Restoring Lives, Transforming Landscapes: The GreenHouse Program at Rikers Island Jail

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Rikers Island, New York, NY

Kamelita M. stood by a planter box of yellow mums, boxwood, and ivy on a residential street in Greenwich Village. In a dark blue shirt, khaki pants, and carrying a black canvas gardening bag, Kamelita snipped ivy and pruned out errant branches in a meticulous manner. It was a striking fall day, warm with a cloudless blue sky. As a plant technician for a private landscape firm, Kamelita would earn $17 an hour for her work. Ten blocks north, Manual R. planted several hundred bulbs in one of New York City's premier public spaces, the newly restored Madison Square Park. Employed by the Madison Square Park Conservancy, Manual was an integral part of a process to build high quality gardens in public parks through public/private partnerships across the city. What makes these individuals notable, however, is not so much the work they were doing, but the path they took to arrive at work; for only 1 year before, both Kamelita and Manual were inmates at The New York City jail complex on Rikers Island, serving a year for stolen goods and drug possession.

During their incarceration, Kamelita and Manual joined the GreenHouse Program, a jail-to-street horticulture project run and administered by the Horticultural Society of New York (HSNY). Unlike most prison farms, often evocative of men toiling in endless rows of leafy crops with guards on horseback, GreenHouse operates

Rikers Island garden, circa 1998 (*top*) and 2007 (*bottom*).
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under a different premise. Here, at a 2-acre facility and greenhouse on Rikers Island, men and women inmates learn the art and science of horticulture. The programmatic approach provides education, vocational skills, and ongoing garden therapy as a way to help inmates redirect their lives in a positive and productive manner. The physical result is nothing less than remarkable: in 10 years, a weedy, barren lawn has been transformed by 550 inmates into bird and butterfly gardens, a native forest, herb and vegetable gardens, a peace pagoda for **Sept. 11, 2001**, a pond, waterfall and gazebo complex, all traversed and tied together by a series of elegant pathways. The concept of "transformation" is inherent in everything that takes place in the garden, for in the process of transforming landscapes, the students begin the process of transforming themselves.

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Equally important is the objective to change the concept of jail, which — in the parlance of ecologists — is seen typically as a resource sink, or as one correction official liked to comment — "a graveyard of lost opportunity." GreenHouse operates under the premise that jail can serve as a sustainable resource — one that generates benefits to constituents in jail as well as to entire communities across the city and region.

Doing their "time" in the garden, inmates will not only rehabilitate themselves but rehabilitate damaged plants given to HSNY by nurseries or landscapers all over the New York region; grow plants (annuals, perennials, herbs and vegetables) for community groups in New York City; from salvaged wood, construct nesting boxes and bat houses for city parks and open space to improve habitat for native wildlife; build rooftop gardens in jail that will later be reassembled for city schools or community groups; and after their release, bring their gardening skills back to their families and neighborhoods.

By connecting people who have had little contact or understanding of nature to the natural world, the GreenHouse Program hopes to combat the 65 percent recidivism rate that has plagued the country's criminal justice system (Elsner 2004). And while the connection is profound, the hard skills of horticulture need to be employed when the inmate leaves jail and is faced with the myriad of poor choices available in inner-city neighborhoods. It is well documented, for example, that people leaving jail or prison tend to move to core areas of impoverishment where housing and services are affordable. In New York

An inmate maintains the garden.
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Manhattan rooftop garden built and installed by GreenTeam members.
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City, 70 percent of the 16,000 inmates on Rikers come from five core neighborhoods — East New York, Crown Heights, Bushwick, South Bronx and East Harlem (Wynn 2001). The opportunities and influences found in this setting will statistically determine whether an ex-offender will return to jail within 1 year of release (Petersilia 2003).

