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## Reflections from the outside in: Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program acting graduation

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## REFLECTIONS

### **Reflections from the outside in: Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program acting graduation**

A new beginning. The first time this course was offered. First time acting for all ... for one last time. Excitement, anticipation, and anxiety as the outside meets inside one last time. First one, and then another. Until finally, the last appears. Much later than the rest. Concern that he might not show sparks conversations. One can never know when the rules require revoking privilege.

A hat. A simple article of clothing one would think. But inside a prison, a place to hide one's eyes or oneself, contraband. Through one gate and then another with the item, then back again because no proof of clearance. To the class it was a prop. A simple item to aid in 'Waiting for Godot'. Without it, a paper hat would have to do, but how realistic would *that* be? Really, how surreal the entire experience. Acting behind the bars. Acting.

The performances though not Broadway worthy were spectacular in many respects. Inmates of a medium secure facility with a couple of lifers thrown in and university students working together, and apart. Memorizing their lines, working the scene together. Pretty amazing. As I have seen in other graduation performances, the inside students seemed a bit more prepared. Maybe because it is an escape from doing time. Perhaps because they felt the privilege of being part of the class more so than the outside students. All performing much better than I can ever imagine myself under any circumstances, let alone behind the prison walls, within a system of arbitrary rules where 'security' needs dictate the limits to everything, even human contact, even among family members.

Acting through the walls, beyond the outside noise, despite the inside noise. The social worker's radio blasts incomprehensible muffled voices and could not be turned off. Repeatedly, loudspeakers paged workers at random intervals. But the plays went on. Applause.

Certificates awarded. Professor near tears, knowing the end is near. Students, faculty, and guests line up for celebratory sandwiches, juice, and really delicious pastries – inmate made. Sitting down to chat one last time, about life, school, work, justice, people, and relationships ... not much talk of the finality of the newly formed bonds.

I nearly cried many times, though that would not be surprising to those who know how easily my tears flow. But the reasons they may not guess. My eyes swelled for the lives interrupted – by the crimes and the punishment – for the inmates who gained life-long 11 week friends, for the students whose lives I

imagine must be forever altered, for the pride I feel for all performing, for myself, lucky enough not to be where they are.

Truly inspirational. Quite transformative. Justice? No, but a small step in the right direction.

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