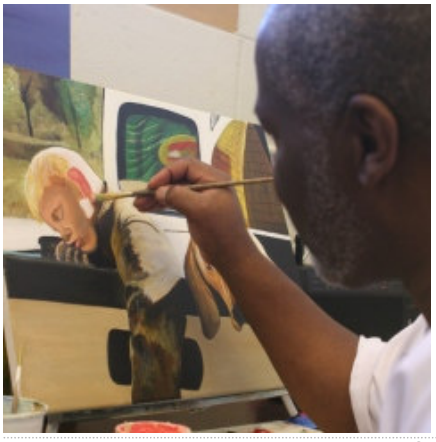
# Convicts find peace, purpose in art

By Jen Rini

**Published:** Monday, November 15, 2010
**Updated:** Monday, November 15, 2010 22:11



Lauren Scher

Gerald Collins teaches art to other inmates.

WILMINGTON—The prisoners at James T. Vaughn Correctional Center have been called a lot of things in their lifetime—kidnapper, rapist and criminal. But now some can be known as artists.

Gerald Collins, 55, originally from Detroit, has been at the correctional center for 20 years. Known colloquially as Honcho or "Honch" to the inmates, Collins has been involved with the Correctional Arts Program since he came to the facility, first as a student, and now as a teacher.

"When I started, I was just a student here and Roy Hickman was the instructor here, and when I came in I was one of them people who were just really inquisitive and wanted to continue to learn the craft," Collins says.

In order to get to the small art room where Collins teaches, visitors and inmates navigate through 21 metal sliding gates in the prison, with a correctional officer standing at attention at almost every barrier. Inmates meander by; some engage in a pick-up game of soccer, others carry trays of food to be washed and put away.

"It's like the ‘Shawshank Redemption' up in here," says Carmita Kelly, Correctional Arts Program Coordinator, with a chuckle.

The bubbly and cheerful Kelly, 50, is known as the boss of the art program in the correctional facility. She is in charge of facilitating the program, getting students into the classes and collecting supplies.

"It's an opportunity to give them another avenue of channeling energies, energies that would otherwise be spent not so nice," Kelley says.

She says she nurtures the inmates and encourages them to draw. Kelley says she wants to make them as happy as they can possibly be under their circumstances. She also says the art program gives prisoners a useful skill if they are released.

Prisoners are accepted into the program under the conditions of good behavior and a review of their records. The program currently has 46 prisoner-artists engaged in basic and advanced courses.

Collins arrived at the correctional center after being convicted of kidnapping and rape, but says his passion for art has helped his rehabilitation.

Kelly appointed him as the new teacher for the art program after the previous teacher was released.

"Collins, he just loves to draw to paint, if it brings him something that's fine, if it doesn't that's fine too, but he

would continue on, if it didn't bring him a dime," Kelly says.

Before his incarceration, Collins was enthusiastic about art in the late 1980s when he was in his home state of Michigan. He says he believes his artistic talent is a god given gift.

"I was back in prison in Michigan in 1987, and my mother sent me a picture of this, she had gotten it from the Philadelphia Museum of Art and asked me if I could find somebody to draw that picture," Collins says. "I sat down with a pencil and piece of paper, and I drew the picture."

In the prison, there are basic art classes that focus on learning beginning art techniques, manipulating circles and squares and forming a painting. The advanced classes, Collins says, are for people who are knowledgeable about art and have financial ambitions for their future.

Collins's assistant teacher is Joseph Walker, 44, from Dover. Walker was convicted for his use of narcotics and was sent to Correctional Center.

"I was a drug dealer for the most part—fast money," Walker says.

Unlike Collins, who has had some former experience with art, Walker's passion for art took hold during prison.

"I just picked up a pencil one day bored, and started drawing," he says.

Walker says he values art's therapeutic qualities; it is a stress reliever and eases his mind. He says he would like to see the institution make the classes mandatory. Walker's favorite pieces to draw are ocean scenes, he says. Walker says it took a long time, but after mastering technique, he was able to create beauty.

"You gotta get it just right," Walker says.

For his own artwork, Collins channels his nostalgia of his past artistic endeavors. He says he loves to draw children and older people for the sheer fact that they are so relatable.

"This kid right here that I am doing here, it takes me back to when I used to watch my little son sleep and the dog he always had," he says with his paintbrush precariously balancing between his index finger and thumb as he points to his current painting.

The painting shows a young boy and his dog resting in the back of a car. The flaxen-haired boy is resting peacefully on his hands, and the dog is in a parallel position sleeping next to him. At the moment the details aren't all there, Collins says, but the craftsmanship is.

"I want you to see his eyelashes and everything, the inside of his ear," he says.

Collins says he's inspired by everything he sees, but ultimately strives to make his pictures look as real as possible. When he stands back, he wants to see a photograph, but when viewing the painting up close, the detail is striking.

"I'm a real, unorthodox type artist," Collins says. "I mess up to make up. What I mean by that, I can see the picture, and I can see the shades and colors and I'll add that in, and I'll do little variations of things I see."

Over the years, Kelley says there have been talented artists that have come through the system. She features their works in initiatives to get the word out about the art program at the correctional center. She says the works often leave people flabbergasted after hearing it was created by inmates.

"It's inmate art and it's jaw dropping," Kelly says.

She says introducing inmates to drawing is a small endeavor, but it is a significant step in making a life for them. There is much joy in the ability to create art and obtain money from it legally, Kelley says.

# Convicts find peace, purpose in art

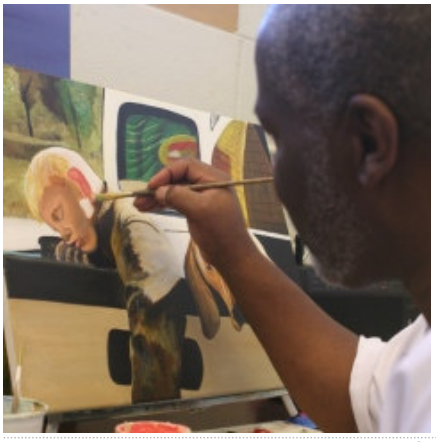
By Jen Rini

**Published:** Monday, November 15, 2010
**Updated:** Monday, November 15, 2010 22:11

"I like to treat to them as human despite the fact that they are human and incarcerated," she says. "The system has placed them at the facility and now it's my turn to rehab them."

As much as possible, Collins tries to incorporate his family into his artwork. He has four daughters and a son.  His grandson plays wide receiver for Michigan State.  His son is a minister.

"I didn't know I wanted to be an artist, I wanted to be a criminal," he says. "A criminal, because I didn't know nothing else."



Lauren Scher

Gerald Collins teaches art to other inmates.

« Previous 1 2