstances. Others got on stage to confront the characters. All the women spoke with great passion. It was clear the play resonated with them.

One woman got onstage to confront the abusive father who was determined to "sell" his daughter. She reprimanded him for marrying off his daughter so young, to which the father said, "Everyone in my family married at 13; what's the problem?" The woman retorted, "That's why we are all here!" gesturing to the audience of 90 women. The women all exclaimed, "Yes, that's why we're here!" In fact, most of the women had been married at 14 or 15 years old, and had suffered years of abuse.

**2. Improving life skills:** Two actors from Simorgh Theatre, Fariba Baqeri and Masouma Adel, were given additional training to lead the workshops in the prisons and take leadership roles for the duration of the project. Since the US artist-educators have left Herat, Fariba and Masouma have continued to run all programming and workshops in the prison, women's shelter, juvenile correction center, and child support center.

The curriculum always starts with a good warm-up to give the group energy and release any tensions or fears. The workshops focus on self-expression, imagination, problem-solving games, trust and teamwork, and physical challenges to build self-confidence and conquer fears. However, often the women asked us to please play certain children's games. Clearly, they just need the chance to play freely, aspects of their childhood that had been cut short or that they never had.

Now, midway through the program as trust has been established, the trainers are moving into story-telling and making small sketches that will become plays of the women's own design. We encourage comedy in their work to balance the tragedy; for example, adding a comical character that the audience can enjoy.

From the beginning there has been a great amount of excitement, energy and engagement with the program in all four facilities. We have already witnessed improvement in the imprisoned women's sense of self-esteem and their ability to focus and imagine. In the Women's Prison, we have a core group of women who participate in every workshop and are very motivated. Others are joining as we go along. Many women choose to watch and then ask to join.

Participants who have had the theatre training are more likely to have a positive outlook towards their situation. Everyone looks forward to our visits and many of them continue to practice after the theatre sessions are over, teaching the others who are curious but still not ready to join. The plan is to encourage these natural leaders to continue with the group once the workshops are over, and act as directors and organizers to see the project continue.

***"When I stand on the mountain and call out my name, I feel like the mountain will come tumbling down, my voice is so powerful. I'm so full of energy now."***

**3. Help for the children:** There are 75 children in the Women's Prison, all under the age of five, and most of them are babies who are still nursing. The women are very helpful towards each other and care for each other's babies so that their mothers can participate in the workshops. Breaks for nursing punctuate every workshop. The children are entranced by the activities and watch intently, even the very young ones, and imitate everything they see. The toddlers often join in alongside their mothers. The time the children spend with their mothers playing and learning in the workshops is clearly some of their most enjoyable moments.

At age seven, the children either return to the family home or, if the family no longer wants them, they go to the Child Support Center. The Center is clean and well-run, and the children seem genuinely well-cared for. They visit their mothers once every week or two.

The children at the Center clamored for our workshops, and it was difficult to handle so many. There are 78 children. Now the staff has selected a group of 45 children (17 boys and 28 girls) to participate in the workshops. Some of the older girls were quite shy, so we have divided the group into smaller groups and the girls are much freer amongst themselves. They are all very excited and happy to learn new skills, play new challenging games, and get a chance to act in their own skits.

Perhaps the most enthusiastic are the young women (ages 14 to 17) in the Juvenile Correction Center. All of them are there for having had sexual relations outside of marriage. At least three of the 13 girls are victims of rape, although they failed to “prove” to the courts that they were not willing accomplices. In the workshop, we can see that they are extremely shy and visibly traumatized. All of the other girls jump up and down and gather around us when we enter the facility except those three. With each workshop, they get a little more brave.

The Juvenile Correction Center looks much more like a prison than the Women’s Prison. A large metal gate with bars leads to a stark corridor lined with heavy metal doors with small barred windows. Fortunately, the doors are kept open and the girls can freely come and go. These girls are full of energy and always ready for anything we give them. We sense sadness for their plight, but not hopelessness. They are our testing ground for the Women’s Prison – we can try out new exercises here in preparation for the older women.

**4. The Women’s Shelter:** The fourth facility is the OMID Women’s Shelter where women who have been released from the Prison, but cannot return to their homes, can live in peace. This shelter, run by Women for Afghan Women, is one of three in Herat, but the only one solely for formerly incarcerated women. They attend school daily to gain literacy first, and then go on to study whatever field they wish.

The women here are very responsive to the program and have a notably better mental attitude than the women in the prison: they are hopeful about their future. Our work more directly relates to their dealings with the outside world; for example, improving their communication skills, body language, and self-confidence.

#### **8. Do you anticipate any difficulties in completing your project in the timeframe in your proposal?**

Some adjustments have been made to the original schedule outlined in our proposal, but the number of workshops and beneficiaries remains the same.

When creating our action plan, we expected that the Simorgh Theatre trainers would be able to facilitate workshops individually. This would have allowed them to teach at the Women’s Prison three times a week and the Juvenile Correction Center and the OMID Women’s Shelter twice a week each. Now we understand that the trainers cannot work alone or travel alone due to security issues. Women do not travel alone.

In addition, we added a program at the Child Support Center. When we first worked at the Prison, the children were housed with the women, and it would have been fine for the trainers to work separately within the same facility. Now, only the youngest children are in the Prison and the older children are in another home. Reaching the children requires traveling to another facility.

