



"Freedom in Surrender" by Nan Dickson

Free on the Inside

by M.I. Torres

Free Behind Fences, a photo exhibit by artist Nan Dickson, captures the images of transformation women prisoners have experienced when placed in faith-based dorms and treated with respect.

Showing at the UBA Offices March 13 – May 30, the exhibit of 16 images presents a visual testimony of the work being done by Discipleship Unlimited, a multi-faceted prison and community ministry, founded by Linda and Dallas Strom. (see inset, pg. 2)

Dickson states that she prayed for the subject matter for a FotoFest 2008 exhibit. "I wanted something meaningful, important," says Dickson. Not long after this, Dickson met Dallas and Linda Strom and was given the opportunity to do an exhibit focusing on the ministry. Dickson desired through this

exhibit to make the work of Discipleship Unlimited more widely known through an art venue and show the work of transformation that Jesus Christ is doing in a faith-based dorm.

Faith-based dorms are not a new ministry, but are still very rare. The inmates housed in the dorms attend services, bible studies, meet with spiritual leaders and undergo discipleship. Strom stresses that these dorms are not an exception to the prison rules, but the inmates are given the opportunities to grow in faith.

When asked how Dickson's exhibit portrays the story behind these walls and fences, Strom (right), author of *Karla Faye Tucker: Set Free*, says, "Some of these women are doing long sentences. I believe her exhibit represents the power of life and freedom that they can have even when locked up. They are free on the inside and just as free as anyone of us on the outside. It displays the power of God."



As an artist depicting the stories of the inmates, Dickson says, "They are so easy to photograph because when they worship, they are lost in their relationship with God." Dickson says that she was humbled by her experience of photographing these women. Dickson recalls meeting one of the women during her visits to the prison who was wearing her "Offender" badge.

"It absolutely pierced me. When I asked why she wore it, she said she chose to because the picture on it is of a mean woman. She told me she's not the same – she's transformed." Dickson continued, "But we're all offenders before God. As believers, our 'offender' badges would say 'now forgiven'."

Dickson observes that people disciplined in faith-based dorms have a strong transformation experience. She relates it to the life of all believers saying, "It happens in churches, too. We save, save but don't disciple. What happens when churches disciple? It works the same way in prisons." This transformation is what

Dickson says made her experience with Discipleship Unlimited, and her exhibit, so meaningful.

Dickson states that there is a tremendous opportunity for believers to minister in prisons and for churches to found faith-based dorms and prison ministries. As others view the **Free Behind Fences** exhibit, Dickson would like the audience to ask themselves what they or their church can do to be a part of what Discipleship Unlimited is doing.



Artist, Nan Dickson

Free Behind Fences exhibit opens March 13 at 4:00 p.m. at the Union Baptist Association offices at 2916 West T.C. Jester, Ste. 200, Houston, TX, 77018. It is a part of FotoFest 2008, an international photographic arts and education non-profit organization.

Discipleship Unlimited

Founded by Dallas and Linda Strom and based in Gatesville, Texas, Discipleship Unlimited hosts several weekly events in the many local prisons.

The Strom family and their ministry have over 30 years of experience working in the prison system and with the inmates in order to deliver the message of salvation through Jesus and the need for discipleship for believers.

Linda Strom served as the spiritual advisor for Karla Faye Tucker, the first woman executed in Texas in over 100 years. Strom's book *Karla Faye Tucker: Set Free* relates the story of Tucker's transformation while on Death Row.

Following the 1998 execution, Gatesville prison doors opened up to Discipleship Unlimited's work and message, allowing them to bring in volunteers and lead services, bible studies, conferences and counseling sessions for inmates and, sometimes, their invited families.

The ministry's motto is based on Tucker's words to the team, "You're not coming to see inmates – you are coming to see people."

Linda Strom states that visiting on a weekly basis, they watch the transformations but when the prison staff observes the change in the inmates, it serves as confirmation. "We see it a couple of times a week," says Strom, "but they are there 24/7 and witness how real it is."

Discipleship Unlimited works with inmates who will soon be released as they prepare to re-enter the communities they left. Local churches in those communities are contacted by Discipleship Unlimited in order to prepare a plan for continued discipleship upon the inmate's release.

For information about how to get involved with Discipleship Unlimited, visit their website at www.liferow.org.

ARTIST STATEMENT:

Many Texans appreciate the appeal of wide open-spaces and would quickly say, "Don't fence me in." But what about people living behind fences in the Texas prison system? Can they possibly live freely when the system determines everything from their clothing to their mealtimes, their surroundings, and their companions, when the seriousness of their offenses may have given them lengthy sentences?

Nan Dickson has gone behind these fences and has captured glimpses of a freedom that many on the outside may long for but not find where they are looking in the wide-open spaces of their unconfined lives.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY:

Nan Dickson is a fourth generation Texan educated at universities in Tennessee and Texas. Her photographic career began in 1979 and led to years of continuing interest in photojournalism. The training she received from David Clanton and Don Rutledge, a photographer with Black Star, had early and lasting impact. She combines a trained eye with technical skills, experience in public relations, and growing knowledge of people and life. She has recently begun to exhibit her black-and-white photography at locations in Texas and Colorado.