A resourceful incarcerated artist uses colored pencil and floor wax to create his own acrylic paints

PJP contributor John W. Zenc has been making art for decades. He has created some 1,500 pieces in all, and makes his own paints.

...read the full article on PAGE 8

ESSAYS & MEMOIRS

Prison Coding Program Helps Participants Reboot Life

Persevere was started by a formerly incarcerated individual. And while the technology we get to use may be aging, the skills we learn are vital for our present and future.

BY VICTORIA A. DENNIS | Victoria A. Dennis writes from West Tennessee State Penitentiary, Tennessee.

I received my first computer in 1989. It was a Kaypro II and came with a game that entertained my 9-year-old imagination.

Day after day, I fed one of my 16 floppy disks into the computer slot, flipped down the switch lock and waited for the command prompt to come up in pale yellow writing on the sickly green screen. Then I explored caves and caverns, battled monsters and demons, and collected a multitude of treasures.

Although the name of the game has been lost to the fog of time and memory, I remember clearly that if I took the wrong path or made a bad decision, all I had to do was put in the previous disk and I would get a chance to make a different choice.

In prison I have lived in a technology drought for two decades. I am not the only one. A 2020 University of Kansas study of 75 women recently released from prison found that a lack of relevant skills was one of the main reasons they were not using the internet. "Lack of self-confidence or self-efficacy in learning technology emerged as an important theme," the authors wrote in an article published in 2022 in the journal New Media & Society.

But steps are being taken to change that.

Four years ago, I was one of five lucky women selected...
We accept stories on a rolling basis. You will receive a copy of your story if we choose to publish it. If we decide not to publish your work, we will return it to you with feedback. We expect to be able to review at least 5 work per month. Please submit only your best work.

WHAT:
- First-time and experienced writers who are incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, family members, corrections officers, prison educators and others involved in the criminal legal system or affected by the experience of prison or jail.

WHAT NOT:
- Submissions under 1200 words. No more than ONE STORY or TWO POEMS per submission per month. Please submit only your best work.
- Submissions must be sent via USPS. NOTE: Submissions cannot be returned.

FACTS:
- In your piece you may use your first name, last name, or a pen name. Please include a short story or a few sentences that describe your artwork. No more than three artworks per entry. Artwork cannot be returned.

WHERE TO SEND SUBMISSIONS:
- PJP BY THE NUMBERS - 38 STATES (Incl. D.C.) 3 COUNTRIES 210 PRISONS 650 WRITERS 2,000 STORIES

Write for Prison Journalism Project

Write for Prison Journalism Project

WHO:
- We are looking for writers who have lived experiences with incarceration, who can write about life inside and what it’s like to be on the inside. We welcome submissions from all walks of life, including former prisoners, family members, and corrections officers.

WHAT:
- Submissions should be original and not previously published. We do not accept stories from former prisoners on death row or who are awaiting execution.

WHERE:
- Submissions must be sent via USPS. NOTE: Submissions cannot be returned.

Submissions should include:
- A header with your full name, prison ID, contact information, date, word count and suggested headline. Your ID is only used for verification and to send you information.
- A brief cover letter indicating where your piece fits into the larger narrative of a particular issue. If you are already published, you are welcome to mention other work. (If you do not submit a bio, we will create a simple one that says who you are incarcerated.)
- A photo to go with your bio. If that’s not possible, we will use a graphic of your initials.

WHEN:
- We expect to review at least 5 work per month. Please submit only your best work.

E-mail: submissions@prisonjournalismproject.org

Categories
- REPORTED NEWS AND FEATURES: Articles based on reporting and research that tell people about things that actually happened.
- ESSAYS: Essays and memoirs about something you experienced.
- POETRY: No more than two submissions per entry.
- ART: Drawings, sketches, paintings and other art that illustrate scenes of prison life. Please include a short story or a few sentences that describe your artwork. No more than three art works per entry. Artwork cannot be returned.

