

Kristin Wenger, Board President, interviews Joann Dayton-Wolf, Ulster Literacy Jail Program Coordinator

Recently, I had a chance to talk with Joann Dayton-Wolf about the Ulster Literacy Association (ULA) Jail Program. Here is an edited version of our conversation.

Kristin: How did you get involved with Ulster Literacy Association?

Joann: Lisa Hantes, ULA RSVP Director, is a good friend of mine and she was involved with it. And she said, well, you know, we could use some help. And because I was teaching GED for SUNY Ulster and I was trying to get SUNY Ulster and the jail connected for a GED program it seemed like a natural marriage to work with Ulster Literacy in the jail program.

Kristin: When did you first hear about the jail program?

Joann: I was working with Amy Lenard, ULA Executive Director, on creating a program with the jail, so it was just a natural progression for me, from helping people to believing that I wanted to do something at the jail.

Before Covid-19, when I was working as a GED teacher, I had students who had been incarcerated come to my class, or I had a few students that were going to go to prison in my class. It was obvious that there was a need, and it seemed like something that I'd like to try. So, pre-COVID, I did the orientation, and was convinced that it wasn't for me.

Kristin: Why?

Joann: Because in the orientation they tell you that you can't be yourself. You know, you can't share anything about yourself. You basically have to separate yourself and your personality from the incarcerated individuals.

Kristin: Why do you think that is?

Joann: Because it is a protective mechanism, and that's not who I am. That's not how I teach. So, at the time, I decided that the program was not for me.

Kristin: What changed?

Joann: So, then COVID-19 happened. After, and there was a new sheriff who changed the energy at the jail by shifting the focus away from they're bad, you're good.

Kristin: When you saw that change, did you know this was something you wanted to get involved with again?

Joann: Yes, I did the orientation again. It had a different energy. You still have to be careful about what you share, but I do share some things about my cat, my son, and my grandson.

Kristin: Can you tell me about the program, what you're doing, and how you prepared for it?

Joann: The program actually occurred at the jail long before COVID-19. There were people who went in and did writing workshops. So that is just something that I continued. And we have incredible volunteers.

Margo McLoone is our writing workshop guru. She and I have writing workshops on Mondays and Fridays. We serve three different pods for two hours on Monday and two hours on Friday. Margo sets up a lesson, and we go in. There are usually two of us that go in, and the lessons are amazing because there's a topic, a theme, and there's a quotation that we discuss. Margo throws in a language lesson, and then we have a prompt followed by writing. The last prompt had to do with freedom. We have used quotes from Joseph Campbell, Maya Angelou, and even Dr. Seuss.

Kristin: Describe the people in the pods.

Joann: Currently, our participants are all men. The individuals can be in jail for a couple of months, or 19 months. It's very fluid.

Kristin: Did you and Margo create the curriculum together or was that an organic thing?

Joann: Margo had some really good ideas. She's an English teacher. We would go into the jail together and she'd be the English teacher and I'd be her sidekick.

Kristin: How did you feel the first time you went in?

Joann: Oh, it was really strange. You go in through reception. You give up your smartwatch, your phone, your ID, and your jewelry. I'm an earring person, so if you have dangly earrings, they come off. Scarves are not allowed. Nothing that could be a weapon. And you can't take in any paperwork that has staples in it. You can't have anything that could be used as a weapon. You go in, and they check your handbag, they check our teacher bags. Then they push a button, and you go through a locked entryway, and after pushing another button, they let you through. You walk down a hallway and push another button. I mean, it's all very secure. Finally, the Correction Officer (CO) of that particular pod looks up, and if there's nothing else going on, he lets you in, and then you go in, and he's there with his computer and all these people around. You give him your name, you tell him why you're there. And then he makes an announcement. "This is the Ulster Literacy writing workshop. Anybody who wants to be involved, please come to the classroom." Then he opens up a classroom door for us and people just come in. We've had anywhere between 7 and 11 learners. However, sometimes it's two. It just depends on the day. It depends on what's going on.

Kristin: What was the first session like?

Joann: The first time you just introduce yourself: this is who we are. I'm Margo, this is Joann, this is what we're doing. I handed out paper and pencils to everybody, and then we started talking. The first time we really had no idea what to expect - absolutely no idea - who are these people? Are they going to be aggressive? You know, you don't know? But, since it started last May, every single individual who has been one of our students has unequivocally been grateful that we are there. And at the end of every class, they say thank you for coming. So you think, at the start, oh boy, this is going to be tough, and then to receive the gratitude that we get. It is amazing.

