IKAR Inside-Out Project

An entire universe separates most Jewish community members from people who are locked up in prison, far away from society. As a part of our community’s effort to have a deeper understanding of racism, justice, and healing, we are establishing a pen pal project, connecting ourselves to people in prison. We will learn from each other and the connections made will offer light and hope to people in a very dark place.

Participate in a learning and training session via video conference:
Sunday, March 22, 4:00 pm to 5:30 pm  (https://zoom.us/j/4270467737)

If you decide to participate, your commitment will be to:
- Write a letter once a month for at least one year.
- Read a book together and discuss your reflections on it in your letters.
- After you finish the book, decide whether to read another together or just write letters.
- Be open and honest in your communication and follow the project guidelines.

Questions you may have:
- How will this be set up?
  Elizabeth Calvin, a long-time IKAR member, is an expert on criminal and youth justice, and has extensive experience working with people in prison, in particular, young people sentenced to very long adult prison terms. Elizabeth has set up pen pal projects before and will serve as an on-going advisor and sounding board for people who participate here.

- Who will I be writing to? We have reached out to people who were under age 18 at the time of their crime and sentenced to life in prison with no possibility of parole. Recent changes in law, including laws IKAR worked to pass, now make it possible for these individuals to have a parole hearing and the possibility of release after 25 years of incarceration. So, the people we will be writing are in the process of moving from living with no hope to realizing they have a chance to be free one day.

- How do we write to them? How do I know what to say?
  Both you and the people inside will agree to follow the project’s guidelines and rules. You will get training that includes ideas about how to start the conversation with your pen pal. You will write first, and the person inside will write back. Their letters will be mailed to the Ikar office, and then forwarded to you.

- Am I supposed to teach them something?
  No. To the contrary, the intention here is to create meaningful human contact for both people, to listen with openness to each other, and through this connection, bridge divides of race, class and other experiences. For both people it is a chance to:
  - Connect as two human beings.
  - See life from a different perspective.
  - Learn and grow.

Some of our pen pals inside rarely have visitors and get only an occasional letter from family or friends. Your letters will be an opportunity for them to interact with people outside of prison and an important chance to have what some of them call “normal” conversations.

- Have these people committed serious crimes?
  Yes, they were convicted of murder. However, they were very young at the time of the crime, at a neurological and developmental stage in life that science and the Supreme Court have concluded means they had less responsibility for their actions than older adults. Many will have been in prison for 10, 15, 20, or more years. They will be in the process of changing their lives and reckoning with the impact of their actions. We will discuss this in the training on March 22nd.

More Questions? Email Brooke@ikar-la.org