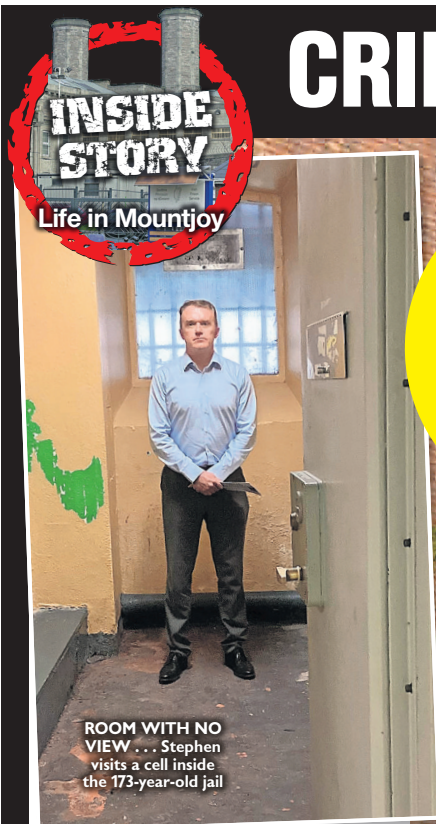


# CRIME EDITOR STEPHEN BREEN ENTERS PRISON TO MEET INMATES



**INSIDE STORY**  
Life in Mountjoy

ROOM WITH NO VIEW... Stephen visits a cell inside the 173-year-old jail

Mountjoy jail was opened in 1850 and has capacity to hold 755 prisoners

By STEPHEN BREEN, Crime Editor

**THERE** are locked doors and security cameras between me and the outside world.

On my way into the building, I pass through a metal detector – but my destination isn't a boarding gate at Dublin Airport.

Instead, I'm sitting in a small room with ten inmates from Dublin's Mountjoy Prison, several of whom I know well – because I've written about their crimes in the past. Or, at least, I thought I knew them well.

Over the course of the afternoon, I would engage in a series of discussions with individuals I never expected to meet face-to-face in my life.

The meeting had been arranged after Senator Lynn Ruane contacted me in March of this year to ask if I would be willing to meet with a group of inmates in 'The Joy'.

When I asked what the purpose of the meeting was, Senator Ruane explained to me that it was related to the Theatre of the Oppressed project she was running, along with artist Grace Dyas.

As part of their project, the role of the media was to be explored – with the prisoners selecting me as the person they would like to meet.

Another reason for the meeting was to give them an opportunity to question the media's responsibility in shaping how they are perceived by the outside world, especially in terms of labels.

They also wanted to raise the issue of parole and their belief that the media often focuses on their past crimes, rather than their rehabilitation or progress.

Once seated in the room of the jail's Progression Unit, the first words the man sitting next to me said when the discussion started were: "We just want to be treated as human beings."

These words were quickly followed by his assertion that his "hope" was for him to be given a "second chance" in life, along with the other men sat in the room. It was not the type of early exchange I expected. I was

expecting a more hostile reception. In fairness, I would have understood if the inmate had taken a different approach.

After all, nobody wants to see themselves being labelled as "notorious" in a widely-read newspaper.

Once the first inmate had outlined his views, he passed over the beanbag – which was the signal to speak – to another prisoner who then had their turn to speak, and so on.

Another life-sentenced inmate began by telling me that he would have hated journalists in the past, but not any more – as he continued to "heal".

He went on to say how he was undertaking a degree in psychology, did yoga and was determined to make a life for himself after his release from prison.

For me, this was not the angry young man I'd previously written about or seen in court many years ago. He also spoke eloquently

about how he had accepted responsibility for his crime and how he was now focused on helping other young men in the prison system.

I continued to listen intently to the other prisoners, who spoke about their concerns about media representation but also about how no efforts have been made by the State to help hundreds of prisoners to develop and seek a life free of crime.

As the beanbag continued to make its way around the room, it landed on the lap of another life-sentenced prisoner.

The man, who'd been in prison for over 20 years, addressed me by saying: "I don't hate you, but I don't trust you." His

frustrations with the media focused on the fact that any time one of his relatives, including those he hadn't seen in years, appeared in the media, his name was also mentioned.

After spending so long behind bars, the inmate spoke to me about his hopes of creating a family, how he grew up having few opportunities and how he dreams that one day the Parole Board will allow him to reintegrate into society.

He concluded by saying how he had worked hard to heal from past traumas, had "let go of hate" and had no punishment from prisons for many years.

