

‘Pelican Bay podcast brings prisoners’ stories to new audiences

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Paul Critz has long been in the business of telling other people’s stories.

In 2000, he moved from San Francisco to Crescent City to take over his dad’s photography business, which told stories through images.

Next, he rescued a friend’s online radio station, KFUG.com, and eventually grew that into an FM station which, in addition to playing music, shares the stories of people in Crescent City with their listening neighbors.

Critz said that about the time when his operations started looking good at KFUG, he got another gig - helping prisoners at Pelican Bay State Prison tell their stories.

The former executive director of the Del Norte Association for Cultural Awareness was approached by the William James Association, which runs arts in corrections programs around the state, looking for someone

local who had podcasting media experience. Critz was the first call.

Pelican Bay's podcast would be modeled after "Ear Hustle," a San Quentin State Prison podcast that's been produced now for four years.

In December 2018, he went into Pelican Bay for the first time, to build the program and to get the equipment approved inside.

Critz said that whereas San Quentin had corporate sponsors and a media lab for its lower-lever security facility, he'd be by himself at Pelican Bay - armed with a laptop, mixer, two microphones and a portable field recorder. That equipment stays inside a prison locker, ready for the next class.

Asked at the time how big a class he might be able to handle, Critz threw out the number eight. So, eight inmates from B Ring and eight from A Ring made up his first classes producing the podcast.

"Technically, what I do is a class," said Critz. "It's Audio Journalism. I had to write up a curriculum. I try to teach what I can: sound engineering, editing. But the rest is the podcast.

"I've gotten to the point that I can set the stuff on the table, and they'll set everything up and start recording."

Critz said a podcast really is no different from radio programming. It's just based initially on Apple technology.

"Anyone can do these incredible media things now, it just takes imagination and knowhow," he said.

His first class kicked off with two men he had asked to talk about the history of podcasting, the Iraq war, and interviewing skills. But, "I sit down, and within 10 minutes that's all out the window.

"I was presented with a topic - the Awakening - at that very first meeting back in April. 'What's the Awakening?' I ask. 'Tell me about it.' I didn't know."

"Well, the Awakening refers to a series of prisoner hunger strikes that protested extended solitary confinement in Pelican Bay's Security Housing Unit, which eventually led to an outside lawsuit - Ashker v. Governor of California - and prison-rehabilitation reform.

"Things now are much less violent," said Critz. "There's a lot more focus on ... actual rehabilitation, rather than just locking people away for decades."

He came away from those first sessions in June and July realizing that the classes were not so much about giving prisoners podcasting skills as about working with their skills.

"They'll generate the content. My role would be to take that content and put it together, produce it in some fashion," Critz said.

The first episode featured introductions from each prisoner. Then, longer and longer interviews, which focused on the Awakening.

He wanted to start simple - by recording, interviewing, sound design, constructing narratives. But it became hard to do within two hours a week with two different groups from A Facility and B Facility who never interact to get them all on same page.

“How do I coordinate 15 guys who don’t talk to the other half? I started to sweat from the enormity of it,” Critz said.

The podcast debuted in mid-December. “Pelican Bay Unlocked” can be found online at Pelicanbayunlocked.com.

Critz fully appreciated that the Awakening podcast would fascinate future generations, the first-hand accounts of those who were there and who organized the protests.

He was excited to tell that story. “To contribute to that historical record keeps me all jazzed and keeps me up at night.”

And now, he said, when he walks across the Pelican Bay Prison yard on his way to classes, he’s approached by inmates who’ve heard he’s the Audio Journalism guy and want to join in. His program has a growing signup list.

Critz said most of the prisoners haven’t yet heard the podcast, and they won’t until they get it on the institution’s television network.

Most of the podcast’s feedback has come from a prisoner’s family, posted on the website. “Mothers, sisters, daughters saying I’m happy to hear from my son, brother, father doing something positive with their prison experience.

“That’s been really, really cool.”