

■ DANNY BROOKS

Nonprofit Group Helps Prisoners Find THERAPY THROUGH ART

WRITTEN BY ROBERT FRIEDMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CATHERINE DAVIS

In 2020, Danny Brooks was serving a 10-year sentence for a violent crime when he received devastating news—his father was dying of cancer. His prison was in lockdown due to COVID. “I needed a way to cope, and [art] was the best thing for me,” Brooks said.

With art supplies sent by his family, Brooks began creating abstract art, landscapes and portraits. Fellow inmates who were also artists helped him develop his skills and talent. He sent his artwork home, hoping it would offer comfort to his family during that difficult time. “There were a lot of times I just didn’t wanna keep going, and art helped me to keep going,” he recalled.

Today, Brooks has rebuilt his life. He is married, has a child, and balances a stable job with his passion for art. While he works primarily for a power washing company, he continues to create art when time allows.

I met Danny through Diane Wells, the founder of Impartial, a Raleigh-based nonprofit with several programs, including one that supports current and former prison artists like Brooks. “Artwork offers a crucial therapeutic outlet for prisoners, helping them process trauma,” said Wells.

THE GENIUS OF PRISON ARTISTS

Wells herself has a personal connection to the justice system. After being wrongly charged with a crime, she endured a six-year legal battle that included being convicted, acquitted and then reconvicted. Although she didn't serve time, she was profoundly disturbed by what she saw in the criminal justice system. Determined to make a difference, she found inspiration in the experiences of incarcerated individuals. "I met somebody who had been incarcerated. He saw firsthand the genius of [prisoners who were] artists and how they could transform their words into art, especially when they struggled to articulate their feelings," Wells recalled.

In response, Wells founded Impartial, a 501(c)(3) organization focused on supporting nonprofits and individuals dedicated to criminal justice reform. Art, she believes, is a powerful medium for both expressing past experiences and envisioning future possibilities.

Impartial's programs include artwork, justice-themed video games, and educational content like investigative journalism and prisoner stories. The organization displays artwork at exhibits and plans to make it available through streaming platforms. Most pieces sold at auctions or acquired to be exhibited have half of the net proceeds going to the artist or their family/designee, 30% supporting criminal justice nonprofits and 20% covering Impartial's operational costs. Occasionally, artwork is donated directly to the organization.

"Our primary focus is on supporting reform through the next generation of justice leaders, law students and organizations working in criminal justice reform," Wells explained.

BEST PRACTICE MODELS

Gerry Komlofske, a chief transformation officer from Chicago, became involved with Impartial after studying gangs and gang violence in Cook County, Illinois, and noting the high recidivism rates. In his search for solutions, a mutual friend introduced him to Wells.

"I thought if we could gather data from these organizations about what they did to help prisoners post-release, and track which methods



■ KOMLOFSKE, BROOKS AND WELLS

worked and which didn't, we might be able to create artificial intelligence models," Komlofske said. As a member of Impartial's board, he hopes these models will lead to best practice frameworks that improve the success of reentry programs.

Impartial is currently building a staff, creating memberships, constructing justice video games and expanding its support for prison-based artwork programs. The organization is also actively raising funds through donations, grants, and sponsorships.

"Artwork starts conversations," Wells said. "It humanizes [the artists] instead of just associating them with a prison number. The artwork shows their value and makes

them relatable. For some former prisoners, art continues to be a source of pride and financial gain post-release."

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT WWW.IMPARTIAL.ONE OR CONTACT DIANE@IMPARTIAL.ONE.

“ARTWORK OFFERS A CRUCIAL THERAPEUTIC OUTLET FOR PRISONERS, HELPING THEM PROCESS TRAUMA,” SAID WELLS.

■ DIANE WELLS





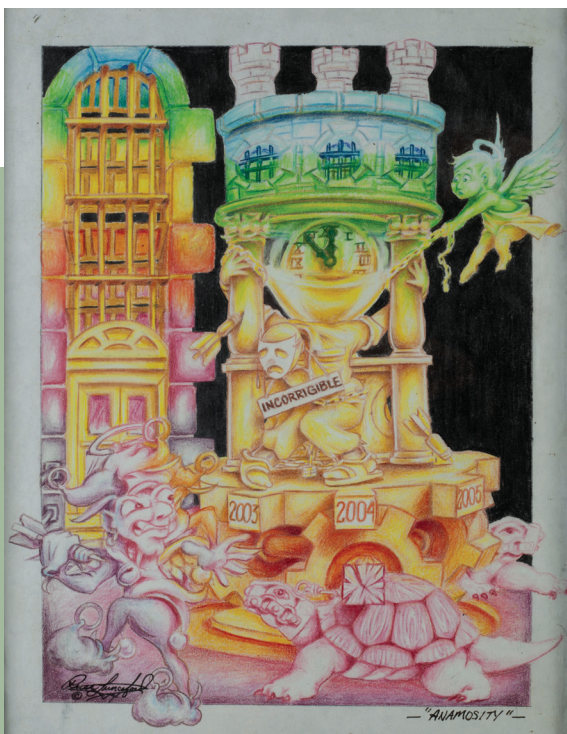
■ BEFORE I RIDE BY ARVEL PERRY



■ CELTIC KNOT-TREE OF LIFE BY DEZMAN SCOTT

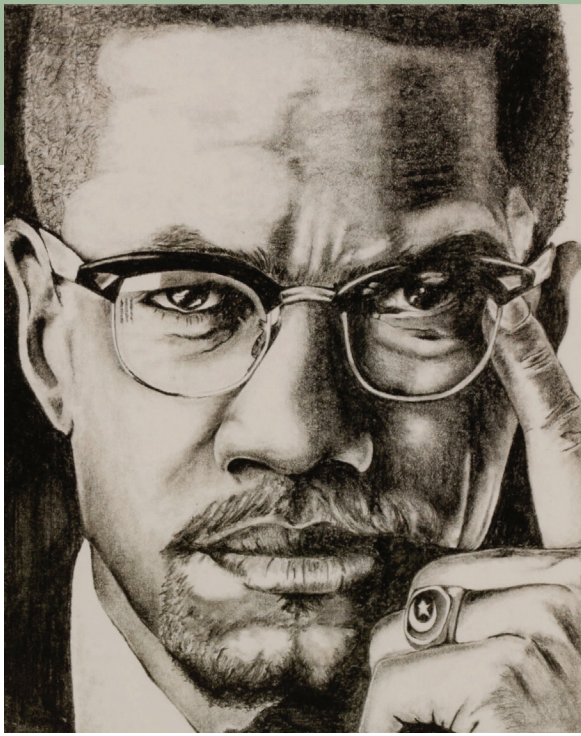


■ THE WALL BY K. KEY



■ ANAMOSITY BY RUSS LUNCSTARD

“ I MET SOMEBODY WHO HAD BEEN INCARCERATED. HE SAW FIRSTHAND THE GENIUS OF [PRISONERS WHO WERE] ARTISTS AND HOW THEY COULD TRANSFORM THEIR WORDS INTO ART, ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY STRUGGLED TO ARTICULATE THEIR FEELINGS,” WELLS RECALLED.



■ MALCOLM X THINKING BY SHAROID WRIGHT



■ NEW WORLD BY SCOTT SMITH



■ SNOW HORSE BY KEVIN MARINELLI