

PRESS RELEASE

Media Contacts:

- Brandon Lee:
Founder, Art of Our Soul
ArtOfOurSoul@gmail.com, 917-520-2888
- Brendon Cross
Communications Director, ADCRR
bcross1@azadc.gov, 602-320-3908

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Innovative Therapeutic Art and Music Program Launching for the First Time Inside a U.S. Prison

(Buckeye, AZ) At today's ribbon cutting ceremony, the Arizona State Prison Complex - Lewis, in Buckeye, AZ showed the public how it has turned a 1,200 sq. ft. unused area inside a 130-bed housing unit for male inmates diagnosed with serious mental illness, into a stunning art and music healing studio. The recently renovated area now offers gorgeous, lively painted murals and neon lights to help inmates begin the process of healing from trauma, much of which led to their destructive behaviors.

Approximately 250 inmates will cycle through the Art of Our Soul program this year, in small groups, with each group spending about 5 weeks creating art, guided by facilitators who have lived experience.

National TV personality [Brandon Lee](#), founder of Art of Our Soul, has found an unlikely partner for his dynamic and upbeat model of helping those with complex behavioral health challenges process and move beyond trauma.

The Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry (ADCRR) has not historically been seen as a place for healing. But in January 2023, things changed when Governor Katie Hobbs brought in Ryan Thornell as Director of the state's prison system.

Thornell's approach to corrections is twofold: empower staff with the tools they need and focus on balancing public safety while prioritizing the individual needs of those in the ADCRR's care or custody. This approach is finding favor.

Says **Thornell**, *"I was brought in to reimagine the correctional system within Arizona. Outdated operations and traditional challenges, along with intense scrutiny, were leaving inmates and staff frustrated and institutionalized. So we've established a roadmap for transforming our correctional system through modern and innovative practices, directly impacting the individuals who work and live within it. The Art of Our Soul program is a prime example."*

Art Of Our Soul's founder, Brandon Lee, a survivor of child sexual abuse, in long term recovery, upholds the belief that the act of making art helps people create their own life changes.

"When you combine music and art together, you help open the frontal lobe and release energy," says **Lee**. His program, studied by major health plans for its innovative modalities combining art and music, is showing success at reducing anger, stress, anxiety, and depression.

Environment, **Lee** believes, plays an important role in how we think, how we act, and how we feel. *"If you put a good person in a bad environment, be it prison, or a family structure, that person will likely end up creating bad behaviors. The opposite is true too: if you take a person who has shown destructive behaviors and put them in a positive environment, then they will, more likely than not, show better behaviors."*

Prior to the partnership with the ADCRR, Art Of Our Soul has been working with justice involved men and women in community reentry and behavioral health programs. The most positive impacts and outcomes within this population are among those diagnosed with serious mental illness and substance use disorder.

Participants in these community based programs are showing dramatic changes in their daily behaviors and have been able to stay away from previous destructive behaviors like substance use disorder.

These outcomes give much hope to the power of the program Lee and the ADCRR are building at the Arizona State Prison, Lewis complex. Lee acknowledges that public opinion isn't always favorable to those who have committed crimes. *"I will never make excuses for the destructive behaviors and hurt caused by those incarcerated,"* **Lee** says. *"There are real victims, there are real consequences."* He and ADCRR Director Thornell want the public to understand through the Art Of Our Soul partnership that an investment in the incarcerated populations' rehabilitation is an investment in public safety.

Both Thornell and Lee agree that communities are safer when investments are made in rehabilitation and behavioral change.

This two year pilot program at the Arizona State Prison Complex- Lewis is funded by [Mercy Care](#) through its community reinvestment program, [Mercy C.A.R.E.S.](#) The local not-for-profit managed care plan is significantly invested in tracking outcomes of incarcerated inmates diagnosed with serious mental illness.

In thinking about the support by Mercy Care, **Thornell** reflects, *"the opening today of Art Of Our Soul at ASPC-Lewis demonstrates more than ADCRR's commitment to reimagining corrections, it shows that the community is similarly in favor of transforming how inmates do time to ensure increased public safety and healthier outcomes."*

Brandon Lee has handpicked program facilitators whose lived experience with substance use disorder and the prison system make them the ultimate credible messengers to the men serving time at the ADCRR prison. *"I cannot overstate the importance of peers leading this program. Learning how to create new neural pathways from someone who has walked the prison path, is transformational,"* says Lee.

Thornell agrees that this first-of-its-kind program may be a shock to the system, but it's a change the prison, inmates, staff and community alike seem ready for. *"We've got our work cut out for ourselves, to be sure. But, it's worth it. And, we invite you to see it now, in its early stage so you can witness the transformation in action. What we are doing here in Arizona is inserting a level of humanity to practices that have traditionally been viewed as inhumane."*



Photo of Art of Our Soul at ASPC-Lewis, courtesy Brandon Lee

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