When the beanbag landed on my lap, I



SENATOR... Lynn Ruane

thanked the prisoners for selecting me to hear their concerns, life experiences and hopes. When they asked me if I had "any fears" coming into the prison, we all laughed when I said: "Yes, your man might give me a box."

However, at no stage during our meeting did I really feel threatened or intimidated. In fact, it was the complete opposite. I was made to feel welcomed and respected.

I found them all to be engaging, articulate and passionate about their desire to turn their lives around.

I indicated how, although I could not speak for all journalists, I would take on board their concerns around their right to privacy once they had paid their debt to society, as well as their concerns around the issue of being labelled.

Once I had addressed the group, we moved on to the next phase of our interac-

tion – my participation in one of the role-play scenes they had been working on.

It involved two of the prisoners performing as journalists while another was an inmate who was due for release from prison.

The "journalists" debated their reasons for obtaining the image of the newly-freed prisoner, while he gave reasons why he should be left alone after paying his debt to society.

I then had the chance to play the role of the prisoner, during which I argued about my human rights and my right to privacy.

After spending time with them, I don't know what the

future holds for the men who were in the room that day. I don't have a crystal ball.

But I got a sense that all of them, even by participating in the project, were determined to improve their own lives and the lives of others on the inside.

By engaging in educational courses, training younger prisoners in martial arts, undertaking courses in first aid, I could see the strong desire they had to continue their journey in a positive manner.

Other courses the prisoners engaged in included the Red Cross, Alternatives to Violence programmes, Mental Health first aid, listening courses and the Open University.

I think it's also important for the various stakeholders in the justice system to realise

that exposure to poverty and violence ultimately leads to circumstances where crimes are committed. Reflecting on their pasts, the prisoners believed early intervention was key.

I believe in the justice system. But, often, when I'm writing about it, my focus has been on elevating the voices of victims and trying to meet their needs.

However, I also believe the prison system should not just be seen as a punishment but also as a mechanism which fosters an inmate's capacity to change and rehabilitate with proper support.

I could also see in the prisoners a clear willingness to work hard. They are not obliged to attend school or counselling, but this is something they chose to do.

Reflecting on the experience, I can only thank Senator Ruane and Grace for giving me the opportunity to gain a fascinating insight into life on the inside.



**CONTROL ROOM**

IMPOSING... the Victorian building is a landmark in north Dublin's Phibsborough

WATCHFUL EYE... Stephen steps into the station where prison officers oversee the daily activities of inmates

Cardiac First Responder courses are offered to all inmates in the prison



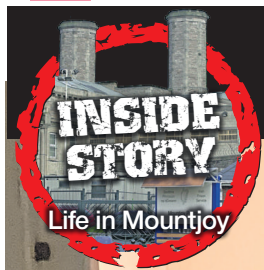
ARTIST... Grace Dyas

# We hope for a life after time in 'Joy'

COMING TOMORROW: WE HEAR THE PRISONERS' PERSONAL STORIES



# CRIME EDITOR STEPHEN BREEN FINDS LIFERS SEEKING SECOND CHANCE



Healing means I've become a better person and I can now be a role model for the next generation.

INSIDE MAN... Stephen inspects the conditions experienced by the 827 prisoners in their cells

EXCLUSIVE by STEPHEN BREEN  
Crime Editor

**A PRISONER** serving life in Dublin's Mountjoy Prison has vowed to improve the lives of younger inmates as part of a specialist arts project in the jail.

The pledge was among the powerful submissions made by six inmates to the audience in the final scene of their Theatre of the Oppressed project, entitled *Pedro's Dream*, in the jail in June. And The Irish Sun was also present to watch an inmate sing to the audience, which included senior gardai, senior Department of Justice figures, leading HSE figures, advocacy groups, senior representatives from the art world, relatives of the inmates and other leading figures from Irish public life.

Another inmate would outline his "hopes" of receiving parole after serving more than 20 years in prison.

The initiative – run by Senator Lynn Ruane and artist Grace Dyas – is based on a social justice theatre methodology created by Brazilian activist Augusto Boal in the 1970s.

It saw the inmates create and direct scenes based on their experiences of life both inside and outside the prison.

Their performances – described by one audience member as one of the "most powerful" productions they had ever seen – also featured their experiences of trauma, the justice system, the Gardaí, the media and other State agencies.

And in his address to the character 'Ireland', played by Fair City actress Neili Conroy, one of the three inmates serving life told how he had now "faced his demons".

