

**Alex Johnson:** ... “Why am I trying to give, when no one gives me a try? Why am I dying to live if I’m just living to die?” I didn’t write those words. Those are the words from a hook of a song written by 2Pac & Biggie called *Runnin’*. And the song resonates with me because a number of years ago, a few years ago, I was in a juvenile probation camp in Los Angeles County.

I hail from Los Angeles County president of the County Board of Education in LA. LA County has the largest juvenile justice system in the nation, 14 camps, 3 halls; used to serve 21,000 young people, 17,000 young people on a formal probation in LA County.

And I was sitting in a camp one day talking to a young man who looked like me, sitting across from him having an awkward conversation. I didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know what to say; trying to make small talk. And finally I asked him, “What type of music do you like?” I love music, love rap music, love jazz, classical, opera, you name it. So, we could talk about music. So, we started talking about music and he tells me that his favorite rapper is 2Pac. I say, “Great. Wow.” I thought it would be one of these other rappers like Future or someone like that. He said 2Pac. I said, “Great.” So, we’re starting to connect. What song do you like? What’s your favorite rap song? And he starts by quoting those lyrics. “Why am I running to live, when I’m just living to die?” And it spoke to me and it continues to speak to me as I do some of the work that I do in Los Angeles County, in the state of California working on justice reform.

This young man, this African American male, 16-17 years of age who was faced with what seemed almost like an insurmountable trauma, felt his life was over. And so, I think about that story. I think about that young man when I think about the arts and the power of the arts to heal; the power of the arts to change lives; the power of the arts to be transformative.

I think about the arts as really a key critical strategy to dismantle and to change the school to prison pipeline. This young man was, as I learned more about him subsequently, had been pushed out of school, had been in 12 or 13 schools, had been in almost an equal number of foster homes, had been diagnosed with every single behavioral disorder you could imagine. And I went back one day and had a longer time speaking with him. His sentence had been extended for one reason or another. And this time, we actually had a longer conversation where he started to talk about his childhood. He’d seen his mom get killed by his father, and then he’d subsequently seen his father get murder as well. So, this young man had no outlet in a camp, in a facility, in a cage, locked down, unable to express and to articulate the pain and the trauma and the hurt that he had felt for so many years.

And his story is similar to so many others like him in LA County right there in those 14 probation camps, those 3 juvenile halls; young men and women whose voices have been suppressed, who have been silenced, who have been rendered throwaways, whose stories are never told.

And so, a few years ago, the Children's Defense Fund-California partnered with an organization that was doing this thing named Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network. I formerly served as executive director of Children's Defense Fund-California and my good friend, Kaile Schilling, came to me with what I call a "Kaile idea." Everybody say, "Kaile idea."

**Participants:** Kaile idea.

**Alex Johnson:** She may have an idea for you over these next two days, and so get ready for something that she may come with. But, Kaile came to me with an idea. She said, "Why don't we look into this program called Freedom Schools, a five-six week summer literacy program, with some arts programming, and then, Alex, why don't you help pay for it through a sub-grant potentially." And so, I said, "Sure." I do whatever Kaile asks me to do most times. And the AIYN came in and Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network, for those who don't know, is a collaboration of nine organizations who provide programming in our juvenile camps and halls in LA County. And so, they came in this summer. And so, literacy, reading books, read aloud, all that was during the day and the arts was the after school piece.

There was complete skepticism from the probation officers, complete skepticism; didn't think these kids wanted to do art; didn't think these kids had anything to say; wanted to just keep the status quo in place, young people marching around in formation listening to orders, just rendered silent and voiceless. So, Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network came in, provided programming and more than provided programming; they trained probation officers. And so, you had this cadre of probation officers who had been stoically steadfast in their resistance to anything progressive in the camps; stoically steadfast in their resistance, utter resistance to anything progressive in the camps. If it wasn't militarized, if it wasn't about young people lining up, then they weren't about it.

And so, they trained these young people. Folks thought arts was dumb. They thought the kids were dumb. They thought we were dumb for doing it. But, they brought them into this space and then they saw the products that the kids and the artwork that the kids produced. They saw these beautiful murals on walls. They saw and heard the stories that young people articulated through spoken word, through poetry. They saw the

depictions of the lives that these young people had had through stories, through drawings, through all mediums.

And there was a conversion that began to take place where these stoically steadfast, resistant to anything that wasn't about the status quo officers began to actually change and see these young people for who they were, young people, youth who are ready and able to thrive.

And so for me, when I think about the arts, when I think about Creative Youth Development, whatever you may call it and whatever form or fashion you practice it in, I see it having the absolute potential to change lives and to change the trajectory of systems. That's what we're doing in LA County. We are trying to use the arts as a lever, as a vehicle to change a system that has been in place for decades by showing and telling these stories of hope, of healing, of redemption, of love and bringing in caring adults into the space and modeling that for the actors who have been in the system for so many years. It's an amazing, amazing experience.

But, we have so much more work to do. And so, I want to leave you with a couple of numbers as you think about this intersection between the arts and justice reform, the arts and changing systems. California is the ninth largest or sixth largest economy in the world, \$9 trillion annually. Piper's giving me the signal; \$11.5 billion spent on CDCR, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, annually. Two hundred and thirty-three thousand dollars a year is spent on incarcerating a young person in a juvenile justice facility annually. A hundred and forty-two million dollars is spent annually to fund the Department of Juvenile Justice in the state of California. Seventy-six thousand dollars is spent annually to house an adult inmate in a prison. Twelve thousand dollars is spent annually to educate a young person. Twenty-two prisons, one university, one UC, University of California, university has been built since 1980, and we have not used a fraction of those dollars to fund arts education. So, we have work to do, but I think the future is bright and there are lots of opportunities to help heal, to help rebuild, to help restore young people so that they can thrive. Thank you.