WHERE TO SEND SUBMISSIONS:
- Prison Journalism Project 2053 Philadelphia Pike #104 Claymont, DE 19703
- Photos/Art Only: PJP Media Department 2625 Alcatraz Ave. #328, Berkeley, CA 94704
- ELECTRONIC MAIL
- GTL Connect Network, GTL Getting Out and Corrlinks: pjp@prisonjournalismproject.org
- NOTE: GTL Getting Out is for messages only, submissions must be sent via UPS.
- Securus: forwriters@prisonjournalismproject.org
- JPay (messages will come from James Pane): JPay (messages will come from James Pane)
- Securus: forwriters@prisonjournalismproject.org

Submissions should include:
- A header with your full name, prison ID, contact information, date, word count and suggested headline. Your ID is only used for verification and to send you information.
- A brief cover letter indicating where your piece fits into the larger narrative of a particular issue. If you are already published, you are welcome to mention other work. (If you do not submit a bio, we will create a simple one that says who you are incarcerated.)
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E-mail: submissions@prisonjournalismproject.org

The Prison Journalism Project is an independent, nonprofit, national initiative. We work with incarcerated writers and those impacted by incarceration to train them in the tools of journalism and help them reach a wide audience through our journalism as well as through collaborations with mainstream media. We believe that the deep reforms that are necessary to fix the U.S. criminal legal system can only happen by shifting the narrative. Intentional, responsible and well-crafted journalism from within the incarcerated community can break stereotypes, increase transparency and drive change.

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To promote a writing program (contest, submissions call, etc.) in a future PJP Inside issue, contact PJP at inside@prisonjournalismproject.org.
Snakes in the Grass
BY AARON LONDON
I've heard there's life after death and the end is where it begins
If it's anything like this I don't want to live again
It's not hard to tell that I've been to hell and back
I can tell you how it feels I just can't tell you where it's at
Lying face up to keep the devil off my back
Fighting to stay woke for 27 hours flat
Scared to go to sleep afraid to fall in his trap
Never looking in mirrors cause I see him in the glass
Demons in the darkness I can see them when they pass
Moving silent as snakes that slither through the grass
Never seen them coming till they're in the middle of your path
Face to face with no intent of giving you a pass
Thinking why me with every minute of the past
Wishing things were different it should have never been this bad
I'm alone my only friends are cellmates where I'm housed
Sick of hearing you're almost there prepare and be patient
Dig deep take a deep breath there's no air in the basement

NOTE: These two poems create different atmospheric effects with two very different styles. London's poem builds a feeling of claustrophobia through its rhythm, unrelenting sense of doom and absence of punctuation. PJP editors will often add commas and periods to unpunctuated work, but “Snakes in the Grass” reminds us that punctuation is about breath; the reader is left breathless. Leon creates an oppressive atmosphere through radical openness and non sequitur. When we shift instantly from the distant sight of the tower to the speaker's most inward thoughts, when we bounce from tactile image to abstract wisdom, "I am a juvenile" lends a sense of depth to its brief space on the page.

I am a Juvenile
BY RAMIRO LEON
I ramiro leon writes from california state prison, sacrament, california.
I am a juvenile.
I wonder what happened to my childhood. I hear chains and shackles. I see the main tower, and I stand up in the face of the exercise yard. I want a new pair of eyes, eyes that will help me see my role in life differently. I am a juvenile.
I pretend this is a dream, while I stare disbelieving. I feel the wind in my face. I listen intently to the sounds, I feel alive. I touch a risk; the great hazard in life is to risk nothing.
I worry how a man endures, how he can be so cold. I cry sometimes because I have not a thing to my name. I am a juvenile.
I understand the size of my heart, and discovered the luster to life. I say to you, “happiness is good health and a bad memory.” I dream I invent something new. I try to fall in love many times with the same person.
I hope she is strong enough to love me. I pray to be forgiven and be a father. I am a juvenile...

NOTE: We chose this essay for the cover of this issue because of its strong blend of detail-driven personal anecdote and reported coverage of a unique prison program. Taken together, these elements make it clear to readers why coding programs belong inside prisons, and what they’re like. The imaginative ending is a great example of how a writer can get creative even in the context of a factual essay.