He said: "There are no words I can say to take away the pain. When I committed this evil crime I was not myself. I was full of pain and trauma."

"But I have changed and I want you to know I am truly sorry. It's only now that my mind and my emotional awareness is now so concrete, that I realise what I have done."

"I am a grown man who faced his demons head on and explored the dark parts of mind alone in a prison cell."

**'When I asked for help, I was turned away'**

"I want you to help me help the next generation of broken children not cause the pain that I have caused. Don't wait until they take a life in order to find their own just as I have done."

Senator Ruane said: "It is hard to describe how powerful and important the men's final event was."

"They were talented actors, powerful orators and strong social justice advocates – they knocked it out of the park."

"Their six months of development work matched their integrity and honesty in sharing their lives, bringing and immersive experience to people who work in the justice system, elected politicians, heads of state departments and the art world."

"They have so many plans after the success of the work. They want to work with younger men who are struggling, or on a similar path, they plan to use forms of art to have a voice."

In addressing 'Ireland', another inmate spoke of his "healing" process within the walls of the prison and the role that the State has to play in helping inmates rehabilitate into society.

He added: "Are you, Ireland, unquestionably innocent? You have watched as whole communities suffered from poverty, homelessness and addiction."

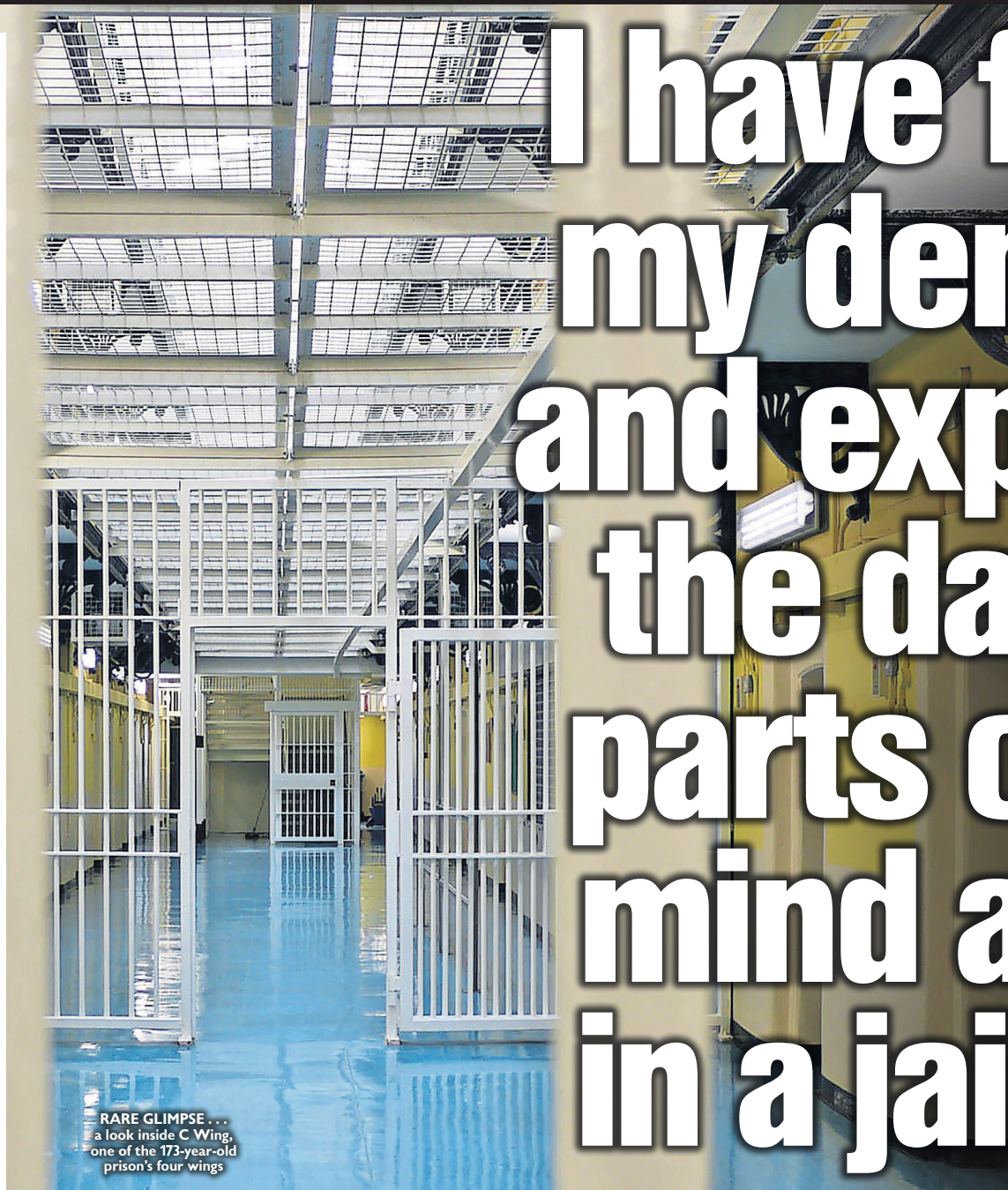
"Should I be ashamed I spent my teenager years contemplating suicide? When I asked for help, I was turned away."

