

## **Making coaching available to the Seven Billion: Coach Training in CA State Men's Prison in Lancaster**

On January 22-23, Amanda Berger and Damon Azali-Rojas delivered a two-day Coaching Essentials (CE) to 26 prisoners in California State Men's Prison in Lancaster. These are some reflections

### **From Damon. Walking in: A Black man's perspective**

About 12 years ago I was a grassroots organizer in charge of developing a new campaign to target the mass incarceration of Black and Latino communities. Our campaign team consulted with criminal justice reform advocates who suggested we go one of three ways: A) target the apparatuses that conveyor belt people into prison, B) address issues of dignity and redemption inside prison, or C) create safety structures for those reentering society.

Our campaign chose option A, by targeting LA City truancy ticket laws. These \$250 - \$1000 tickets were almost entirely on the backs of youth of color. Most students were late to school because of public transit decisions that reduced the number of buses and increased overcrowding so that 2-3 buses would pass by students before they could board one. When they finally got to school, LA City Police and LA County Sheriffs were out front as they walked in handcuffing them and writing them tickets. These tickets would later result in more fees, suspended licenses and added strikes against young Black and Brown students. It took over five years, but with the support of many allies we changed the LA Municipal code to almost entirely eliminate these types of tickets.

I share all of this because since I started organizing against the prison industrial complex back in 1998, I had never been inside a prison. **In fact, as a Black man that grew up in South Central Los Angeles I had nightmares about being locked up in prison with no way to get out.** In these dreams I watched as birds flew onto the prison yard and then up over the gates but I could not leave. Embarrassingly, my knowledge of what life was like inside prison walls was from movies and books—until a couple of weeks ago. Thinking about it now, there were some fierce protectors in my head that made me not want to know more.

### **From Amanda**

I turned towards work in the prisons as a result of my own coach certification in 2012. After almost 20 years of work as a community organizer, program officer and coordinator of social justice work, I was seeking work that was more heart centered and connected to people. I fell into a volunteer position at the Prison University Project at San Quentin Prison and ultimately went to work with the [Insight Garden Program](#) where I am now the program director. We work in 8 prisons in California facilitating connection to nature as a source of healing and growth. **I sought the connection and community that I found in prison work and it directed my passion for changing the conditions of incarceration in California.**

It is only natural then, that I would gravitate towards making coaching accessible to communities that were least likely to get the training. I've loved working with social justice folks and helping to lead CE's in the community but I've long harbored a desire to bring a Coaching Essentials inside a prison to train men/women who were in leadership positions to use coaching skills in their work as peer educators, teachers, facilitators and mentors.

I decided that 2018 would be the year to make this happen and put out the call to Damon Azali-Rojas in LA to discuss the possibility of bringing Coaching Essentials to Lancaster State Prison to their level 3 yard where we also run the Insight Garden Program. He enthusiastically answered yes to my call to action.

### **Stepping inside the prison gates**

The day of the training, we wait for Dave Mashore to escort us in. Dave is the ED of the Catalyst Foundation and the coordinator for the Insight Garden Program at the prison. He has clearance to walk us through the multiple gates, electrified fences and past guard towers with sharp shooters. We walk for a long while inside the compound to get to Yard A.

As we enter the final gate to the yard, there are all kinds of signs telling visitors to stay at least five feet away from the fence (supposedly for our own safety). Dave leads us into a building labeled “Education.” We walk by several “1970 style” classrooms that are empty until we get to the room where we will be doing the training. As we enter there are over twenty men already sitting in the circle waiting for us. They have been up since 5:30am. Damon follows Amanda’s lead and they shake hands with and introduce themselves to all the men-- which in and of itself is moving. One by one we introduce ourselves to every person in the room. Every one makes intentional and direct eye contact.

We put up our post-it charts with the day’s agenda and we start.

## **Yard A**

Lancaster State Prison seemed like the perfect place to pilot a CE and to see how useful it might be to men inside, many of who have spent decades in prison. Yard A is an unusual prison yard that focuses on programming for people serving life sentences or serving life without parole. This is a yard that houses 600 men all committed to programming, service to one another and who have given up gangs and prison politics.