Amplify your story
Do you edit or write for a newspaper or newsletter published at your prison? Please send us a copy of the publication to PJP's Chicago address (3501 Southport Ave., #204, Chicago, IL 60657). We would love to connect and see how we can help amplify your stories.

Snakes in the Grass
BY AARON LONDON
Aaron London writes from Salinas Valley State Prison, California.
I've heard there's life after death and the end is where it begins
If it's anything like this I don't want to live again
It's not hard to tell that I've been to hell and back
I can tell you how it feels I just can't tell you where it's at
Lying face up to keep the devil off my back
Fighting to stay woke for 27 hours flat
Scared to go to sleep afraid to fall in his trap
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COVER STORY: PRISON CODING PROGRAM
[ cont. from page 1 ]

to train as peer facilitators in the first cohort of Persevere, a competitive one-year programming course that trains us to be full-stack developers in the hopes of reducing generational incarceration.
Persevere has 11 classes in prisons in Tennessee, Arizona, Georgia and Virginia, with more coming soon. My class was the first. One of the best things about this program is that its founders is formerly incarcerated and classes are at times taught by previously incarcerated individuals who understand our challenges firsthand.
As a student or student peer facilitator, we work on a series of lessons and projects to earn certificates in subjects such as JavaScript, web design, data structures and project management. We also have gained entrepreneurial and job-hunting skills and are able to take advantage of job services, mentorship, transitional housing, social service assistance and much more offered to participants of the program.
Classes were canceled because of the pandemic for more than 15 years as a developer. I am and will be surrounded by computers running on Windows 7, an operating system that was released in 2009 and is no longer supported by Microsoft. We don't have internet access.
I have completed all six certificates available, but the last one was only about theory. The impostor syndrome looms close, but I'm also confident in my abilities. I have gained entrepreneurial and job-hunting skills and am currently gaining experience as an instructor. I have a solid understanding of coding. Because of this opportunity, I have built people skills, social skills and critical thinking skills. I have learned to diffuse situations, ignore irrelevance, resolve conflicts and solve problems.
By the time I am released, I expect to have more than 12 years of experience as a coding facilitator and more than 15 years as a developer. I am and will be surrounded by a lifetime network of front-end and back-end developers and computer engineers. I’ll also be able to take advantage of job services, mentorship, transitional housing, social service assistance and much more offered to participants of the program.
My hope for the future is that the technology drought will continue to shrink and access to the program’s full curriculum will expand.
But no matter what happens, Persevere has shown me that I don't have to be stuck in this cave called prison dragging around my past and fighting my monsters and demons.
I may have lost freedoms, family, opportunities and life experiences, but I have gained more of the same in

C:\move to the light>
Nowhere to go but forward unless you wish to end the game? Do you wish to move forward?

C:\move forward>
You arrive at an intersection. The path ahead goes faster into the dark. The path to the right looks familiar. What would you like to do?

C:\turn left>
You found a treasure and see a light in the distance. What would you like to do?

C:\move to the light>
You step out into a bright future. You look at your treasure and realize that you have opportunities now that you didn't have before. You take a look over your shoulder back into the dark cave and mourn the losses before looking back at your treasure. There are now so many choices you can make.

(Additional reporting by PJP)
WHAT IS A PITCH?

A pitch is a letter, message or email to an editor in which you share an idea for a story you want to write and explain why you are the right person to author it. Pitching is useful for writers and for editors. The process helps you, as a writer, because you’ll know whether a publication is interested before you spend the time and effort writing the article. If they like it, it will help you think about how you’re going to assemble the story before you put a lot of work into it. Editors like pitches because they create an opportunity to provide input on the reporting and composition of a piece. By giving this feedback early on, they can help you tailor it for their publication and their readership.

It’s important to keep in mind that there are many good story ideas, but not all of them are the right fit for every publication. Editors have to consider whether the publication already has a similar story planned or they recently published a story on the same topic. You might have a really good idea that just needs to be tweaked. Or your story might require a little more context or research to fit the publication.

