

*Concrete, Steel and Paint*. 55 minutes. 2009. Cindy Burstein, director/producer; Tony Heriza, director/producer. New Day Films. 190 Route 17M Suite D, Harriman, NY 10926. [www.newday.com](http://www.newday.com). Purchase: \$250.00; rent: \$75.00.

**Reviewed by:** Marion Cockey, Jennifer Langdon, and Jeff A. Larson, *Towson University, USA*  
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*Concrete, Steel and Paint* documents a community mural project undertaken by inmates in a Philadelphia-area maximum-security prison and the efforts to gain community support for and collaboration in the project. Mural artist Jane Golden from the City of Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program directs the project. Golden travels between inmate artists and a group of victims and victims' advocates to negotiate a plan and then a design for the new mural. The inmates want the "healing wall" to express both their and the community's standpoints, to promote reparation and forgiveness, and to relieve some pain. The victims' community cautiously welcomes the dialogue in which they see a chance to tell their stories, express their pain, and seek remorse among the inmates. Golden finds that her arts experience has not prepared her for the community conflict resolution work that arises. The process that unfolds illuminates the complex intersection of criminal justice and conflict resolution and highlights the strength of identity and cultural boundaries that can become an obstacle to cooperation.

The criminal justice system yields offenders and victims. Conflict resolution deals with stakeholders. In the zero-sum logic of the criminal justice system, blame is assigned to the guilty party regardless of how many ways that individual has been victimized. In conflict resolution practice, both parties must bear some of the responsibility for the harm. The process is not complete until both parties agree to a mutually satisfactory solution, and in *Concrete, Steel, and Paint*, the solution is a mural design. In the film, the stories shared by both inmate artists and community victims/victim advocates recognize that the boundaries between them are not as hard and fast as they had originally thought. Each side has an opportunity to express itself in public forums, in private conversations, and through the completion of the mural. Trying to bring these two diverse groups together while one is within the confines of the prison is definitely difficult.

In conflict resolution practice, there is recognition of the need for individuals to express what is important to them. By establishing what core

values are at stake, it then provides a space for individuals to express themselves. Personal efficacy, voice, and one's community are important in conflict resolution practices. In *Concrete, Steel and Paint*, the project director and her assistant serve as mediators between the various voices and values at play, and they help to establish the core values that would ultimately be reflected in the community art project. The victims' community sees in the mural an opportunity to express and seek recognition of the pain caused by offenders. For the inmate artists, it is important to them that someone recognizes the pains of imprisonment, the victimization they have suffered, and the ongoing difficulty of dealing with what they have done. Both communities, inmate and "outside," have experienced a great deal of suffering that is rarely recognized by the other community. The mural project effectively is conflict resolution practice, enabling each to come to a better understanding of the other's pain.

*Concrete, Steel and Paint* can also be viewed through the lens of sociological theories of identity, which challenge the belief that identities are essential to an individual or group and instead argue that they are continually negotiated through interaction. The criminal justice system, by structuring who may interact with whom and how, reifies a dichotomy of offender and victim—offenders live inside prison bars and victims live on the outside. This institutional boundary becomes imbued with emotional and cultural significance that powerfully structures interactions long after the walls between them are gone. By bringing offenders and victims shoulder to shoulder, the mural project succeeds in removing many of the physical and institutional barriers between them but is less successful at bridging the cultural boundary that separates them.

