

A True Story of Redemption Through Opportunity

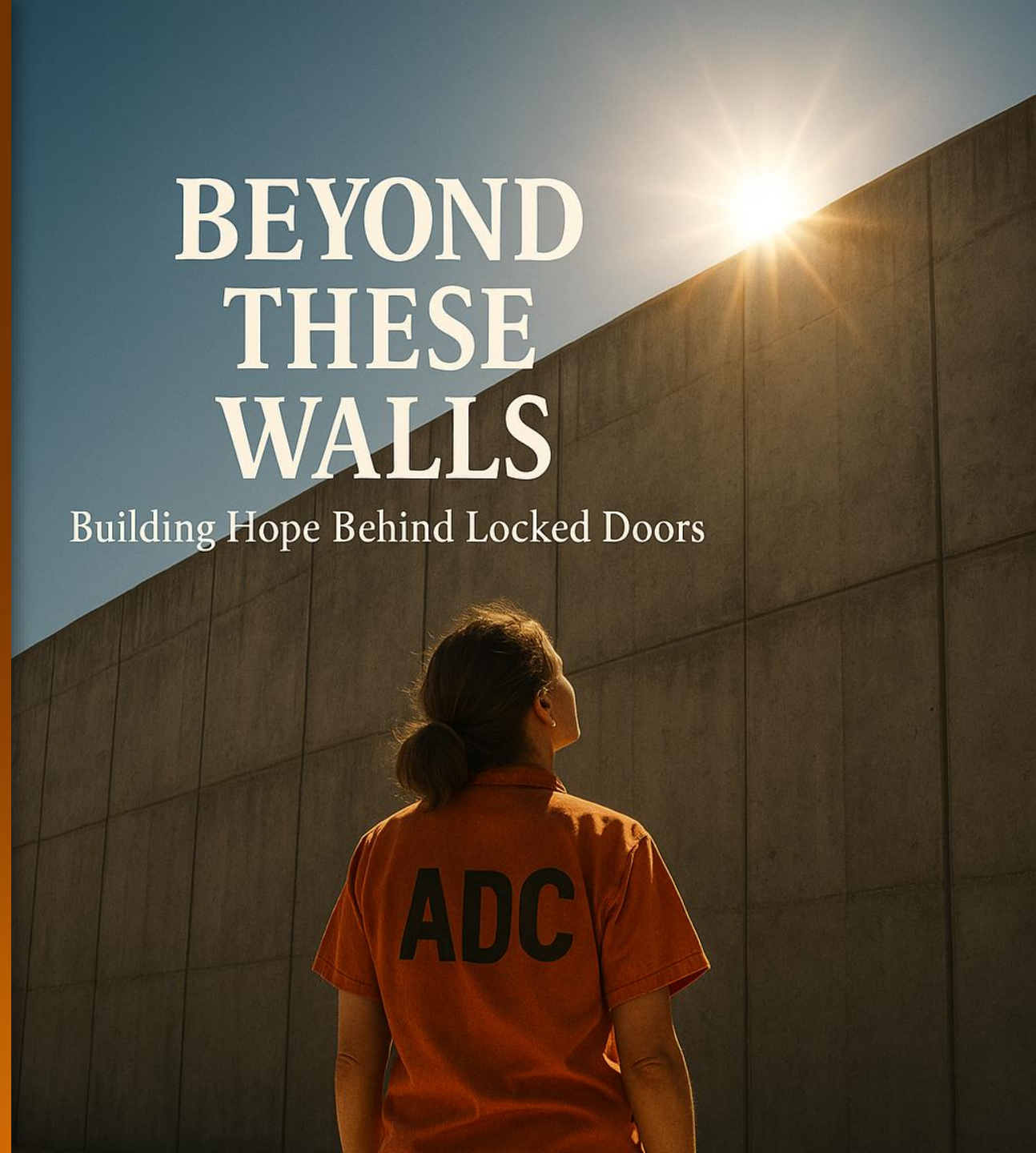
by Galen R. Collins



© 2025 Galen R. Collins. All Rights Reserved. Registered with Writers Guild of America West #2323357

BEYOND THESE WALLS

Building Hope Behind Locked Doors



Logline

A holistic program blending life skills, employability training, culinary instruction, and reentry support transforms thirty incarcerated women and the educators who refuse to give up on them, proving that dignity, opportunity, and belonging can change anyone who dares to rise.



Synopsis

When Northern Arizona University partners with the Arizona Department of Corrections to launch a holistic training program inside a women's prison, skepticism and logistical chaos nearly derail it. Delays, staff turnover, and the stark reality of prison life test the resolve of the founding team. But as ten women from the Santa Maria Yard—many battling trauma, addiction, and lifelong disadvantage—enter the program, hope takes root. Through food-safety instruction, life-skills development, employability and culinary training, and emotional breakthroughs, they discover purpose, self-worth, and a path forward. Their lives continue after release as they navigate the real world, rebuild their confidence, and find work. The program's results ripple across the state... and eventually the world.



Why This Story Matters

Beyond These Walls matters because it reveals something rarely shown in film: incarcerated women are not hopeless — they are underserved.

