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THE CONCERT THAT ALMOST WAS

By
John Purugganan

It is often said, “It’s the thought that counts.” In this case, it truly was. Rap and film star, Common, along with a surprise guest, rumored to be a certain coach on NBC’s hit show *the Voice*, were scheduled to give a concert on Facility “A”, the Progressive Programming Facility at California State Prison – Los Angeles County. The Governor’s own Chief of Staff Nancy McFadden came down from the State Capitol for the event. The stage was literally set. Unfortunately, due to 45 mile per hour winds, the concert was cancelled.

The inmates had been locked down so that a 2500-square foot stage could be constructed. Whenever machinery or vehicles enter the perimeter of the prison yard, the inmates are confined to their cells as a security measure. On March 30, machinery and trucks bearing materials and equipment to build the huge stage came and went. By late afternoon, when the inmates were released for dinner, the massive stage with line-array speakers and light towers sitting in the softball field was quite the spectacle. The men experienced mixed feelings of excitement and anxiety. Instead of standing upright, front-of-house risers for the sound mixers and other equipment were laying in the field. The high winds being the obvious explanation.

No music was played, no songs were sung, but the thought, the intention, the planning, the labor, and commitment of each individual involved in this effort was appreciated more than they could possibly know. Many of the PPF prisoners have been in prison for decades and have never seen the inside of a visiting room. They have been shunned by family and friends, and have no one who considers them worthy of their time. This unsolicited act of kindness came unexpected to these men, who understand that their own actions have made them the scorn of society.

The concert that almost was still made quite an impact. In what is often perceived as a “what’s-in-it-for-me” world, this benevolent gesture gave my fellow Facility “A” residents and me hope. Strangers reaching out to us in this manner clearly said, “You matter; your lives still hold value.”

The PPF program, originally the “Honor Yard,” began as an experiment that offered an opportunity for prisoners to improve and remake themselves into something better than what they were before. The majority of the initial volunteer participants were LWOPs, men sentenced to Life Without Parole. Some prisoners want to clean up their act to please the Parole Board. There is nothing wrong with that, nobody wants to stay in prison. But LWOPs, men dedicated to renewing their hearts and their minds knowing they are never getting out of prison? They disprove the popular notion that “they’re just sorry they got caught.” Theirs is of a nature far more genuine than the callous rhetoric insinuates.

Evidently, it’s not always about ulterior motives. It’s not always about campaign votes. It’s not always about record sales, either. Sometimes it really is about humanity.