Bottom line: You’ll have a better chance of getting published if you get feedback from an editor first.

PJP is now accepting pitches for these same reasons. We want to help you shape your idea and provide suggestions for how you might report on it and structure your story, so it can represent your best work.

We also know that, as outside editors, there are many story topics, ideas and angles we may not see, so pitching your own ideas is a good way to grow beyond the prompts PJP occasionally publishes. It’s important to keep in mind that there are many good story ideas, but not all of them are the right fit for every publication. Editors have to consider whether the publication already has a similar story planned or they recently published a story on the same topic. You might have a really good idea that just needs to be tweaked. Or your story might require a little more context or research to fit the publication.

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Clear first sentence that concretely speaks out the article’s topic.

Immediate context that also grabs the attention of the editor. Keep in mind that editors are looking at pitches and drafts all day. A captivating hook with concrete details that pulls the reader in is always effective. We redacted the name of the prison for legal reasons, but I am sure the privacy of this family is well understood even after adding it in the final pitch is a good idea.

Here we have a clear explanation of what the essay is going to be about and how the author is going to use the information to make the piece. This also answers the question editors will have: What is the point that you’re going to try to make through the story? Why is the story important? What is it going to show?

You don’t need to provide an exact date, but being specific about length and general deliver date can also help your editor get a better idea of what you plan to deliver. If your story is time sensitive, it’s good to mention that here too.

May 19, 2023

Dear PJP editors,

I’d like to pitch you an essay about the things I wished I knew when my brother went to prison.

My younger brother Isaac was sentenced to 19 years in 2019. He is currently serving time at [State Prison].

When Isaac first went in, I knew nothing about how to support him while he served his time. I didn’t even know how to do simple things like accept collect calls. I remember fumbling with my credit cards while pressing "5" on my phone to input the card number so I could accept the call. Through Googling, I later learned about Global Tel Link, the company that provides inmate calling services. I also had a difficult time finding out how to visit Isaac in person. For example, I understood from the prison website that I had to get the visitation form from the incarcerated individual, but it failed to mention where to mail the form once it was filled out.

The essay will follow what I went through in the early days of navigating confusing prison websites and what happened the first time I visited my brother.

I know Prison Journalism Project mostly publishes incarcerated writers. However, I believe it’s important for me to share stories from the other side of the wall too, in this case from the perspective of an older sister of an incarcerated person.

And I hope that my perspective and knowledge as a loved one of someone inside can be helpful to other people in my position. My goal is to write an article that serves family members and friends of the incarcerated.

In my experience, there is limited anecdotal information online to find practical tips for how to deal with a newly incarcerated family member. I can write a 1,000-word article with the first draft delivered to you by June 2, 2023.

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to your response.

Best regards,

Sister of an Incarcerated Person
What is News Literacy?

In this issue, we’ve partnered with the nonpartisan education nonprofit the News Literacy Project to bring you this quiz—a fun, interactive way to test your ability to determine the credibility of news and other information and tell the difference between fact, opinion, and misinformation. We call this “news literacy.”

It’s an important skill, particularly in today’s age because the internet makes it easy for anyone to spread conspiracy theories and false information by creating professional-looking content quickly and sharing it widely. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok encourage users to read and pass along stories that reinforce existing beliefs or are simply untrue.

As a result, many people have a hard time recognizing the difference between fact and opinion, and between credible and non-credible sources of information.

Studies conducted by the Pew Research Center found that only 35% of U.S. adults surveyed could accurately tell the difference between opinion and fact. A 2019 Stanford Graduate School of Education study similarly reported that 96% of high school students surveyed were unable to evaluate and challenge the credibility of information presented to them.

The News Literacy Project was established in 2008 and has been endorsed by leading news organizations because they felt that this spread of misinformation and disinformation could threaten the very fabric of our democracy. A democratic society cannot function without a well-informed public. PJP agrees.

News literacy helps us develop a healthy skepticism as well as critical thinking skills, so you will be in a much better position to know what information to trust. As consumers of news, we need to be able to evaluate and interpret information so we can distinguish between legitimate news outlets—one that shares verifiable information gathered through ethical practices—from outlets designed to exploit or偏差 readers.