This story shows that:

- Trauma, addiction, and poverty are often at the root of incarceration.
- Education, structure, and emotional support dramatically reduce recidivism.
- Giving someone a skill is powerful but giving them confidence, dignity, and belonging is transformational.

It highlights the humanity inside a system that often strips people of their humanity.

It honors the educators, correctional staff, and volunteers who quietly do the work no one sees.

And it shows the world this truth: When you believe in people no one else believes in... they rise.

•



Themes That Drive the Story

- Second chances
- Dignity and respect
- Healing from trauma
- Belonging and community
- Hope in oppressive places
- Education as empowerment
- Humanity inside incarceration
- Mercy with structure
- Renewal and reinvention
- Positive ripple effects in society



Act I – Seed of the Program / Entering Perryville Women’s Prison

- Rob Averitt, professor and administrator at Northern Arizona University, visits his mentally ill brother, Daniel, in a Virginia county jail — an experience that inspired him resolve to help incarcerated individuals reenter society with dignity and real opportunities.
- Rob contacts the Arizona Department of Corrections (ADOC) and meets with Johannes Hartmann, a seasoned ADOC education administrator, to propose a holistic training program with structured aftercare.
- ADOC supports the concept but lacks funding. Rob and Cheryl Thomas, Director of the Arizona Hospitality Research & Resource Center, co-author a grant and secure a \$330,000 FIPSE award from the U.S. Department of Education.
- ADOC unexpectedly assigns Perryville Women’s Prison (Santa Maria Unit) as the implementation site — not one of the men’s prisons Rob previously toured.
- Four key staff members are hired: Dr. Lisa Wilson (Program Director), Eileen Clarkson (Culinary Instructor), Jessica Jackson (Life Coach), and Corliss Jones (Aftercare Coordinator).
- Building #35 is selected for renovation into a fully operational training space: a culinary lab, classroom, and computer lab. The NAU team confronts the realities of corrections work: construction delays, equipment installation issues, bureaucratic hurdles, and the steep learning curve of operating inside a prison. Lisa quits. Eileen becomes the Program Director.



Act II – Transformation Begins

- The program is promoted across Perryville. The first cohort of ten women enrolls — guarded, skeptical, wounded, yet willing to hope.
- Building 35's renovation is completed in March 2002 — nine months behind schedule — but fully equipped with a training kitchen, classroom, and computer lab. Canteen, the prison foodservice provider, donates equipment and food supplies, and a lodging-technology company donates the computers.
- The program launches with Food Safety training, Life Skills instruction, and personal reflection journals — the first fragile steps toward trust.
- Before they can cook, each woman must pass the national ServSafe Food Handler exam. All ten women pass — a moment of collective triumph — and hands-on kitchen training begins.
- A Prison-to-Work Advisory Board forms to support job placement. Corliss secures 100 employers willing to interview program graduates upon release.
- As the women learn and practice life and employability skills, they open up and share breakthroughs. One inmate admits:
"I used to think love meant letting people do whatever they wanted. It doesn't. That's... new for me."
- Jessica prepares them for the next phase:
"Alright, ladies — you've earned your Food Safety certificates, your Customer Service certificates, and you are almost finished with kitchen training. Now we move to the next step: getting the job — writing the résumé, completing applications, and interviewing."



Act III – Beyond The Walls

- As release dates approach, the women practice résumé writing, job applications, and mock interviews — learning accountability, confidence, and professional communication. Corliss prepares them for life beyond prison: donated professional attire, hygiene baskets, job placement help, and housing support when needed.
- FIPSE funds are nearing their end. A plan for ADOC and Canteen to co-fund the program — each contributing 50% — falls apart when ADOC withdraws due to severe budget cuts. Despite more than 150 women enrolled and a growing waitlist, ADOC announces the program will shut down on January 1, 2006. Rob must break the news to the women. One graduate responds through tears: “ *We saw what this program did for the women who finished. It gave them hope... skills... made ‘em believe they might actually make it out there.*”
- Fragile, determined Becca (emotional core) prepares for release after years of trauma and instability. On her final night, she writes in her life-skills journal: “ *I’m stepping forward with more confidence than I’ve ever had. And maybe — just maybe — my journey can change.*”
- After release, Corliss drives her to job interviews, supporting every shaky step. At a McDonald’s in Phoenix, Becca completes her first real interview. The next morning, she gets the call: she’s hired. Her mother overhears the news and breaks down — the beginning of healing.
- Montage: graduates working in restaurants, hotels, salons, call centers, college campuses, and small businesses — rebuilding lives with dignity and hope.
- At the 2010 ICHRIE Conference in Puerto Rico, Rob presents the results: 60.7% “Exceptional,” 30.9% “Above Average,” 7.9% “Average,” and a 10% recidivism rate vs. the national 67%.



A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing an orange jumpsuit, is shown in profile from the chest up. She is looking upwards and to the left with a hopeful expression. The background is a dark, textured wall with a chain-link fence and a single strand of barbed wire visible at the top. The lighting is dramatic, coming from the side, highlighting her face and the texture of the wall. The overall mood is one of aspiration and resilience.

