

Prison chat with boy murderer inspires prof to write drama

BY ELISE STOLTE, EDMONTON JOURNAL FEBRUARY 19, 2010



Prof. Diane Conrad, who spent three years going into the young offender centre regularly to research her play called Athabasca's Going Unmanned, is interviewed at the University of Alberta drama studio as actors rehearse on stage.

Photograph by: Ed Kaiser, The Journal, Edmonton Journal

The boy Diane Conrad met in prison seemed friendly and generous.

So she was shocked when she read in the newspaper he was being sentenced in adult court, for murder.

"I couldn't even talk about it on the phone; just disbelief," said the University of Alberta drama and education professor, who needed support from a colleague just to go back and face the boy again.

"But funny enough, when we did have our next session and the youth was there, it was just very normal. When you're face to face with a person it's very different."

Conrad spent three years volunteering weekly at the young offenders centre, trying to understand why kids fall into that downward spiral. She turned her research into a play about two boys planning a prison

break, which was performed this week on campus.

LAST SHOWINGS TODAY

The last showings are today at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. in the north tower of the education building.

For Conrad, continuing with her research after realizing such friendly, nice kids were also thieves and murderers meant coming to grips with her own capacity for evil, she said.

"Human to human, we're all capable of doing those kinds of things. Somewhere inside of us, just like somewhere inside of that kid, there was something that led to that behaviour.

"If people are not willing to see that, they're not being honest."

Conrad doesn't feel comfortable speaking from the perspective of a victim of crime, even though she had a gun pointed at her head while working in Africa, and had her house broken into while she was a teacher in a small Northwest Territories town. But she has never lost someone she loves to murder.

But she was troubled as a youth and said researchers would have labelled her as "at risk. I was on the border. I could have gone either way."

Several of her friends died before reaching adulthood, and she remembers one accident in particular where the car nearly rolled off a cliff. The friend she was driving with was drunk.

"I could have easily been killed in that car accident," she said.

Those memories shape her research now, and for years she's been trying to understand what makes one young person spiral into crime and poverty, while another with a similar background will go on to have healthy families and legitimate careers.

HELPS YOUTHS WITH SKITS

When she works with youth, she helps them develop skits and stories to talk about their lives. For her master's research, she worked with youth in a Northland School in northern Alberta. After she got a job at the university, she decided to turn her attention to young people in prison.

What does save youth from spiralling downward? "Relationships with adults," she said. "That needs to happen. There needs to be real sincere caring and personal one-on-one interactions with adults."

In her own life as a first generation German immigrant, she rebelled and couldn't connect with her parents.

It was her drama teacher who showed her someone cared, as well as a woman whose kids she used to babysit. "They were a surrogate family. That was the personal connection I made."

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