The first difficulties arise when the victims' community objects to a proposed design that depicts an inmate both inside and outside prison bars, effectively blurring the cultural boundary that sets victim apart from offender. Their objection reveals the significance of an earlier scene in the film in which the inmates meet with community members for the first time and encounter pushback when they characterize themselves as both offenders and victims (e.g., of sexual abuse, violence, poverty). Rather than recognizing their counterparts' identity and the pain they have experienced, the inmates blur the boundary that gives them meaning, value, and voice. With the proposed design, members of the victims' community feel that they are not adequately represented in the mural and begin to make changes that are then taken

to the inmate artists. The response is predictable. The inmates feel disrespected, hurt, and as if their hard work has been for nothing. For many prison inmates, the most important aspect of their sentence is getting out. While not a factor for lifers, everyone else is working toward that date. It makes sense that in a mural created by inmate artists, there is a reflection of a man in prison as well as one out after incarceration. These thoughts consume many inmates, so to have that important piece in their mural is a necessary expression of their core values. It also is predictable that the outside community would be fearful and/or ambivalent about offenders being released, as it threatens to upset their seemingly stable distinction between "us" and "them." Consequently, themes of redemption and transformation expressed in the representation of an offender on both sides of the bars are not something that those "outside" would wish to include in the mural.

*Concrete, Steel and Paint* is inspiring and yet sobering on many levels. It is inspiring to see people who are dedicated to their work and to developing dialogues between communities. At the same time, the artist inmates who participate in the project are equally dedicated to developing their abilities to express themselves in many different forms. They are willing to share their emotions and stories with the outside community members who participate in the mural project. From the perspective of the outside community, there is a lot of anger and, to some degree, hostility toward the inmates. Everyone from the community who participates has been a secondary, or indirect, victim of violence. Some come to the project with interest in what could be said or accomplished; some come with the need to get their own story out and figure out how "one of those people" could have caused them so much pain.

The sobering aspect comes with the vision of a community that is so torn by the ravages of poverty and crime that it can hardly function as a community. Giving a community not only artwork that everyone could share but also a project through which many could express diverse perspectives is heartening. The eventual distrust and lack of respect shown throughout the project provides an indication of just how wide a chasm exists between individuals who are often both victims and victimizers and how powerfully the boundaries of identity can be in maintaining in-group cohesion and out-group exclusion.

In the classroom, instructors may use this film to illustrate the value of conflict resolution in a real-world setting as well as the vexing difficulties that routinely arise in the process. In terms of creating a true conflict resolution practice, both sides

should be consulted and either work together to formulate the mural or have a back-and-forth process that would enable them to understand what each hopes to accomplish through the mural. Instead, we watch the process break down and the groups agree to create two murals. Students could be invited to engage the film by identifying both how the project effectively brings disparate stakeholders together in collaboration as prescribed by conflict resolution practice and the obstacles that threaten to derail a successful settlement, such as those created by durable identity boundaries.

This film does not impose an explicit sociological narrative but clearly lends itself to classroom discussions of criminal justice, conflict resolution, identities, and boundary work. It vividly displays an attempt to find agreement, mutual respect, and cooperation between what are usually antagonistic groups, both deeply affected by the criminal justice system. The inherent difficulties of bridging identity group boundaries are of course not unique to the prison setting or conflict resolution practice but are also common barriers between racial, gender, and class groups, organizations, social movements, and nations. As such, *Concrete, Steel and Paint* could serve as a useful tool for courses on social psychology, introductory sociology, stratification, and criminal justice.

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*Conducting Hope*. 57 minutes. 2013. Margie Friedman, director/producer: Westport Productions. <http://www.conductinghope.com>. Purchase: \$250.00.

**Reviewed by:** Rita Shah, *Elizabethtown College, USA*

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The East Hill Singers, the focus of *Conducting Hope*, is a choir like no other. It is composed of inmates from the Lansing Correctional Facility in Lansing, Kansas, and volunteers from the Kansas City, Kansas, area. *Conducting Hope* follows the inside members of the choir as they prepare for their next concert. The aim of the documentary is to show how the choir functions as a rehabilitative program and impacts recidivism rates among its members. Unfortunately, the documentary lacks a critical and nuanced examination of the program and fails to adequately support its thesis.

*Conducting Hope* is divided into three chapters: (1) "Preparing for the Concert" (17 minutes), (2) "Day of the Concert" (30 minutes), and (3) "2 Days