Thinking Outside the Box
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Thinking outside the box can be difficult, even if you’re able to leave “the box.” It becomes trickier when you are confined to “the box.” Nevertheless thinking outside the box was the challenge presented to the Aspire Team at CRC in early 2016. A group of students from the University of San Luis had asked to visit the institution as part of a week long immersion trip. Thus, the guys in the office were given the task of planning the visit. The “Aspire team” was a rag tag group made up of office regulars: Zach, Ed, Daniel, as well as their tag-along, sidekick Stevie.

The men had adopted the name Aspire for their team because each member saw himself as ambitious, motivated, and determined to succeed in life. Their group objective was to “be able to gain real world experience and skills, such as time management, brainstorming, team building, event planning, breaking of comfort zones, and character building.” Ed, a youthful, selfless stock-analyst-in-waiting, had initiated the group, bringing in his pals Zach and Daniel. By becoming friends the three were testing prison-politic-policies. Showering the prison world with smiles and good-natured maturity, their positive attitudes were contagious, thus allowing them to get away with the “great sin” of getting along — across racial boundaries. Lately, they had decided to bring in their friend Stevie, a reflective young Muslim kid whose goal in life was to cure Alzheimer’s. The youngster had so impressed the others by his 14-hour-a-day study patterns that they knew they had to have him on the team.

In the office the four guys sat through the documentary “Half the Sky” then began brainstorming. Consensus was that the customary dog-and-pony show normally presented to visitors by inmates was over-used and uninspiring. Yes, they could do a presentation on how bad “the system” is and how unfair the laws are — but why? What would that do for the team? Surely, the visitors would walk away being “moved” to do something about the system but then what, and would they? Isn’t there more to life than always fighting the system? The Aspire fellas thought so and opted to plan a workshop on women’s issues. Why would a group of male prisoners care about women’s issues you might wonder? They were thinking waaay outside the prison box.

“Half the Sky” showed the efforts of a courageous woman named Somaly Mom who had defied all the odds against her. Having been sold into prostitution as a child, she had eventually escaped. Somaly Mom had then created a network to house, protect, and educate young girls rescued from brothels in Cambodia. The story was shared with a group of 14 male inmates and the 14 SLU students, most of whom were young women. Zach, Stevie, Daniel and Ed took turns challenging the participant’s thoughts and worldviews during a day that, for a change, was not focused on prison at all.
At the end the SLU students walked away with an idea of reaching out to local foster kids, inviting them to visit SLU. Equally inspired, the Aspire team decided to write a collection of reflections also aimed at foster kids. The next semester SLU students and staff began planning a campus event at SLU, keeping the inmates up-to-date on progress.

Zach delivered his part of a book the Aspire team decided to write, *The Boy on the Lower Bunk*, completing his chapters two days before paroling. The other three are currently wrapping up their chapters of the book and have begun planning the next visit from a new group of SLU students scheduled for March 2017. The theme this year is “Resilience” based on the documentary “Wasteland,” a powerful story of a photographer’s journey to capture the images of garbage pickers in Brazil.