



# REENTRY

National Media Outreach Campaign

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## New Production, BRIDGING THE GAP

In 2006, The Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign began working with Vicki Lopez Lukis, former chairperson of the Florida Governor’s Ex-Offender Task Force, to develop a documentary on the BRIDGING THE GAP writing workshop. BRIDGING THE GAP is a collaborative effort among the Florida Department of Corrections and Department of Juvenile Justice: community volunteer Vicki Lopez Lukis; the Girls Advocacy Project (GAP); and Art Spring, Inc.

### BRIDGING THE GAP: A WRITING WORKSHOP

Envision finding yourself in prison and wondering how to make sense of this new and unexpected journey. This is exactly where former Lee County Commissioner, Vicki Lopez Lukis found herself in 1999 when she self-surrendered to FCC Coleman, a female minimum-security federal prison. She began serving a 27-month sentence for honest services mail fraud for lying to a newspaper reporter about an affair that she was having with her then boyfriend, a lawyer lobbyist, and now husband.

Few individuals who were voted most likely to succeed by their high school class and one of the youngest persons to graduate from the University of Notre Dame would ever believe that their charmed and privileged life could take a sudden and bizarre twist. Yet this harrowing experience provided a unique opportunity for Ms. Lukis to go “inside” to see firsthand the fastest growing industry in America and experience the impact of incarceration.

On November 21, 2000, President Clinton commuted Ms. Lukis’ sentence. Since returning home to Miami-Dade County, she has worked tirelessly on behalf of women in prison, girls in detention and formerly incarcerated men and women who are released and return home to Florida’s communities. She has emerged as a well-respected authority on these issues.



Responding to a growing crisis in our country and particularly in Florida that has resulted in more and more women and girls being arrested, detained and incarcerated, often for very long periods of time, Vicki Lopez Lukis is determined to break this vicious cycle.

Her work with girls in detention highlighted the urgent need to intervene in the lives of these at-risk girls to teach them that every action has a consequence.

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## New Production, BRIDGING THE GAP—Continued

Each time she told her own story about her prison experience, she saw the power of someone who had “walked the walk and talked the talk”. She invited other formerly incarcerated people to talk with the girls, bringing into detention the stories of women who had “been there, done that” and who desperately wanted to save the girls from following in their own footsteps.

In the absence of being able to bring together the women in prison and girls in detention for a series of meaningful dialogues around the negative impacts of incarceration, she developed a writing workshop to “bridge” this gap. Thus was born ***Bridging the Gap: A Writing Workshop***.

***Bridging the Gap***, represents a unique partnership between the Florida Departments of Corrections and Juvenile Justice; community volunteer, Vicki Lopez Lukis; the Girls Advocacy Project (GAP), an award-winning intervention program for girls detained in Juvenile Detention Centers; and ArtSpring, Inc., an arts organization whose mission is to support self-growth and effective life skills through art-making for underserved and institutionalized women and girls.

The objective of this project is to develop a published anthology of the writings of the women inmates that can be shared with the GAP girls. ArtSpring engaged its advanced *Inside Out* program participants who had been in the program at least five years at both Homestead Correctional Institution, located in Florida City, and Broward Correctional Institution, located in Pembroke Pines, in a specifically designed creative writing program that addressed, through personal narrative essays, answers to questions that were posed by the girls in GAP, including the realities of being incarcerated.

***Bridging the Gap*** is expected to educate female juvenile offenders on the issues related to the criminal mistakes made by female adult inmates who are serving long, and in most cases, life sentences for their crimes. The life experiences shared by the women inmates will benefit the girls in detention by giving life to real stories that have ended in real tragedy. The women will be able to highlight their regrets and the losses they have experienced, such as the loss of families and freedom since their incarceration. The objective is to share experiences of the women inmates to help the girls reject unhealthy relationships, substance abuse and the temptation to become involved in future criminal activity.

***Bridging the Gap*** directly addresses the opportunity for positive growth and development in the lives of the project’s participants. Through this innovative intervention program, the girls will be given the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of the women, which will give the girls insight to make different choices about their own lives when released from detention and/or confinement. They will have a heightened awareness that will allow them to return to their lives in the community with a more positive self-image, an expanded perspective to strengthen their family relationships, and thus be able to work toward establishing healthy lifestyles that will lead to their search for the resources they need to live productive and successful lives.

The inmates have participated in a twelve-week writing workshop with the expressed objective of providing insight on certain themes appropriate to girls involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in, the juvenile justice system. This anthology will be distributed free to girls in the Miami-Dade, Southwest Florida, Orange and Palm Beach

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Regional Juvenile Detention Centers and will be used to develop an intervention/prevention curriculum for girls in or at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

An additional component of ***Bridging the Gap*** has involved women from the community who have volunteered to educate themselves about the shared paths of delinquency of the women and girls. Some have volunteered with GAP providing programming and mentoring services to the girls in the GAP program. The community volunteers at Broward 's workshop were Jill Ecklund, Kendall Pryles and Brenda Valencia Aldana. During the Homestead workshop two freelance journalists, Leslie Sternlieb and Bonnie Schindler joined Jill Ecklund. These extraordinary volunteers spent untold hours with the adult female inmates learning about their journeys into the criminal justice system and how incarceration has impacted their lives and that of their families.

The BGAP program at Broward culminated with a formal presentation in May 2006 for invited guests from the community, individuals and/or representatives from organizations and agencies funding the project, members of ArtSpring's Board of Directors, as well as Department of Corrections staff, including Deputy Secretary Laura Bedard. The BGAP program at Homestead hosted a similar community presentation on April 28, 2007.

The *Bridging the Gap* documentary and The Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign are funded by a generous grant from The Annie. E. Casey Foundation. Visit the Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign website at <http://www.reentrymediaoutreach.org> to view the film. A viewer's guide is also available on the site.

