

# Classical group pairs with people who served prison time to create music exploring incarceration, rehabilitation, hope

*Elise Schmelzer*

Ashley Furst threw away all of her business clothes before she turned herself in at federal prison.

She didn't think she'd need them after she served her 27-month sentence. She assumed her professional career in communications and marketing was over.

"I had this mindset that I wasn't worthy of anything anymore," she said.

But Furst eventually found a need for business clothes again. She'll tell her story — from the low of trashing her wardrobe to her new position as senior program manager of employment opportunities at Responsible Business Initiative for Justice — [at The Lived Experience Concert](#).

The Dec. 13 performance, at The People's Building in Aurora, will feature compositions of writing and music created by pairs of formerly incarcerated people and classical musicians along with videos and other works of art.

The artists and formerly incarcerated people participating hope it helps the audience see the humanity of people who spent time in prison. The majority of people sentenced to prison will eventually be released back into communities after serving their time, and organizers hope attendees will see that these once-incarcerated people can be successful and contribute to society after release.

"I feel like I need to tell my story because maybe it helps me deal with what I've been through, but also maybe I feel some deep-seated need to show people I'm not a bad person," Furst said. "Not all people who commit crimes are inherently bad — there's usually a lot more to it."

After the murder of George Floyd, the members of the classical music group Playground Ensemble felt like they needed to become more involved in social justice issues, founder and director Conrad Kehn said. The chamber-music group sought out a community organization working with people re-entering society after incarceration to collaborate on a project.

After a few dead ends, the Playground Ensemble found a willing partner in [Remerg](#), a Denver nonprofit organization that connects people leaving jail and prison with resources.



Roohallah Mobarez, left, and Conrad Kehn and work together inside the King Center on the Auraria Campus in Denver on a music composition by Kehn that combines Mobarez's voice and narration, on Nov. 20, 2022. (Photo By Kathryn Scott/Special to The Denver Post)

Roohallah Mobarez, director of operations at Remerg and one of the formerly incarcerated people participating in the concert, chose to tell a story that doesn't center solely around his time in prison. Instead, he focuses on his father, who emigrated to the U.S. with Mobarez and the rest of their family from Afghanistan in 1993 as refugees.

In his story, he speaks about their lives as immigrants and his father's death. He talks about his younger self and seeking reconciliation with his father.

"I hope it reminds people of everyone's personhood and their experiences instead of stripping them and making them into that other, that title of felon, convict, criminal, offender — whatever it may be," Mobarez said.

Kehn said some of his favorite students from his decades of teaching are people who had been incarcerated. One of those students spent time in solitary confinement and created a string instrument by tying dental floss to his bedframe and using a toilet paper roll as a slide.

"I believe there are a ton of artists and musicians incarcerated," he said.

Mobarez found solace in visual art in prison. He found a mentor who taught him how to make paintbrushes out of toilet paper rolls. When he moved cells, he often left paint splatters behind.

But working on a musical piece is new to him. He's tried to explain some of the melodies and noises he hears in his head to Kehn, who then incorporated the ideas into the song. But the creative process goes both ways — Kehn saved 15 audio recordings of closing doors on his computer for Mobarez to listen to and determine which sounded most like prison doors sliding shut.

"Art moves, it pulls the strings of the heart," Mobarez said. "I love the five love languages and I personally think that art is the sixth love language — all mediums of art. We can communicate on a different level."



Conrad Kehn, left, and Roohallah Mobarez work together inside the King Center on the Auraria Campus in Denver on a music composition on Nov. 20, 2022. (Photo By Kathryn Scott/Special to The Denver Post)

David Coleman, who was [released from prison a year ago](#) after serving more than 30 years, found the process of writing and recording his story to be therapeutic.

"Each time you tell it, you realize you're still going through a lot of what you're talking about, still grappling with the emotions and the trauma of it all," he said.

The partnership has also been eye-opening for the musicians, Kehn said.

"We're all a bunch of private school kids," Kehn said.

"The difference between me and some of the people we might be doing storytelling with is a combination of privilege and luck," he said.

"How did I slide through when others did not?"

*The Lived Experience Concert will take place 7 p.m. Dec. 13 at The People's Building, 9995 E. Colfax Ave., Aurora. Tickets can be [purchased online at playgroundensemble.org](https://playgroundensemble.org).*