But news literacy isn’t just about identifying ill-intentioned sources. Even legitimate news outlets can be vulnerable to putting forward biased or otherwise compromised sources on a deadline (even heard the expression “Speed is the enemy of accuracy?”). No matter what the news organization, a news-literate user is always mindful of what they are reading.

News literacy is especially important for you as a writer of journalism. You need to know that you are sharing solid information from reliable sources with your readers. (By “sources,” we’re talking specifically about news articles, research papers and other documents you might reference in your work.)

This can be difficult inside prison. Incarcerated writers have limited access to sources and some of them may be censored. They also may face more initial skepticism from readers about their facts and assertions. Developing a critical eye and a high standard for selecting sources can lead to strong, persuasive and credible articles that readers can trust.

Being transparent about the limitations of your ability to fully fact-check stories can help too. That’s why PJP editors sometimes come back to you with questions about your story, asking you how you know such and such information. It’s why we sometimes insert a sentence in your story that makes it clear what you know and what you don’t know. Readers will trust you because you’re upfront about this. It doesn’t weaken your story; it strengthens it. We hope this quiz will help you better understand what “credibility” looks like and how to recognize it.

**QUIZ**

How news-literate are you?

1. Which statement best describes the difference between a reporter and a columnist? (Circle all that apply.)
   - A. Reporters can generally write about any topic they like, while columnists are assigned to a fairly narrow range of topics.
   - B. A reporter produces straight news reports and aspires to be objective; a columnist expresses an opinion.
   - C. A reporter and a columnist basically do the same thing, depending on the news organization.
   - D. A reporter typically stays in the newsroom to write news reports.
   - E. None of the above.

2. Which of the following are types of sources in news reports? (Circle all that apply.)
   - A. Expert
   - B. Eyewitness
   - C. Official
   - D. Eyewitness
   - E. Official
   - F. Anonymous
   - G. Document

3. How free is the press in the United States? (Circle all that apply.)
   - A. The most free in the world.
   - B. Among the 10 freest in the world.
   - C. Among the 50 freest in the world.
   - D. About average among other nations.
   - E. In the bottom 25% in the world.

4. Fill in the Blank: An_________ board is a group of opinion writers that meets regularly in private to discuss the news and to write pieces that represent the opinion of the news outlet as an organization or institution.

5. Which of the following are common guidelines in the practice of photojournalism? (Circle all that apply.)
   - A. Photographers should never pose their human subjects except when taking portraits.
   - B. Photographers should only try to take images that represent ordinary life.
   - C. Cropping an image (changing it by removing unwanted or irrelevant subjects or details around the outer edge) is never OK.
   - D. Photographers should never use editing software to erase anything from a digital image, even when it doesn’t change the picture’s meaning.
   - E. Photographers are allowed to crop an image as long as it does not change the meaning of an image.
   - F. None of the above.

6. True/False: When a news organization makes a serious error or fails to follow the ethics and standards of quality journalism, other news outlets ignore it out of solidarity.

7. Giving equal coverage to all ideas and perspectives related to a subject, even when they’re not equally supported by evidence, is a problem in journalism known as _________.
   - A. false balance
   - B. neutrality
   - C. maintaining objectivity
   - D. being fair

8. The innate habit of people seeking reasons to discredit or dismiss information that complicates their existing beliefs, and to accept information that upholds their existing beliefs, is called ________. (Circle all that apply.)
   - A. “me first” bias
   - B. ego
   - C. confirmation

9. **Answers on page 17**
The Topic No Man in Prison Wants to Talk About (But Needs To)

Incarcerated men are particularly vulnerable to prostate cancer. In Florida, one man is raising awareness about the taboo topic.

By Gervasio “Julio” Torres Jr.

Gervasio “Julio” Torres Jr. writes from Everglades Correctional Institution, Florida.