HSNY's GreenTeam is the "street" arm of our jail-to-street program and provides an avenue of support for inmates leaving jail.Inmates with an interest in horticulture can begin working with the GreenTeam as paid interns the day they arrive home, earning $7.50 to $10 per hour while honing their skills for a future career in the "greening" field. The program's salary and skill-building is comparable to that of an income-generating landscape/gardening firm. As long as there are contracts, HSNY can afford to retain and pay interns to carry out the work. Some of our contracts take place in luxury buildings, penthouses, or private homes. But the focus of HSNY's income-generating projects is on partnerships with community-based organizations and service providers. These may be schools, psychiatric institutions, facilities that provide residential services to the mentally ill, people with HIV, at-risk youth, family shelters, seniors, and the disabled. The work may consist of planting street trees, building rooftop gardens, installing specialty gardens for food, herbs, or gardens strictly for therapeutic activities. Not only does the process involve former inmates, but clients of the community based organizations are also active participants, becoming — as their skills and knowledge develop — stewards of the resident garden. As both ex-offenders and clients assume control of resources they had no prior connection to, they begin to assume a measure of **control** over their lives. It is a realization that success is dependent on the role they take in managing the sites, and how that role is played out on a daily basis of work and dialogue.

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Over time, the number of gardens and projects and people involved add up to a green continuum among neighborhoods and communities. It begins at Rikers, where the individual learns the simple connection between work, responsibility, care and the benefits associated with cultivating not just the garden, but themselves. It continues as ex-offenders who, for the most part are marginalized from mainstream society, leave Rikers with the ability to immerse themselves in professional gardening work. This not only gives them vital skills to find

and hold a job, but extends their influence to developing meaningful spaces in areas ranging from wealthy neighborhoods to low-income, under-served communities. It may be a neighborhood branch library garden, or a strip of park land on the Hudson River, or a street tree in a hot zone of Hunts Point, Bronx. And the beginning has no end; we've found that garden-work sensibilities extend to families and children, neighbors, and parents. I think of Martin C., one of my first students on Rikers in 1997, who planted his first garden during his incarceration. During 10 years he held jobs ranging from seasonal work as a zoo horticulturist at the Prospect Park Zoo, to a full-time zone gardener in Central Park, to the establishment of his own small lawn-care business in Long Island. In 2007, Martin's son, Martin Jr., joined the GreenTeam, not as an ex-offender, but as part of the program's expansion and outreach to "at-risk" youth.

Over the past year and now planning into the future, the GreenHouse and GreenTeam are reaching out to adolescents in jail and upon return to their neighborhoods, under the assumption that work skills and meaningful work are preventative measures that can break the rate of incarceration among at-risk youth. In the mid-1980s, The HSNY established a vocational horticulture program for adolescent boys that was supported through a city-based Youth Service Grant. In 1994, the grant was terminated and the program — then called GreenWorks — folded. When HSNY returned to Rikers in 1997, the focus was on men and women adults, primarily because adolescents were mandated to attend school during the day. Now, however, with re-entry and rehabilitation taking a strong role in the ever-shifting criminal justice paradigm, jails such as Rikers are revisiting the importance of vocational skill development for youth offenders. A unique aspect of the program that GreenHouse provides is the "street" component — the opportunity for men, women, and youth to continue a vocation that they started in jail.

While the program has shown measured success in reducing recidivism among its participants (25 percent as compared to 65 percent of the Rikers population) the stark reality is GreenHouse, and programs like GreenHouse are under-utilized as an alternative to modern incarceration practices. The potential of this program — at Rikers and in facilities across the country — could be more fully realized

by increasing the resources devoted to alternative programs rather than solely focusing on inmate control. In her book, "When Prisoners Come Home," Joan Petersilia states that just "one-third of all prisoners released will have received vocational or educational training." In California alone, of 132,000 inmates released in 2002, just 8,000 received some kind of aftercare support to help them successfully reenter and remain in their community (Jiler 2006). At Rikers, GreenHouse provides services to less than 25 inmates daily; and only 1 to 2 percent of the Rikers Island total population of approximately 15,000 inmates are eligible to participate in the program. Overall, GreenHouse could accommodate far more inmates, and provide more opportunities to rehabilitate inmates with meaningful work skills in gardening, horticulture, and environmental restoration and management. With the cost of constructing new prisons averaging well over $70,000 per cell, and the yearly cost of incarcerating an inmate averaging $50,000, horticulture programs are a low-cost alternative to punitive measures of imprisonment.