The men in the room are the facilitators of most of the programming on Yard A. They lead various groups like the [Insight Garden Program](#) (planting, composting and pruning in the garden and inside ourselves); [Paws For Life](#) (training program to ready formerly homeless dogs to serve as specially-trained companions for military veterans coping with PTSD); Bare Bones Society (you bare your truth and seek self forgiveness), and Convicts Reaching Out to People (working with young people on the outside to attempt to make amends to society in general). You can see the yard and several of the men that we trained in the HBO documentary [Toe Tag Parole](#).

## **How was this CE different?**

All 26 men sitting in the circle when we walked in were ready to work. In the group we had two Asian men, one Indigenous, three white, three Latino and the rest were Black. About 1/3 of the participants are life without parole and most of the room had already served over 20 years inside. In one case, a participant had been in solitary confinement for 17 years in Pelican Bay before his transfer to Lancaster Prison.

Throughout the two days of training, the attentiveness, focus, appreciation and seriousness with which the men engaged with the work was truly amazing. Their intention to learn the skills and then to use them in the context of their work in prison was clear. ***Compared to all the other coach trainings we’ve done, there has never, we repeat never been a CE like this one.*** Unlike other trainings, there was no ambivalence about how to use coaching skills—it was just deciding where and when they would put them to use.

The men treated the program with the utmost care, quickly taking to our work and approach. We spoke in passing about things like group coaching, using coaching as a mediation tool to stop violence or the neurobiology of coaching and each time they heard a new concept or idea they asked us for a little more detail. There was a readiness. There was immediate and palpable value in what they were learning.

Many of the men have known each other for years, yet we were still surprised to see the comradery, the tenderness and the support they showed each other. When we did the acknowledgement exercise we assumed that they would not be willing to turn their backs to each other (given longstanding prison taboos). They were more than happy to take the risk and offer authentic acknowledgements. We were deeply touched by the kindness that they showed each other and impressed by the vulnerability that they expressed. They understand that it is through vulnerability that people build deeper connections.

Our circle process yielded a great conversation about the way that coaching could be useful and not so useful in a prison setting. The men talked about lack of trust, machismo (hyper masculinity), and prison politics (gang and

race divisions) as real impediments for using coaching and more intimate forms of communication inside. But they also were able to shift to where it might be useful—the ways that empowering questions and deep listening might open up thinking amongst younger men, the ways it would energize groups and how it could generate greater hope, communication, possibility, and new solutions to old problems. They also spoke about the life affirming qualities of coaching—the way that coaching honors the wisdom that they hold and their value despite whatever harm they caused in the past or the trauma they’ve experienced. As one man told us—“This is so esteeming, the fact that you would bring this level of training in affirms my value and makes me feel like I have something to offer the world.”

### **The clarity of their coach’s stands**

We shared our coaching stands with the group and then asked the men to take time to develop their own stand, stance and metaphor. In less than 30 minutes, without wavering, no first drafts, no “I’m still working on it”, the men came up with some drop-your-jaw coaching stands. No doubt the clarity of these came from the years that these men have been in prison and their own process of reflection, faith and struggle. We were both astounded and humbled by the beauty of these stands. Here are just a few:

“I believe that human beings have the ability to transform their lives for the better.”

Metaphor: Millions saw the apple, Newton asked why

Stance: Relaxed but attentive, one hand in pocket on belt loop in a non-threatening position while maintaining eye contact

“I believe that human beings have the ability to come back from devastating circumstances and become their best selves.”

Metaphor: Like a bamboo stalk, strong and flexible. However, when they are put together they are unbreakable.

Stance: To stand tall and grounded sturdy with back straight, chin high, knees stable, unbreakable.

“I believe that human beings have the ability to love deeply and care gently.”

Metaphor: Waves of emotions going from source to source.

Stance: My stance is a circle on equal footing, leaning into the stance (hands in a circle).

“I believe that humans have the ability to love unconditionally.”

Metaphor: A phoenix –things that happened in the past are small compared to what is going on in you right now.

Stance: Hand in hand

“Meet people where they are because human beings have the ability to change their character into something or someone God intended them to be.”

Metaphor: Artichoke

Stance: Hands at side, feet crossed at ankle.

“Hate was too great a burden to bare so I chose love. (MLK)”

Metaphor: Circle (oneness)

Stance: Hands up by head, standing.

“I believe that people have the power to bring heaven and earth within their heart, mind and soul.”

Metaphor: Adam and Eve with peace and in garden Eden.

