



Graduation Day of the Art and Wellness Fellowship at the Minnesota Correctional Facility at Faribault. Each fellow received a certificate of completion.

Art From the Inside Art and Wellness Fellowship

Interview Summary

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Background

Art from the Inside's Art & Wellness Fellowship is a trauma-informed, person-centered program that uses creative expression and wellness practices to support healing, self-discovery, and personal growth among justice-impacted individuals. Through a combination of visual arts instruction, mindfulness practices, restorative dialogue, and community-building activities, participants develop emotional resilience, self-awareness, and creative confidence. The fellowship creates opportunities for participants to explore their identities, strengthen coping skills, and build meaningful connections with others.

Throughout the month of March 2026, Wilder Research interviewed 11 formerly incarcerated people who participated in Art from the Inside's (ATFI) Art and Wellness Fellowship. Participants shared their experiences with art, healing, community, identity, and reentry. Across interviews, participants consistently described the program as a source of support, connection, creative expression, and hope during and after incarceration. The following report summarizes key themes and findings that emerged from the interviews.



2 Worlds by A.C.

Summary of key findings

- Participants consistently described art as an important tool for healing, emotional expression, stress relief, and coping during incarceration and reentry.
- AFTI created a strong sense of community and belonging among participants, helping reduce feelings of isolation and disconnection.
- The program helped participants rebuild confidence and identity by allowing them to be recognized as artists, creators, and community members.
- Public exhibitions and fellowship opportunities gave participants visibility, validation, and opportunities to connect with the broader community.
- Participants valued the relationships they built with AFTI staff, mentors, and peers, often describing those relationships as supportive and life-changing.
- Participants discussed barriers related to incarceration and re-entry, including limited resources, prison restrictions, financial stress, transportation, and mental health challenges.

Themes

Art as Healing and Wellness

One of the most common themes across interviews was the role art played in healing and emotional wellness. Participants described art as calming, therapeutic, grounding, and healing. Many explained that creating art helped them cope with stress, trauma, depression, anxiety, anger, and the emotional challenges of incarceration and reentry. Participants also discussed how mindfulness activities, grounding techniques, breathing exercises, and meditation practices introduced through the fellowship helped support their mental and emotional well-being.

It was a stress reliever of just painting and a moment of freedom; so, it's healing that way. — Participant

Painting and drawing stood out the most to me as a mode of meditation. When in prison, there's not a lot of places to relax. — Participant

AFTI has saved my life literally and metaphorically. They have matched my interests in what I am capable of doing. — Participant



Humility by Roberto Lopez Rios

Community and Connection

Participants repeatedly described AFTI as a supportive community where they felt accepted, understood, and connected to others with similar experiences. Many participants talked about the importance of the relationships they formed with other artists, mentors, and staff members. Several participants explained that the program helped them feel less isolated during incarceration and after release. The sense of belonging and continued support after release was especially meaningful for participants navigating the reentry process.

The community definitely builds. Seeing former inmates was nice to see, and it keeps me grounded. — Participant

It became a brotherhood and sisterhood of people coming together for the same thing. — Participant

Being embraced in the community compared to just being a part of the community is so important. — Participant

Identity, Visibility, and Being Seen

Another major theme was the way AFTI helped participants feel seen and recognized beyond their history of incarceration. Participants shared that the program gave them opportunities to be recognized as artists, creators, and people, rather than being reduced to labels such as inmate, felon, or criminal. Public exhibitions and community events helped participants feel validated and appreciated for their talents, stories, and growth.

People actually see me now, which I've never felt before in my life. — Participant

When people see the pieces of art, they don't see an incarcerated person. You can do something different, and people wouldn't judge you. — Participant

They see us as people. They see that humans can heal and humans can grow. — Participant

Art as Expression and Communication

Participants described art as an important outlet for expressing emotions, experiences, trauma, and identity in ways that felt difficult to communicate verbally. Several participants explained that art allowed them to process difficult emotions and tell their stories without needing to directly speak about painful experiences. Themes used in exhibitions and fellowships encouraged participants to reflect more deeply on identity, healing, and personal growth.

I'm an introvert, so it's easier to express through painting than talking about it. — Participant

We could speak our mind through our art piece without talking. It helped me understand people around me. — Participant

Visual arts have helped express those emotions I wouldn't be able to otherwise. — Participant

Hope, Growth, and Future Opportunities

Participants frequently described AFTI as a source of hope, purpose, and motivation for the future. Many explained that the program gave them goals to work toward and helped them imagine positive futures beyond incarceration. Participants also described opportunities to sell artwork, participate in exhibitions, mentor others, connect with organizations, and continue developing as artists after release. Several participants emphasized that the program helped them stay focused on growth and healing.

What stands out the most is hope for tomorrow. — Participant

[AFTI] gave me a purpose and...a mission to do. — Participant

It helped me keep my hope alive and kept me going through it. — Participant

Barriers and Challenges

Although participants overwhelmingly described AFTI as a positive and meaningful experience, many also discussed barriers they experienced both during incarceration and after release. Inside correctional facilities, participants described limited access to art supplies, restrictive prison policies, lockdowns, schedule conflicts, and inconsistent support from correctional staff. Several participants explained that certain officers viewed art programs as unnecessary or treated access to art supplies as a privilege rather than a meaningful form of rehabilitation and healing.

The prison was constantly changing rules...you can't do this or that, or changing supplies. — Participant

Some of the sergeants and lieutenants were not willing to engage in the process and actively pushed against it. — Participant

Participants also discussed challenges after release, including transportation barriers, financial stress, housing instability, mental health challenges, balancing work and family responsibilities, and limited opportunities to continue showcasing their artwork. Some participants living outside of the Twin Cities shared that access to art opportunities and community spaces felt more limited in rural areas and they would love to have opportunities for artists like them to have a central space to gather more.

I came home with a bunch of restitution to pay back, so I had to immediately start grinding to make money. It makes time tight to work on art compared to on the inside, when all the time I had was to work out and do art. — Participant

Even with these barriers, participants consistently described AFTI as an important support system that helped them stay connected, motivated, and focused on personal growth.



After the fire by Lux Thunberg

Conclusion

Overall, participants described Art from the Inside as much more than an art program. The fellowship and exhibitions provided opportunities for healing, creative expression, connection, and personal growth both during incarceration and after release. Participants consistently described the program as a source of hope, support, and belonging that helped them feel valued and seen as people.

The interviews also highlighted the importance of community-centered and creative approaches to supporting justice-impacted individuals. Participants shared that art helped them communicate emotions, process trauma, build confidence, and reconnect with others in meaningful ways. Many participants described the relationships formed through AFTI as life-changing and emphasized that the support extended beyond the fellowship itself.

Although participants discussed ongoing barriers related to incarceration and reentry, including financial stress, prison restrictions, mental health challenges, and limited resources, they overwhelmingly described AFTI as a positive and transformative experience. Participants emphasized that the program not only supported their development as artists, but also helped them feel humanized, hopeful, and connected to their communities.