One year out of jail, William R. takes his son to water his plot in a **community garden** on 9th Street in Manhattan. Since his release, he has worked steadily with the GreenTeam, has become a certified tree climber and readily dispenses gardening advice to an inquiring public on 9th Street. Is William a success story? Occasionally he relapses into alcohol and drug use, which prevents him from holding a steady job in the profession. But unlike before, a relapse is less likely to end in jail than in the garden. For William, horticulture is a lifeline that keeps him on a forward path, despite a history of jail and substance abuse.

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> "You may not see changes," he tells me. "But I know I'm changing. I'm doing things differently."

When he's not working as a gardener, William is on 9th street, gardening for the fun of it.

On its own, horticulture is not a panacea for the huge challenges facing the criminal justice system either in New York City, the state, or country. With almost 2 million men and women serving time behind bars nationally, up to 600,000 are released each year returning to their communities with weak prospects for the future. Up to 80 percent are in for drug related crimes and a high percentage have serious addictions or mental illness. Many former inmates are simply not healthy enough

to work a 40-hour week in horticulture, nor can they cope with the serious issues confronting them after their release from jail.

Programs such as GreenHouse must work hand in hand with other nonprofits that target substance abuse, housing, trauma, physical health and mental health issues as well as job training in fields unrelated to gardening. It must partner with community groups such as Sustainable South Bronx or **Added Value in Red Hook**, Brooklyn that have their own "green" job training component for neighborhood youth. It must act as a model for other jurisdictions that hope to replicate similar programs for their criminal justice system. And to generate success, it most focus on its students, one individual, and one garden at a time.

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Prior to her arrest and incarceration at Rikers, Kamelita, now 28 years old, moved from job to job with little ambition or idea of developing a professional career. With two small children and no high school diploma she was mostly concerned with paying rent, putting food on the table, and her children's education. She spent 6 months with GreenTeam and was an intern at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden before landing her job with a private firm as a plant technician. Today, she will quickly tell you that horticulture is her life with opportunities branching out like a fast growing tree. "I have private clients, and plenty of overtime and the trust from my boss that I'll always leave a site in perfect condition," she said. More important, Kamelita is part of the greater collective of gardeners greening New York.

"Everyday I'm doing this," she said, "I feel that I'm getting paid to give something back to the community."

The feeling is not limited to Kamelita: it is something that germinates in many of the men and women we work with in jail and with some care, develops into positive behavior that leaves in its wake a healthy, more livable city for themselves, and for everyone else.

Dialogue With Author:

Are there any precedents that informed your work? Or similar projects like yours? Or is it wholly unique?

There are many horticulture programs in jails and prisons throughout the country, but none that offer a jail-to-street continuum. I personally was inspired by Catherine Sneed's work in San Francisco. Not only did she start a large-scale organic farm on jail grounds but found a vacant lot in the city for released inmates to gather, garden, and stay positive. Later, she established a contract with the Department of Public Works that provided work for ex-offenders to plant and maintain street trees in San Francisco. While her gardening program in jail and her work for ex-offenders planting trees no longer has the funding to support itself, as a model it continues to inform and inspire (see Jiler 2006).

My predecessor at HSNY, Arthur Sheppard who started GreenWorks – a program that worked with adolescent males on Rikers – and later established an early incarnation of GreenTeam, was equally influential. GreenHouse is simply a second-generation version of GreenWork that was expanded to include men and women adults. We then privatized GreenTeam (under Arthur the GreenTeam was supported by foundation grants) by seeking contracts to generate income. This created a large measure of financial sustainability and support for the program

John Cannizzo, the current Director of GreenTeam also deserves much credit for his work expanding the program, building partnerships with different groups across the city, and reaching out to include at-risk youth through Federation Employment and Guidance Service, Inc. (FEGS) and Graham-Windham, (an organization that works with youth graduating from foster care). This job-training component adds a whole new dimension to our mission of establishing a generation of professional stewards dedicated to improving environmental and human health in their communities.

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