



New Jersey Department of Corrections

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 25, 2024

Media Inquiries

Amy Z. Quinn

Amy.Z.Quinn@doc.nj.gov

(856) 889-0571

NJDOC-PRODUCED SHORT DOCUMENTARY SHOWCASES A UNIQUE MUSIC EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR INCARCERATED MEN

TRENTON, NJ - The New Jersey Department of Corrections announces [its short documentary, “Be Not Afraid”](#) -- spotlighting an extraordinary music program inside a prison for men – was honored by the state’s premiere film festival.

The documentary, produced by the Department’s Office of Public Information in conjunction with the Division of Programs and Reintegration Services, focuses on an immersive music theory educational program at Garden State Correctional Facility in Chesterfield Township, N.J. “Be Not Afraid” had its premiere as part of the 22nd Annual Garden State Film Festival on March 23 and was honored with the event’s Broader Vision Award, recognizing films that serve the public good. [Watch it in full here.](#)

"It's truly a pleasure to highlight our dedicated and hardworking educational staff, and initiatives like the music theory program not only showcase their innovation but also provide life-changing opportunities for our incarcerated population," said Commissioner Victoria L. Kuhn, Esq. "The film captures the transformative impact of rehabilitative programs that make a significant difference in the lives of incarcerated persons, and we thank the Garden State Film Festival for bringing international attention to our efforts."

The educational program, now in its 26th year, immerses participants in the art and theory of music, turning incarcerated student novices into a band of proficient musicians, while teaching them valuable lessons about teamwork, self-expression, collaboration, responsibility and creativity.

The documentary also offers insight on the experiences of Ben, the former lead singer of the band, delving into the emotional challenges he faces as he nears release and grapples with the prospect of leaving fellow band members behind. “Be Not Afraid” adeptly explores themes of apprehension, growth, and the impact of the music program on the lives of those involved.

“We’re proud of this opportunity to showcase one of our innovative education programs and its profound effects on both students and teachers,” said Dr. Darcella Sessomes, NJDOC’s Chief of Programs and Reintegration Services. “The documentary effectively portrays the journey of these young men and the extraordinary teachers and staff who help them achieve not just musical proficiency but a sense of achievement and belonging, and gives them training for a career in the music industry.”

Showcasing 200 films from 14 countries across eight venues, the globally-recognized Garden State Film Festival celebrates independent film by curating a selection of original works by filmmakers locally and from around the world.

“Be Not Afraid” was a passion project for filmmaker Chris Carden, Deputy Director of Public Information for the NJDOC, who spent many months with the band, learning how the program works and getting to know the young men it impacts.

“The public perception of incarcerated persons is all too frequently one-sided, failing to consider their journeys toward self-improvement, and my hope is that the public will embrace their struggles, fears and triumphs,” Carden said. “While conveying the young men’s emotional narrative in this unique setting, I also wanted to show that we, as a Department, are dedicated to providing creative, progressive opportunities to help make those journeys possible.”

“Be Not Afraid” promises to be a thought-provoking and impactful cinematic experience, providing audiences with a glimpse into the transformative power of education and the arts within the correctional system.

About the New Jersey Department of Corrections:

The mission of the New Jersey Department of Corrections is to advance public safety and promote successful reintegration in a dignified, safe, secure, rehabilitative, and gender-informed environment, supported by a professional, trained, and diverse workforce, enhanced by community engagement.