

Iowa City Press-Citizen

LIFE

Despite challenges, we continue to create communities through music

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Do you know how it feels to have a community you've created, shaped, and co-led for 12 years abruptly stop? And for almost three years not know whether it would restart?

Between 2009-2020, I facilitated the Oakdale Community Choir, comprised of incarcerated ("inside") and non-incarcerated ("outside") singers and featuring songwriting, reflective writing exchanges, and peacebuilding classes inside the Iowa Medical and Classification Center (commonly known as Oakdale Prison).

Over 140 outside singers and 175 inside singers participated, over 3,600 people came into the prison as audience members, and over 20 international participants joined us for events. The Soweto Gospel Choir, and singer/song leaders Maggie Wheeler (who played "Janice" on the TV show "Friends") and Sara Thomsen came into the Oakdale Prison for a musical learning exchange where each group led songs and I facilitated a conversation about the event's theme, "Changes We Choose." Our primary goal is to build communities of caring.

The Oakdale Choir is rooted in the South African concept "ubuntu": my humanity is interconnected with yours. Our goals are to create communities of caring – inside ourselves, in our immediate communities, and in our broader communities. COVID-19 abruptly stopped us. Two horrific murders in the Anamosa State Penitentiary have curtailed the possibility for restarting in Oakdale what we created. The Iowa Department of Corrections is just starting to figure out the process of allowing non-religious volunteers to come inside Iowa prisons.

We are sad to lose this weekly singing and songwriting community, but I am hopeful about the seeds we've planted and possibilities for new communities of caring.

We are transforming. In 2020, we did three Zoom musical listening exchanges, sharing and discussing original songs (inside singers were not allowed to join). On September 21, 2021, my University of Iowa peacebuilding students sang with outside and former inside singers at the dedication of the peace pole in downtown Iowa City. On April 29, 2022, outside and former inside singers performed an arrangement of my song "May My Tears Water a Sapling" for the Anne Frank Tree Planting Ceremony on campus. We recorded background vocals for an original song "Rise" by Moose (Benjamin Cooper), incarcerated in Pennsylvania and a participant in "Songs in the Key of Free." We performed at the May 21, 2022 Inside Out Reentry Fundraiser. We've given two guitars and a computer digital audio workstation to former inside singers. Outside singers and songwriters are pen pals with inside singers.

I co-lead the new International Music and Justice Inquiry Network: IMAJIN Caring Communities with people from 14 countries (so far) who work with music-making in prisons. We meet monthly on Zoom. Contact me at mary-cohen@uiowa.edu if you'd like to attend.

In November 2022, I published, with coauthor Stuart Duncan, *Music-Making in US Prisons: Listening to Incarcerated Voices*, a book examining past and current ways music-making bridges lives inside and outside prisons, with the goals of dismantling harmful prison practices. We invite you to join two events in Iowa City: Thursday, Feb. 16 from 5-6:30 p.m., a "Book Matters: Scholars in Conversation" event at the Stanley Art Museum, 160 West

Burlington Street. RSVP at <https://research.uiowa.edu/book-matters>. And Tuesday, April 11 at 7 p.m., a reading at Prairie Lights Bookstore, 15 S Dubuque St.

Mary Cohen is an associate professor of music education at the University of Iowa. The front cover of the forthcoming book she co-authored with Stuart Paul Duncan, "Music-Making in U.S. Prisons: Listening to Incarcerated Voices," features the musical notation for Blackwell's lyrics: "Every wrong is the reason to forgive."