

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

Woman prisoner
finds the light
through her art

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By Lisa Reisman
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ESSEX - When Lynda Gardner first saw the tiny, dank cell at Niantic's York Correctional Institution for Women, she thought her life was over. The divorced mother of five and grandmother of nine was 56 and facing a 15-year sentence.

Four years earlier, someone gifted Gardner a day of fun at Mohegan Sun. She had empty-nest syndrome, she said. She was lonely. She won big. She was hooked. Before long, she was playing nine machines at once. The casino offered her a free suite and limo service so she could gamble whenever she wanted. She accepted.

"It was all about getting that half-second rush, trying to satisfy a deep pit in your skull that you just never can," the intense, angular 62-year-old told a group of 40 at a recent exhibition of her drawings at the Essex Library.

To feed that deep pit, she sold her car, pawned her jewelry, then her mother's, all the while cutting herself off from her family. Once everything was gone, she turned to crime. She stole hundreds of thousands of dollars. Then she got caught. She was charged with six felonies, including first-degree larceny.

During her first six months



During Lynda Gardner's first six months in prison, she "saw no light," she recalled, sitting in her airy, peaceful New London studio. Above, she is at an exhibit of her work at the Essex Library. Photo by Peter Casolino.

Light: Former woman prisoner gets her life back through art

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in prison, she "saw no light," she recalled, sitting in her airy, peaceful New London studio. She would sit on her narrow cot, "waiting for nothing," and think of ways to kill herself. There were days she didn't get out of bed. She had few visitors. From them, she heard about the deep shame her youngest son felt about what she had done. Her only consolation was a weekly Wednesday night Bible Studies class. But some weeks the class would be randomly cancelled.

Then Gardner learned of a writing workshop led by the author Wally Lamb. It had an impossibly long waiting list and required her to submit three stories and to win unanimous acceptance by the class. She requested a pen. She got a stubby pencil that caused blisters to form on her fingers as she worked on her stories.

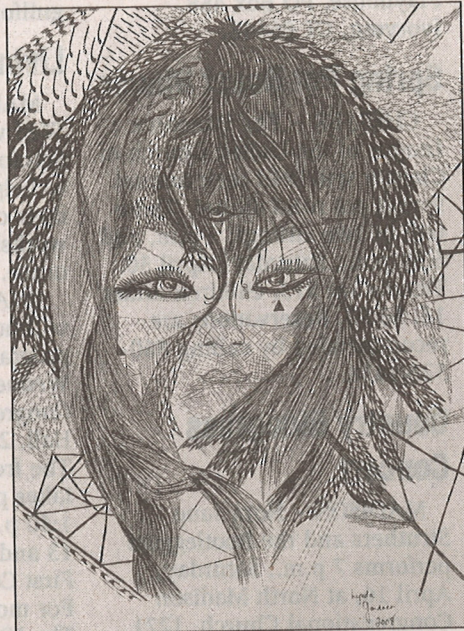
Around that time, someone mentioned the prison arts program. Gardner said she wasn't interested. She couldn't even draw a stick figure, she insisted. Then the friend told Gardner she'd get a pen if she took the class. Gardner enrolled.

"Just draw lines," she remembered the teacher, Jeffrey Greene, saying when she announced she had only come for a pen so she could write stories. "See what happens."

Gardner went with it—and she hasn't stopped since. Sure, she had a certain creative streak when it came to cooking and was known for her elaborate gingerbread houses at Christmastime; yes, she had doodled and drawn "silly" pictures for her children when they were growing up. But she'd never had any formal training. Besides, she'd always considered herself "too stupid and too dull" to amount to anything other than a good mother. It was only when Greene challenged her to stay in the class that she began to

sense what she could do and who she could be.

"Drawing opened up a whole new world," said Gardner. "It released something that had been locked up my whole life." Greene, who's been working with inmates in the Community Partners in Action's prison arts program for 16 years of its 34-year his-



There are women, their mouths veiled, barbed wire over their throats; they personify "the way prison takes away your voice." Photo by Peter Casolino.

tory, agreed. "The talent Lynda had from the start was the courage to lose herself to the drawing – not to worry about the opinions of others ... just go for it," he said.

Soon Gardner was spending hours and hours on highly detailed black-and-white drawings. On every surface of her cell – the floor, a ledge

that served as a table – and often by the dim light from the hall – she poured herself into increasingly complex works. There are women, their mouths veiled, barbed wire over their throats; they personify, according to Michelle Lucier, Gardner's close friend and a former York inmate, "the way prison takes away your voice."

The wings of swarming birds protecting children reflect how, when Gardner was young, she pretended she "could fly away and escape the dangers of her life." And the charging horses represent energy, "the power to break free of the past."

As she developed as an artist, Greene said, "Lynda realized she was more than just her physical self, dealing with the day in and day out of life. Her drawings are evidence that there was a huge well of substance, thought, and feeling inside of her just waiting to be tapped."

The woman who had spent years erasing herself in the fantasy world of the casino and the desolation of a prison cell was painting murals of soothing underwater scenes on the walls of the crisis room, using her long hair for brushes when prison authorities refused her request.

"Women need to see beauty," she said. "It makes them feel better." She got involved with Chrysalis, a women's prison ministry program designed to encourage faith and commitment to productive lifestyles. And she pushed successfully to have a problem gambling group at York.

Not least, she was invited to join Wally Lamb's writing

workshop. When she read aloud to the group "Broken Doll," an account of the sexual abuse she suffered as a child and its effects on her life, the acclaimed writer stood up, took off his glasses, and clapped. "Broken Doll" was among the selections published by Harper Collins in Lamb's 2007 "I'll Fly Away." She also penned 22 journals documenting the prison conditions she encountered at York. She plans to publish them.

"I want to be a voice for the women still there," Gardner said who, since her release in October 2009, has become active in prison reform. "And with my art and writing I want to make people outside the

prison system aware of what's going on."

She's followed through. In the last year, she's created a backdrop for a play enacting stories written by York inmates and performed by Wesleyan University students and former prisoners. She frequently has spoken about gambling addiction and her own life. And her exhibition, currently at Essex Library, will be traveling to libraries throughout the state.

"The act of expressing myself through art has been a healing process," Gardner said near the end of her talk at Essex Library. With that, she pointed at an empty tear under a woman's eye in one of her drawings. "For me, tears sym-

bolize healing. If you hold in your tears, they become toxic. If you can't cry, you can't heal." She paused, as if to collect herself. "Look at this tear," she said. "No fluid. That means she's getting all the crying out. She's going to be okay."

Lynda Gardner's artwork will be exhibited at the Community Partners in Action Prisons Arts Program Annual Show at the John Slade Ely House, 51 Trumbull, New Haven from May 8 to May 29. Reception on Sunday, May 15. For more information, contact CPA Prison Arts Program Manager Jeffrey Greene at cpaprisonarts@earthlink.net or visit Elyhouse.org.



Lynda Gardner says she wants to be a "voice" for women who are still in prison through her art and her writing. Above, she talks with patrons at the Essex Library during her exhibit. Photo by Peter Casolino.