

Dear Madame Chair and Members of the Committee,



I am Roberto Lopez-Rios, a 38-year-old artist with skills developed through the pain and struggles a life sentence forced me to face. I was 16 years old and lacked the skills to write or even describe what I was going through. I didn't have the language or ability to understand the emotions I was experiencing, and art became the only way to project bits and pieces of my emotional turmoil confined in a cold cell.

Art From the Inside is more than just a program that encourages creativity and exhibits the talents of individuals doing prison terms to the public. It changes people's lives across the board, from incarcerated people, their families, and the public. The impact goes beyond its intended purpose, as each piece carries part of its creator in time, thought, dedication, motivation, and the spark of hope that lights the path for growth and discovery of the inner self. It also makes us feel connected again, as the public experiences our creations up close and personal. It's contributing to the building blocks for the long overdue bridge to our communities that we will one day live in.

Amazingly, Mr. Espinosa recognized the critical role art plays in the lives of individuals that suffer in silence and the need for stability that validation, inclusion, and a sense of accomplishment naturally brings with it. Art From the Inside is based on all that Mr. Espinosa learned during his service to the state as a correctional officer. I was among many who had the honor to meet Mr. Espinosa when he worked at Stillwater prison. He created this program out of the loss of his friend and colleague, Joseph Gomm. He wanted to bring more light, positivity, and connection to everyone in prison. This program has shifted the morale among the incarcerated people and some staff. A genuine sense of community has been built between the artists, creating a safer space for all.

This program has given me more than I could ask for. Like being recognized as an artist, and knowing my work is appreciated and displayed in somebody's home, office, and even museums. As a kid, I dreamt of making a difference in people's lives in a good way. I've reached such a dream through my participation in Art from the Inside because now people know that beautiful creations are possible even in the world's darkest places.

Art from the Inside has created ways for my family and daughter to be more involved than usual. They are proud and witness a community of people that see me and express themselves about me as a human being. Recently, after my commutation was denied, I was crushed inside. As I dealt with it alone in the middle of the night, I took out and read the notes people wrote about my work at the Art from the Inside events. It is always humbling to read such kind words of encouragement; it helped and did not allow my hope to fade on any level. I am grateful and hope for its expansion, as it is crucial to many aspects of life behind bars. The negative stigma attached to this environment is changing, and the opportunities for success in communities and acceptance are growing. And all thanks to Art from the inside.

Sincerely,
Roberto Lopez-Rios
3-6-23

