

EDUCATION

# Formerly incarcerated fathers write and perform play about the justice system



The piece "A Man Like Me" was initially co-written by four formerly incarcerated fathers. Since the project's beginning, two of the men had to leave because they got jobs, and two actors took their place. "At the end, I want you to look at all four of us like we're the same," participant Derrick Hill said. [CARLA JAVIER/KPCC](#)

**Carla Javier** | January 24, 2018

A group of formerly incarcerated fathers are bringing their experiences to the stage with a show they wrote called "A Man Like Me."

At a recent rehearsal in Atwater Village, one of the actors asked why they had to sit so close together for a scene set in jail.

"We'd be talking and people would always try to come up and hang on the end of the bed," 54-year-old Derrick Hill told him, remembering his own experiences behind bars.

That's the point of the play: to help people who have been incarcerated transition from inside of prison to outside and share their experiences. The collaboration received a [Re-Entry Through the Arts Grant](#) from the California Arts Council.

To receive one of the pilot program's grants, programs had to show they would "help inmates transition from incarceration back into their communities and prevent those on probation, parole, or post-release community supervision from being incarcerated."

For Hill, the experience has been difficult.



Derrick Hill said it's painful to act out the events that led to his time in jail, but that it's worth it if it changes at least one person in the audience's life for the better. [CARLA JAVIER/KPCC](#)

"We have a part of the show where I actually demonstrate the reason I went to prison," he said. "Involuntary vehicular manslaughter."

Even though the incident happened 11 years ago, the section of the play where the other three actors sit as if in a car as he narrates the events leading up to the crash is still hard for him.

From the performance:

When I found out the driver's wife had died I went into shock.  
 The doctor said, "It's not your fault, man, he was drunk."  
 Two years later, around my daughter's birthday, I got pulled over and was told I had a warrant.

"Every time I even talk about it or say it in the play or rehearse it or read it, it just brings up that moment again," Hill explained.

But, he said, it's important to do if it helps people understand life behind bars – and after, too.

"You never know who you're going to touch," Hill said.



Derrick Hill and Kentrell Antoine act out a scene in "A Man Like Me" where men in jail read and write letters to loved ones outside. [CARLA JAVIER/KPCC](#)

Another participant in the program, Kentrell Antoine, had never acted before, but he said he hopes stakeholders watch and reflect on the show's themes.

"I want everybody: preachers, judges, lawyers, producers," said Antoine. "I want all of them to watch it so they can feel the effect of what we've been through."

Susie Tanner, of [TheaterWorkersProject](#), collaborated with teaching artists, Friends Outside in Los Angeles County, and Dads Back! Academy to put on the shows. She said she thinks people like the formerly incarcerated men she worked with are unfairly judged by society.

"They're seen as less than. They're seen as people who are throwaways," Tanner said. "I'm a firm believer in restorative justice. I believe in second chances, and I believe every human being should have the right to redefine their story."

Empowering them to share their experiences through theater was one way to do this, Tanner said.

Hill, who was involved in theater in his youth, hopes that by the end of the show, the audiences see the incarcerated men as regular people.

"You have two actually convicted convicts, and you have two guys acting," he said.

"And at the end, I want you to look at all four of us like we're the same."