We have adjusted the schedule so that the trainers continue to facilitate workshops three times a week in the Herat Women’s Prison but only once a week in three other locations: the Juvenile Correction Center, the OMID Women’s Shelter, and the Child Support Center. Simorgh Theatre will still fulfill their commitment of 72 total workshops but it may take longer than the estimated time to complete this.

The potential delay is contingent on two factors: the weather and Ramadan. The program may not be allowed to continue during the holy month of Ramadan (mid-June to mid-July). During the winter months, the facilities lack sufficient heating to accommodate the spaces where workshops

are held. We anticipate this limitation in the Prison and Juvenile Center, particularly, whereas the Child Center and Women's Shelter may be better equipped.

Similarly, we had to delay the program start until the arrival of warmer weather. We received our funding in November 2014 but were not able to begin until March 2015. The prisons are without modern heating systems and there would not have been adequate conditions for us to perform our show or facilitate the workshops.

### **Impact:**

The critical need for the active and expressive workshops that we provided became vividly clear upon our arrival at the prison and each facility. In the face of insurmountable circumstances, the women and their children crave positive, uplifting and personal expression. In each facility, with each group, we see their eyes light up and a dramatic change in their outlooks. One prison guard expressed to us that,

***“Some women in the prison want to hurt themselves by cutting their hands and necks, and even want to kill themselves. We are fortunate that you brought this program which has a great impact, not only on the most vulnerable inmates, but on every woman in the prison.”***

One of the most notable benefits that we discovered was their need for physical exertion – sport, exercise, movement, dance – anything that expends energy. We know that physical activity stimulates chemical activity in the brain that makes people happier and more relaxed. This benefit complemented our other workshop activities that involved focus and problem-solving activities. In addition to improving the general health of participants, their moods were elevated and their attitudes invigorated. A seventeen year old girl who was imprisoned for having relations with a boy she fell in love with, told us,

***“I feel better when I am doing the theatre games and joining in these exercises. It makes me brave, and I feel I am a complete person and I am free.”***

The women also get the chance to exercise their minds and imaginations. This restores a sense of hopefulness and possibility that they have lost during their time in prison. The justice system seems unrelenting and impossible to battle, and the stigma of having been in prison is difficult to overcome. Yet many of them came from equally dismal circumstances in which they were physically and mentally abused, and strictly controlled by their husbands, fathers, or brothers. They never had a chance to imagine a better life. The workshops give them a chance to imagine a different future in which they can make choices for themselves, seek an education, or find assistance when they are released. It gives them the personal tools to act on their hopes.

We found that the women are practicing the games and exercises on their own after the workshops are finished. One woman practiced with her roommates until one in the morning, and now works with them every day. Since one of our goals is to give the women the confidence and opportunity to exercise leadership, we are happy that this woman is already initiating and leading workshops on her own.

The women report feeling much more confident and bold, even with particularly difficult exercises, such as a perception exercise in which you walk with your eyes closed between obstacles. As new women join the workshops, the more experienced students recognize that their skill level has vastly improved and what was hard is now easy. This has boosted their confidence tremendously, and makes them good role models for the newcomers.

***Having witnessed the immense changes in the lives of the women and children we have touched, we are so thankful to the women of Dining for Women for giving us this opportunity to make a big difference in so many lives. Thank you!***

**Testimonies:**

*“Before these exercises I was angry all the time and I always hurt myself. Now I feel that I can do everything as I want!”*

*“I thought if I told my family that I didn’t like the boy they chose for me to marry, they would not care. I am in jail for killing him. Now that the theatre teachers are here, I finally have some way to speak about my situation, and it gives me comfort that things can be different.”*

*“Through the mirror exercise, we can understand each other’s mind. In looking at the other like a mirror, I can see myself.”*

*“Some of the girls have told us that they want to continue to do theatre when they leave the prison. They had never been exposed to this work and now cannot get enough of it!” - Simorgh Theatre staff*

*“The women are more interested in going to the theatre workshop instead of their other courses because, instead of just sitting and learning, in the theatre workshop they are learning while doing physical exercises, and they get to do different things every day. – Asma, Prison staff*

**Ongoing Schedule:**

<b>VENUE</b>	<b>ACTIVITY</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>NUMBER of PARTICIPANTS</b>
<b>Simorgh Theatre</b>	Teacher Training and Rehearsals	3/27 - 4/6/15	10 (8 women, 2 men)
<b>Herat Women’s Prison</b>	Performance of <i>The Backbiters</i>	4/7/15	90 – 100
<b>Herat Women’s Prison</b>	Workshops – Sundays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays	ongoing	15 – 20 20 – 40 observing
<b>Child Support Center</b>	Performance of <i>The Backbiters</i>	4/10/15	78
<b>Child Support Center</b>	Workshops – Mondays	ongoing	45 (17 boys, 28 girls)
<b>Juvenile Correction Center</b>	Performance of <i>The Backbiters</i>	4/13/15	13
<b>Children Support Center</b>	Workshops – Saturdays	ongoing	13
<b>OMID Women’s Shelter</b>	Performance of <i>The Backbiters</i>	4/16/15	15
<b>OMID Women’s Shelter</b>	Workshops – Thursdays	ongoing	15

**Meetings with the following authorities:**

General Minister of Prisons, Herat

General Abdullah Azizi

Chief of Herat Justice Department

Said Mohammad Rahmani

Director of the Herat Women’s Prison

Sima Pazhman

Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC)

Malika Rassuly, Qader Rahimi

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