"Healing means I have become a better person who will never harm again. By becoming a person who will not harm others, I can now be a role model for the next generation."

"Becoming a role model means sharing my experiences with the youth so they can avoid the same mistakes. We can't do this alone, Ireland, we need your help."

Before entering the progression unit, audience members were placed into teams and introduced to the character of 'Pedro' – one of the life-sentenced prisoners who explained the rules and process of the production.

Once inside, the teams were given different coloured bibs as two prisoners called out names. The interaction



RARE GLIMPSE... a look inside C Wing, one of the 173-year-old prison's four wings

tion with the inmates showed what it was like for prisoners being brought into the old St Patrick's juvenile prison.

As teams waited to experience the different scenes, one of the inmates read a monologue from 'Pedro'. It featured thoughts from a dream and other experiences of trauma and prison.

The first scene involved Pedro's interaction with the prison governor, who was played by another inmate.

In this scene, Pedro spoke of his hopes of working in the prison garden, only for them to be dashed by the governor, who said he couldn't because of his name.

The next scene would involve Pedro's relationship with the media, with

# I have faced my demons and explored the darker parts of my mind alone in a jail cell

one of the inmates engaging with Neili Conroy, who was posing as an editor determined to obtain an image. This was followed by an interaction between the Justice Minister and his aide, who said it wasn't a good time for Pedro to receive parole.

In this scene, the emphasis was on the Justice Department's view on public perception and also the views shared by the media.

And in another scene in the cell, which focused on the 'language of violence', the issue of aggression in the home emerged when a father attacked Pedro after the Gardaí had called to the family's house.

On this occasion, Criminal Assets Bureau boss Det Chief Supt Michael Gubbins and former HSE CEO Paul Reid also interacted with the scene from their points of view.

A scene involving prison officers using control and restraint on an inmate would also be performed before the audience.

As part of the project, special 'installations' were held in the showers, lockers and rooms of the facility. They included a video of Pedro

freezing in an isolation unit and messages inside the lockers that included words such as 'hitman' and 'suicide'.

Headphones were also installed in the showers with voice messages of the prisoners speaking about their experiences of trauma as children and their hope for the future.

Once the scenes had been completed, the audience was then brought to the church as 'Pedro' spoke to 'Ireland' as part of a restorative justice dream.

Artist Grace Dyas said: "The one thing that I learned from the project is that it affirms my belief that so many behind bars were destined to become incredible artists had they not been failed by the State."

"Many working class communities are actively blocked from expressing themselves through art."

"I'm left wondering what Pedro's life would have been like if they had been allowed access to the arts at a young age."

"What would their lives have been like if they had been given access to the arts at a

young age?" Mountjoy Prison Governor Eddie Mullins described the project as "unique".

He added: "The Theatre of the Oppressed was very powerful indeed. It gave great insights into perspectives of the impact oppression can have within our communities and how that affects people's lives and the paths it can lead you down."

Irish Prison Service Director General Caron McCaffrey said: "Everyone in custody returns to their community at some stage. It's the role of the IPS to work constructively with those in custody to address the risk factors that have led to their offending so that they are unlikely to offend and create further victims of crime on release."

"For many, those risk factors include adverse childhood incidents, trauma, addiction and mental health issues."

"Where a person has worked hard to address the factors that led to their offending, it is important that they are given a second chance by society and hope for their future."

stephen.breen@the-sun.ie

SHOW MUST GO IN



ARTIST... Grace Dyas directed the play



SENATOR... Lynn Ruane conceived plan



ACTRESS... Neili Conroy played part

SHOWING SUPPORT



AUDIENCE... CAB boss Michael Gubbins



IMPRESSED... ex-HSE boss Paul Reid



BOSSSES... Prison Service DG Caron McCaffrey and Mountjoy Governor Eddie Mullins