

Is mental health a laughing matter? Is race discrimination a joke? These were the questions a team from Southside Partnership, part of the Certitude Group, which provides help for people with mental health needs in prison, considered when they brought a stand-up comedian into prisons to talk about mental health and race. The result – an award-winning DVD, *Bringing the Outside In* – has had a major impact and has been sent to prisons across the country.

Mental health issues among the prison population are well documented; 90% of British prisoners have one or more psychiatric disorders; suicide rates in prison are 15 times higher than in the wider community and black, minority and ethnic prisoners have mental health rates three times higher than the national average.

The problem has long been identified and the support mechanisms are in place; the challenge has

set about mental health and race to a group of inmates in prison and to turn the results into a film.

Project leader Fabio Gomes from Southside Partnership explains where the idea came from: “I was influenced by social and cognitive studies which indicate that messages communicated via the media – be that soaps, films or comedy – can be more influential in changing attitudes than a direct therapeutic approach. People have time to think about what they have seen and reflect on it after the event. This gave us the idea to produce some kind of DVD.

“The inspiration to use a comedy theme came from several of our volunteers at Southside, especially Obinna Ugoala, who was a volunteer and is now a community development worker. Many of the people who work for Southside have direct experience of prison and mental health problems and it was enlightening to have their take on how best to connect with people in this situation.”

Southside Partnership teamed up with NHS Surrey – with which it has an ongoing relationship – and

# LAUGHING ON THE INSIDE

How having a good laugh got prisoners talking about mental health and race issues.  
Nicholas Campbell-Watts reports

been in encouraging inmates to take up the help on offer because the stigma attached to mental health stops many people coming forward. This is particularly noticeable in black, minority and ethnic groups who are over-represented in the prison population.

Southside Partnership has been helping prisoners and ex-offenders for many years through its Beyond Prison programme. This ongoing initiative offers practical and emotional support to people while they are in prison and in the crucial hours and days immediately after release. Southside also works with ex-offenders to help them locate housing, access the health and welfare systems and to find employment and training.

As an organisation it is aware that many prisoners and ex-offenders choose to disconnect from the mental health services available. A radical approach was required to engage prisoners with mental health and race-related issues.

## Bold idea

*Bringing the outside in* was a bold notion; the idea was to persuade an outspoken stand-up comic to perform a



**John Ryan,**  
the comedian  
who took part  
in the project

Nicholas Campbell-Watts is director of mental health services for Southside Partnership

production company, Media for Development, to pitch the proposal to the Department for Business and Innovation, which agreed to fund the project.

“We had to work with a number of parties to bring this project together,” explains Gomes. “As well as the combined expertise of the proposal team, we needed supportive prison governors, a suitable performer and an independent evaluator.”

Three Surrey prisons – HMP Coldingley, HMP Send and HMP Downview – agreed to take part in the project and the prison governors played an important part in facilitating the activity. Sandra Young, a community development worker in the Surrey prisons was pleased with the support the project received from the prison staff.

“The governors we work with are well aware that many prisoners are reluctant to take up the help available to them if they are suffering with mental health issues,” Young says. “I think they were pleased to see this issue confronted head on. This ground-breaking project wasn’t always easy to manage but the impact was tremendously positive. Prisoners are – almost by definition – disconnected from the real world and this sense of disconnection can cross over into all elements of their lives. Using humour like this was a way of grabbing people’s attention and encouraging them to think about these topics in a different way.”

## Tough gig

But making jokes about mental health and race is pretty risky so it took a bold comedian to take on this project.

Maya Twardzicki, public health lead at NHS Surrey, knew of just such a performer from her experience developing the ‘Cracking Up’ comedy show – a show designed to lift the lid on mental health and that provided inspiration for the prison based show.

“John Ryan is a professional stand-up comedian with an interest in health and social issues”, she says. “His East End Irish upbringing gives him the rare ability to connect with people from diverse backgrounds and his performances in the ‘Cracking Up’ shows in Surrey were a hit with audiences. When we approached him about this project he was both enthusiastic and imaginative in his response.”

Playing race and mental health issues for laughs was never going to be easy so Ryan knew he had to get his material right. He spent several months in the run-up to the performance researching the issues and meeting inmates in several prison-based focus groups.

“As comedians we have a great opportunity to talk about things which are important to us,” Ryan says. “Mental health is something I am very interested in and prison fascinates me. However, comedy only works if your material is relevant. I wanted to generate a strong reaction to what I was saying but I also wanted keep everyone on side. That’s why the conversations I had with people in the various prisons before I wrote the show were so important.”

“In the end my only anxiety about performing in prison was the timing – stand-up comedy in a brightly lit room in the middle of the afternoon to a sober audience is always going to be a tough call.”

However, the performance went down a storm and the audience reacted well to Ryan’s comments on everything from race, discrimination and class to



The Southside Partnership/NHS team picking up their award



Beyond Prison at work inside a prison

lock-down, depression, isolation and self-harming. No subject was taboo and it was clear that many of his jokes connected personally with his audience.

## Audience response

The Institute of Psychiatry evaluated the project by surveying prisoners on their views before and after the performance. The shift in opinion was noticeable; respondents reported a greater level of comfort discussing mental health problems with staff and fellow inmates after the performance than before it.

A majority of respondents indicated they would be more prepared to take up the emotional support and physical coping strategies such as gym sessions and capoeira available in the prison. Inmates responding after the performance said they were significantly more likely agree that psychotherapy was an effective treatment for mental health issues, and that it is possible to make a full recovery from severe mental health problems.

The reaction to the use of humour was particularly strong and is illustrated by the enthusiastic comments written by inmates on the completed surveys: “I think it opens people’s minds,” said one.

“I think it was a brilliant way to get people listening and laughing with a serious message,” said another.

“A sense of humour can grab audience attention,” commented one inmate.

“I think it is a good idea because it gets people to relax but also relate to what is being mentioned. It’s healthy,” said another.

The DVD *Bringing the Outside In* features Ryan’s comedy performance and the creative thinking and focus groups which went on behind the scenes. It has been shown in prisons all over England and recently won a NHS South East Coast, Health and Social Care Award for best Mental Health and Wellbeing project across Kent, Surrey and Sussex. ■

A download of Ryan’s *Bringing the Outside In* performance can also be viewed on the Southside Partnership website, [www.beyondprison.org.uk](http://www.beyondprison.org.uk).