Stance: Side to side, shoulder to shoulder

“I believe that human beings have the ability to transcend the limits of humanity.”

Metaphor: The imagery of innumerable birds flying in complete coherence.

Stance: Head down (humbled) and arms open to invite a hug.

“I believe that human beings have the ability grow into their best self.”

Metaphor: A mustard seed that grows into a huge tree.

Stance: The American Sign Language sign for “life”.

**A Transformational Experience (From Damon):** For those of you who have gone through a major life experience or transition... initiation into a spiritual tradition, becoming a parent for the first time... there is a part of you that is not the same as you were before the event. You just see everything about the world differently. **Going into this prison and meeting these men was one of the top five most transformative things that I have experienced in this lifetime.** I don't know what will fruit from it but I do know that I am not done with the prison. I am hooked. I don't think that I could leave this world having only been in there for two days training.

**Race, Power, Privilege and Gender (From Amanda):** As a white women who works in the prison on a regular basis I know that most of the outside people that the men inside engage with are not people of color. While the administration and officers at Lancaster might be black and brown, many of the volunteers are not. So coming in with Damon felt really significant to me. It was pretty clear that that the men felt a deep sense of appreciation, curiosity, and solidarity with Damon. It offered them hope to see a black man with so much expertise and spirit—and they could see parts of themselves in him. They could see their brilliance and possibility reflected in Damon.

### **So what are the possibilities?**

Yard A was created as an alternative to other level 4 yards where violence, prison politics, chaos and stress rule the way that men interact with each other. Of the 26 men in our group, a third are life without parole—meaning that they will never go home unless the governor commutes them or there is a change in laws. The other two-thirds are serving life sentences of at least 25 years. So how might coaching be helpful in this environment? The men were able to name a few significant ways including:

- Coaching for conflict resolution
- Because there are a number of prisoners that already confide in us daily and we can really get folks engaged in finding solutions for themselves
- Cultivating relationships, creating trust and fostering independence and self-reliance
- Disarming machismo (about 4 people said this)
- Working with Veterans with PTSD and making me a better teacher
- Help the outside see that we have value and worth
- To bring peace to ourselves by giving back to the communities that we tore down...now to rebuild
- Connecting to needs to create a different environment, helping to change prison culture, reducing violence
- Identifying the root cause of trauma

### **From Damon**

There is so much to say and I feel that I am rambling but I will end with these three things. First, as an Ifa priest that leads a temple I talk about hope, redemption, love, faith, gratitude and spiritual elevation all the time. All the boxes in which I held those ideas, concepts and definitions have had their bottoms dropped out. It is like when the first astronauts got into orbit and got a chance to look at the whole of planet Earth. There is so much more space to ponder and dream with. I need to recalibrate what those words mean to me now. My former definitions seem so surface at the moment.

Secondly, I am truly convinced that this is the on the ground manifestation of LTW's idea to coach the 7 billion people in the world. Not only is it flipping the script about who is of value and worth, it is simultaneously engages the most impacted, rocketing the expansion of coaching applicability. At the same time, it gears up some of the most inspiring and real people that I have ever met.

Finally, we give our deepest appreciation for all the generous gifts and heartfelt well wishes. There were so many people that made this training possible. So on behalf of Amanda and myself, Dave, Tobias, Dara, Justin, Lou, Slim, Christian, Chris, TS, Clayton, Dortell, Jamala, John, Lindsey, Rich, Jessie, Allen, Bryan, Victor, Kory, Heard, Bo, Quinton, Joel, Bryant, Lee, and Floyd...

THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU

**From Amanda**

Thanks to Belma who kindly put out the call to LTW faculty for funding. We got an immediate and wonderful response and raised \$1800 from faculty and LTW. A deep bow of gratitude to all of you who supported this project. Thanks to Dave Mashore, our liaison at Lancaster Prison who made the training happen and supported us with 100% of his spirit and mind. And of course a full appreciation to Damon for the expertise, spirit and leadership that he embodied at the actual training

It is often hard to go home and leave people locked inside. Leaving this training my heart was full and also heavy.

When I drove out of the prison, I took a left down a long, country road. I stopped and walked a bit into the desert. I sat looking in the direction of the prison. I held the faces of the men in the group and I breathed in the metta kindness meditation that I call on so much these days—May they be happy, May they be healthy, May they be free of harm.... May they be happy, may they be healthy, may they be free of harm...