The story ends not with
perfection, but with
transformation — showing
that education, structure,
and compassion can
empower women to rise
beyond these walls.

Target Audience

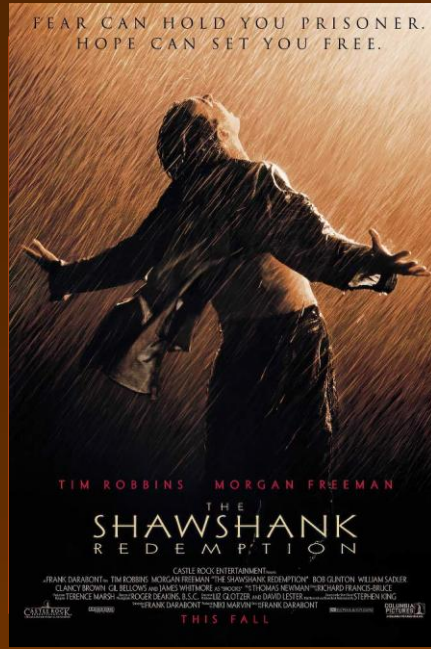
- Social justice festival programmers
- Inspirational drama lovers
- Faith-adjacent viewers
- Women-centered audiences
- Latino-American audiences
- Educators and criminal justice reform advocates
- Producers seeking authentic, character-driven true stories



Tone & Style

- **Tone:** Compassionate, authentic, and quietly uplifting. The film balances the harsh reality of incarceration with a deep sense of dignity, hope, and emotional restoration. It is honest without being bleak, inspirational without sentimentality, and grounded in lived experience.
- **Style:** Lean, character-centered storytelling with documentary-like realism. Scenes are purposeful and intimate, using natural dialogue, small gestures, and everyday routine to reveal transformation. The visual style is restrained, observational, and empathetic—showing how education, structure, and human connection gradually change lives.

Comparable Films



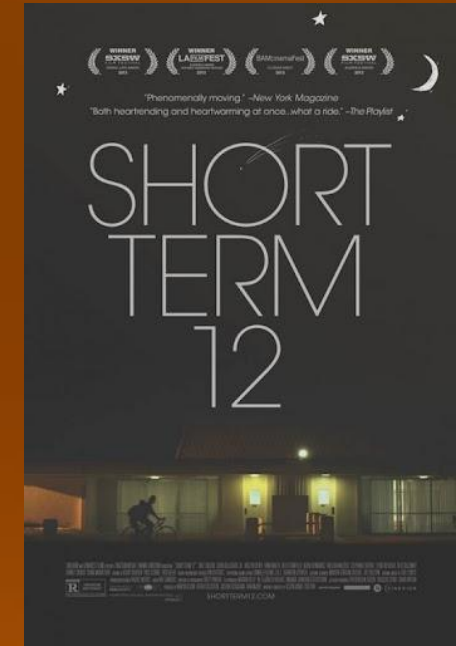
The Shawshank Redemption (1994) – Story of hope forged within prison walls → \$73M+ worldwide, Oscar-nominated, now considered the #1 film of all time by IMDb users.



The Mustang (2019) – Intimate portrait of inmate rehabilitation through structured training → Sundance standout, Spirit Award nominee.



The Forgiven (2017) – Restorative-justice drama of accountability and grace → Acclaimed true-story adaptation..



Short Term 12 (2013) – Intimate, character-driven healing in a care facility → Critically acclaimed indie breakthrough.

Format Potential

Feature Film (120 min) – Powerful standalone drama

A photograph of a prison complex at dusk. In the foreground, a white rectangular sign with black text is mounted on a metal post. The sign reads "ARIZONA STATE PRISON COMPLEX PERRYVILLE NO TRESPASSING". Behind the sign is a low stone wall. In the background, a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire runs across the frame. Beyond the fence, there are several prison buildings with yellow walls and dark roofs. Tall light poles with glowing lights are visible against the twilight sky.

**ARIZONA STATE
PRISON
COMPLEX
PERRYVILLE
NO
TRESPASSING**

Why I'm Telling This Story

- I'm telling this story because I witnessed a program that genuinely transformed the lives of 30 women — and then watched it disappear due to Arizona Department of Corrections budget cuts. Decades later, I knew the impact was too important to be forgotten. People make mistakes, and they deserve a second chance, especially when they work for it. This holistic program proved that with education, structure, and the right support system, women can rebuild their lives and recidivism can be dramatically reduced. I want this film to remind others of what's possible when we choose compassion, opportunity, and belief in human potential.



The program's results, published in a 2010 ICHRIE article, have been downloaded nearly 1,300 times across 70+ countries — including major universities, government agencies, and companies such as Harvard, the U.S. Department of Justice, & Oracle.

A story about how dignity, education, and belief can transform lives in the place most people least expect:
PRISON.

Contact: Galen R. Collins | Galen.Collins@nau.edu

BEYOND THESE WALLS

Building Hope Behind Locked Doors