I had never seen my dad so angry. It was two decades ago in a Florida examination room. My dad had just been diagnosed with cancer, and he was expressing an outburst at my mom. Her face expressed unconditional love and support, but I knew what hid beneath that mask. Fear. She was afraid, and I was too.

That memory has left an impression on me to this day. As Everglades Correctional Institution, in south Florida, a large portion of the 1,800 residents I live alongside are men over 50 who suffer from various disabilities and conditions, including cancer.

The chances of being diagnosed with prostate cancer rise rapidly after age 50. About 60% of instances of prostate cancer are discovered after age 65, according to the American Cancer Society. And for those who are diagnosed while incarcerated or recently released from prison, the risk of dying from cancer is higher than for those who had never been incarcerated, a study from the Yale Cancer Center found.

In prison, cancer is the leading cause of death, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. An analysis of mortality in state and federal prisons, from 2001 to 2019, found that cancer accounted for 27.5% of all prison deaths over that period.

A STIGMA PERSISTS

How has the prison population reacted to such frightening statistics? Many have chosen to avoid the topic, said ECI resident Al Burgess, a staunch proponent of raising awareness of prostate cancer.

“It looks like you don’t want to talk about it; you don’t want to think about it,” he said.

Burgess believes the reluctance to discuss prostate cancer is more than about fear and has to do with machismo.

There is a fear of the exam itself and finding out you may have [cancer],” Burgess said. “It’s an extreme that men aren’t willing to talk about.”

When men find out the prostate is a gland that helps semen, they feel that a prostate cancer diagnosis means ‘something is wrong with us as a man,’ he explained.

“Men are actually afraid of a health exam,” Burgess said. “You can run from the examinations only to discover the cancer years down the line.”

RAISING PROSTATE CANCER AWARENESS

In the weeks leading up to National Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October, pink ribbons can be seen almost everywhere — on TV and in print, as well as proudly worn on many a lapel, by men and women. This is largely due to the meteoric growth and popularity of Susan G. Komen for the Cure, a nonprofit that has helped make the ribbons a ubiquitous sight. It is also due to the fact that breast cancer is the second-most common form of cancer in the U.S. behind skin cancer.

The estimated cases of prostate cancer for 2023 are not far behind breast cancer, and the estimated number of deaths for both cancers are also close, according to the National Cancer Institute. Despite being similarly prevalent, breast cancer has historically garnered much more funding than prostate cancer, according to the National Cancer Institute.

Burgess says he believes women are socially conditioned to better deal with the emotional implications of prostate cancer than men are with prostate cancer.

“We [men] haven’t even started the conversation,” he said.

A health services administrator for ECI’s medical provider reported that our prison has seen six cases of surgical removal of the prostate over the past year.

“We don’t see [these patients] until it’s a little too late,” he said. “Why won’t they speak up and notify medical staff?”

But how do you have the conversation no one wants to have?

Over years of incarceration, Burgess has freely talked with men about prostate cancer. He suggested we start the conversation within our own communities. “There are people among us who do have information, residents who were formerly doctors. Medical staff could offer seminars to help get the men talking,” Burgess said. “We are conditioned to stay quiet about most things. But, by providing a safe forum and a sympathetic ear, you find those willing to open up.”

If ECI residents can already openly talk about alcohol addiction or drug dependency in support groups, why shouldn’t we open up about prostate concerns? Why shouldn’t we exchange our fears and preconceived notions of masculinity for awareness, prevention and longevity?

IF ECI RESIDENTS CAN ALREADY OPENLY TALK ABOUT ALCOHOL ADDICTION OR DRUG DEPENDENCY IN SUPPORT GROUPS, WHY SHOULDN’T WE OPEN UP ABOUT PROSTATE CONCERNS? WHY SHOULDN’T WE EXCHANGE OUR FEARS AND PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS OF MASCULINITY FOR AWARENESS, PREVENTION AND LONGEVITY?

Incarcerated men are particularly vulnerable to prostate cancer. In Florida, one man is raising awareness about the taboo topic.
In Prison, They Call Me Picasso

A resourceful incarcerated artist uses colored pencil and floor wax to create his own acrylic paints.