So, since the first session, we have become more comfortable about knowing what to expect. It is still a little daunting, but we're comfortable. And the participants are more comfortable with us, too. And so are the COs, you know, they're comfortable. They know that we're going to follow the rules. You know, I may not be the biggest rule follower in the world, but I am in the jail facility because I want them to have me come back next week. Yes, there, I follow the rules.

Kristin: What surprised you about the program or your experience there?

Joann: The biggest surprise, honestly, was the gratitude from the individuals and the COs. You know, people are happy that we are there. I think the COs understand that we are trying to make things easier for them. With trust, it becomes a mutually beneficial exchange.

Kristin: Can you describe some of the work that's been created by the learners in your classes?

Joann: At the end of each class, the participants hand in their writing to us. Margo keeps all the writings, and she reads them, and returns them the next week with her comments. She has a stack of almost a year's worth of writing. What I've found is how open people are when they write because after you write, you share. We found out that one of the participants was in for something very serious.

He was talking one day when only three of us were in class. He started telling us he has trouble saying no to family and friends because if he can do something for them, why wouldn't he? And that's why he ended up in jail, because he didn't say no. He wrote about things like that, and also about his fears. It's just really interesting how when somebody gets to know you and trusts you, how open they are with their writing.

Some of the participants are concerned about what we're going to do with the writing. We told them that this is between Margo and them, and unless they wanted something to happen with it, nothing will happen with it. There was a concern in the beginning that we were going to make money from the writing. We said - no way!

Kristin: How have you changed from being involved in the program?

Joann: It's easier for me to see both sides of the institution. I've never, like I said, been a rule follower. But now it's easy to see both sides of the situation. I can see, you know, the complaints from the participants, and I can see how difficult it is for the COs. So, you can be empathetic to both. And I don't know if I would have been so empathetic to the COs before, being a child of the 60s.

Kristin: I hear that an Art Therapy class is starting. Can you give a little preview of that?

Joann: I'm excited about it. We will have an artist and a therapist. Both are really excited, and both of them have been volunteering in the writing workshops, so that experience gives them the necessary comfort level. They will be teaching on Tuesdays and Wednesday and will work with four groups.

I'm really, really excited about this class because when we do our writing workshop, some of the guys said that they write in a composition book during the week. And they say, "I've been writing this story," and they'll illustrate it a little bit. So, it just seemed perfect to start an art therapy class to allow for that creativity. Andrea, the artist, will start it off with a theme, maybe one of the themes used in the writing workshop. For example, one of the themes that they've been talking about is dreams, so that's also visual and something they can talk about.

Kristin: What's the age range of the learners?

Joann: They range from 21 to 60. Many of the younger participants are into cartooning so creating illustrations to accompany their writing is perfect.

Kristin: What is your hope for the program?

Joann: Well, I hope it grows because the sheriff has this *Ignite Program*. It's happened in a couple of different states. I think we're only the second area in New York to do it. It's a program based on merit. All the individuals get a tablet loaded with lots of courses and different offerings and information. Through this program, the sheriff is trying to unleash the potential of people so that, you know, they do not necessarily go back to the same space, job, or family. Once you've been incarcerated, having a different focus is essential. The recidivism rate is incredible. People don't go back to jail if they have something new, a new direction, and a new reason for not doing what they were doing before. And that's documented. So, my hope for Ulster Literacy is to be able to envision some other ways that we can be helpful.

There is a belief that the people we work with can't read and write, and that's not a fact at all. We have brilliant people in our writing classes. We had a woman with a master's degree in our writing class. She just made a bad choice, and making a bad choice doesn't have that much to do with what your intellect, right? You just made a bad choice.

Kristin: What is your hope for the learners?

Joann: That we can make a difference every day, every time we go in there; if we can lift somebody's spirit a little bit so that we could help our participants make better decisions, maybe just help them to make a better decision that day. You know, just for that day.

The art piece is going to add a whole different way to express yourself. Maybe instead of being inside a cell, you imagine something you want to draw; maybe you think about color. Hopefully this elevates someone, and that's what I wish long term.

Of course, you'd like somebody to have a better chance. But, just for that one day in class, I would wish for that one day to be better because I've seen how, in there, one day can be good and the next day can be awful. So, you say okay, maybe today will be better. I have not seen anyone leave the writing workshop feeling worse. You know, that's kind of a great feeling. Oh, it's fabulous. And who would have thought?

Kristin: Thank you so much for talking with me today and sharing your work and your experience with the Jail Program.