

PRISON BREAKTHROUGH

Dennis Sobin found the inspiration for his Safe Streets Arts Foundation while doing 10 years for a crime he didn't commit

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It was 1991. Dennis Sobin and his family were vacationing at a nudist colony in Florida. He videotaped his two young children swimming and playing outdoors for a cable documentary he was filming, titled *Social Nudity in America*. Ironically, some of the local nudists objected. They were afraid that such pictures could open up their community to others, and demanded that Dennis destroy the tape.

He refused and prepared to leave, but before he could, they called the police to come and arrest him. They told the cops that they had seen him taping his children in sordid poses—producing kiddie porn. Dennis wasn't concerned because he had the tape as proof of what he had actually filmed. Indeed, at his insistence, that was shown in court.

However, Dennis was a man of principle, and he refused to plead guilty to a misdemeanor when state attorneys offered a deal that would've required him to pay a small fine and give up the tape. He said that he wouldn't plead guilty to something he didn't do. At the trial, he was depicted as an obstinate individual who was a believer in the libertarian philosophy that government should help rather than hinder human freedom, beginning with the decriminalization of all acts between consenting adults. The jury was informed that he once ran for office in Washington, D.C., on that platform. Even though it had no relevance to this case, witnesses were flown in to reveal his views and outspokenness.

And *then* the video was shown. The state prosecution admitted that although it contained nothing inappropriate, the defendant was obviously such a devious and degenerate creature that he had somehow

managed to get rid of the offensive scenes before the police could arrive and seize the tape. Moreover, it *did* show that Dennis's children were of mixed race. He realized that, from the jury's point of view, "for this brazen Northerner to bring his two nigger kids to this land and allow them to romp around in the buff as if they owned the place was too much."

They found him guilty of engaging children in the "attempted" production of child pornography, which they hadn't been able to watch because it simply never existed. The judge sentenced him to 12 years in state prison. Prosecutors lobbied the federal government to bring additional charges against Dennis. The feds found inaccuracies in a bankruptcy form he had signed five years earlier. They charged him with "Bankruptcy Fraud." He was found guilty again, and when his Florida sentence ended, he'd have to spend five more years in federal prison.

I corresponded with Dennis while he was serving time—it turned out to be "only" a decade—time which he helped pass by playing the guitar. He remained optimistic about the plans he was making for what he would do after being released. His transformation of that fantasy into reality is inspiring.

He founded the Safe Streets Arts Foundation (PrisonsFoundation.org), "dedicated to promoting the arts in jails and prisons by mentoring to imprisoned artists and providing them with the support they need to develop and exhibit their artistic creations. The foundation helps imprisoned artists by training and providing mentors, making art supplies and musical instruments available to them, operating a Prison Art Gallery in downtown Washington, D.C., that exhibits and sells prisoner-created art, and showcasing live performances there and at other locations, including the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts where the Foundation has its annual program that features plays and music written by prisoners. We believe that art can be therapeutic and redemptive. The mission of the Safe Streets Arts Foundation is to give imprisoned artists hope and opportunity."

As Salvador Dali said, "Even in a jail, even in a concentration camp, I would be supreme in my own world of art, even if I had to paint with my tongue on the dusty floor of my cell."

I had never bought a painting before, and the foundation has made available hundreds of inexpensive reproductions by more than 80 prison artists, but there was one particular image with which I strongly identified—a clown behind bars for the crime of being "Incorrigible"—that now adorns the wall of my office. The artist, Russ Luncsford, was released from prison six years ago. He hopes his work "moves people to new perspectives," and characterizes his art as "a service."

Meanwhile, a team of filmmakers is planning to make a movie about Dennis Sobin, exploring how he endured the slings and arrows of prosecutors and political leaders who exploited a puritanical and ignorant public, resulting in a chunk of his life lost in prison. And found. Dennis told me that he hopes "to compose the soundtrack based on what I learned about music during my ten years in prison"

—PAUL KRASSNER

Visit www.SafeStreetsArts.org