BY JOHN W. ZENC
John W. Zenc writes from California Health Care Facility, Stockton, California.

I've been making art for decades. I came to prison in 1977 on a 7-years-to-life sentence, and began drawing — I've created some 1,500 pieces in all. The prisoners and staff here have nicknamed me Picasso.

I'm 65 years old and have Parkinson's Disease and the onset of dementia, yet I strive to keep creating. Sometimes I'll work for 25 hours without pause. My goal before I die is for people to see my creations — to know I did not waste my time in prison but gave back to society by creating and sharing my art.

I first used watercolor pencils. But when I got the real paints and brushes, I could create really amazing work. But that stuff costs a great deal of money.

If I had real paints and brushes, I could create really amazing work. But that stuff costs a great deal of money. I tried crushing the colored pencils wet, the colors just ran off. I needed a way to make the paint waterproof. I tried mixing in white glue, but that was a failure.

One day I watched an inmate washing the floors of my housing, and voilà — it hit me. I asked him for a small bottle of floor wax. I took a quarter ounce and some ground-up lead from a colored pencil and stirred them together into a thick and creamy consistency.

Next, I tested my paint on canvas. I got a toothpick, dipped it in the paint, then dotted the canvas. I did this several times and let it dry. It dried very quickly, maybe in two minutes or less.

Then, to protect the paint, I coated the dots with more floor wax using a Q-tip. Once the floor wax was dry, I checked the painted dots with a few drops of water to make sure they did not smear … success! I had created my own acrylic paints.

EXPERIMENTING WITH HOMEMADE PRISON PAINT

While at Pelican Bay State Prison, maybe 30 years ago, I dabbed in oil paints and loved it. They gave out canvases and paints in a hobby program. But after a year I was transferred.

If I had real paints and brushes, I could create really amazing work. But that stuff costs a great deal of money. For a poor prisoner, I make do with what I can get or make. Eventually, I figured out how to make my own paints.

I first used watercolor pencil. But when I got the pencils wet, the colors just ran off. I needed a way to make the paint waterproof. I tried crushing the colored pencils' lead into a fine powder then mixing in white glue, but that was a failure.

One day I watched an inmate washing the floors of my housing, and voilà — it hit me. I asked him for a small bottle of floor wax. I took a quarter ounce and some ground-up lead from a colored pencil and stirred them together into a thick and creamy consistency.

Next, I tested my paint on canvas. I got a toothpick, dipped it in the paint, then dotted the canvas. I did this several times and let it dry. It dried very quickly, maybe in two minutes or less.

Then, to protect the paint, I coated the dots with more floor wax using a Q-tip. Once the floor wax was dry, I checked the painted dots with a few drops of water to make sure they did not smear … success! I had created my own acrylic paints.

I fill in a 2-by-2-inch section at a time. I let it dry, then fill in another. I do this so I can add the floor wax at each step. As I continue in this manner, I clear coat each section until the whole painting or drawing is covered.

Once that's finished, I take a Q-tip or toothpick and begin to dot the work until all the dots are where I want them to be. Then I clear coat the entire painting several times to seal up the paint so it doesn’t come off. It works great.

PAINTING WITH Q-TIPS

I have a real odd style but can paint and draw nearly anything.

My process is this: I first make a sketch using white or brown regular colored pencils. Next I add a few highlights with my watercolor pencils. Then I get my Q-tips out and dip them into my paints, filling in the sketch. I fill in a 2-by-2-inch section at a time. I let it dry, then fill in another. I do this so I can add the floor wax at each step. As I continue in this manner, I clear coat each section until the whole painting or drawing is covered.

Once that's finished, I take a Q-tip or toothpick and begin to dot the work until all the dots are where I want them to be. Then I clear coat the entire painting several times to seal up the paint so it doesn’t come off. It works great.

NOTE: I've been moved not only by the beauty of these paintings but also by the ingenuity of DIY acrylic paints. PJP readers appreciate getting the backstory and context for the art we publish, so we encourage you to share your artwork when you submit us.