

Prison Choir Reflection by Amanda Weber

Last Tuesday, I visited a prison for the first time. I spent time reflecting beforehand on how I was feeling. The unsettling mixture of fear, nerves, and hopefulness were all confirmed in the thirty minutes it took to get through “the trap” and enter into the classroom. The process of stripping down – removing all accessories, letting go of all belongings, following orders, and being escorted around - really got me thinking for the first time about the life of a prisoner. All this to be contrasted so immediately as I stepped into music class – a gathering of about thirty men, circled up, eager to learn. Suddenly, in the face of fear, we were singing “Lift up your voice, be not afraid”; in the face of hopelessness, we were singing “Soon and very soon, we are going to see the King”; in a setting infused with loneliness and distrust, we were holding hands, making eye contact with one another, and uniting our many voices as one. Music carries this power. When we sing together, we are creating a counterculture – a radical experience of life and love and community that is too often dismissed in today’s society. This is true of all choirs, but especially in the setting of a prison. Within a lifestyle where freedom no longer exists, the men of [REDACTED] experience an oasis in music class where they are freed to express themselves, to create music, to write their own lyrics, to gain a sense of leadership, and to discover how their individuality *does* contribute to a community. As Andre explained at the end of class, all of this is experienced through a focus on the process rather than the product. The men were encouraged to “make a beautiful sound” by Jamie, not because they need to please a future audience but simply because they can. There is such rich potential for music to be used in the bringing together of communities, especially communities that may not have regular access to musical opportunities. At the end of my visit, each member of the class thanked me for coming, and many thanked me especially for my bravery. I was so moved to feel such a joy in singing and an eagerness to welcome others into the family they’ve formed. The fear and nerves I felt in entering the prison transformed into hopefulness as I walked out, leaving a piece of myself with the choir, and taking their message with me.

Amanda Weber is currently a candidate for the Master of Music degree in conducting from the Yale University of Sacred Music. Weber brings a unique perspective to music as a tool for social justice and community building. Her work founding Bethany’s Women of Praise, a choir for homeless women in Washington, DC has been recognized by Chorus America and the American Choral Directors Association.