

Read this article to practice with informational text. Take the quiz.

## Film producer brings music, writing to teen offenders

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff

Oct. 09, 2014 1:00 AM



Incarcerated youth fill planters with soil to plant a vegetable garden at the Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall in Sylmar, California, Oct. 16, 2013.

LOS ANGELES—Ten teenage inmates sit around a table in a hallway near the guard station. Rap music is playing—an unusual sound at a jail. Their heads are nodding to the beat.

In the middle of the group is Scott Budnick, 38, wearing a dark sweatshirt and sneakers. He asks the teens to write about the song lyrics that spoke to them.

Budnick is a volunteer teacher who leads creative-writing classes for teenagers who have gotten into trouble with the law. When children are accused or found guilty of a crime, they sometimes have to spend time behind bars in special detention centers for young people, called juvenile halls, or “juvie” for short. Many stay there as they wait for their court cases, and some go on to adult prisons.

### One Class And He Was Hooked

A juvenile hall can be a difficult environment in which to grow up. For years, Budnick has been teaching writing classes for teens in juvenile halls to give them something to look forward to and, hopefully, inspire them.

Juvenile hall is very different from the other world Budnick inhabits. When not volunteering, Budnick is a movie producer, planning and organizing major Hollywood film projects, including “The Hangover” series.

Even as he became more and more successful, at a certain point Budnick began feeling empty. He was getting less meaning out of the process of putting together film projects. Through a friend, he heard about InsideOut Writers, a volunteer creative-writing program in the county’s juvenile halls. He attended a class in 2003 and was fascinated by the young men, their backgrounds and their stories.

## **Many Forms Of Inspiration**

More than 10 years later, he is still at it. Once they listen to the rap song Budnick chose, the young inmates begin writing their responses. Inspirational posters of President Obama stare down at them as they work. Next, Budnick and the other volunteers leading the class introduce a new topic, telling students about recent hunger strikes by inmates protesting solitary confinement in the state’s prisons.

Budnick and his fellow volunteers start a discussion on the fairness of the policies that led to the the protests. Under what conditions is it fair to keep a prisoner alone in a room without any human contact? Is refusing to eat an acceptable way of protesting a policy you disagree with?

The class then reads a newspaper article about Steven Czifra, who spent eight years in solitary confinement and is now a student at the University of California at Berkeley. The teens are asked to write poetry inspired by a quote from Czifra: “I have a gift.”

## **Writing As Therapy**

After 20 minutes, they read their poems aloud, raw words tumbling out like raps. A 17-year-old named Andres who dreams about being an architect, reads a poem about his inner conflict.

“My life is a gift but also a curse / My life has a lot of truths and a lot of lies / I like this gift but I don’t because sometimes I see no light / I know my life is a gift but also a curse,” he reads.

Antonio, a 16-year-old who was behind bars for more than a year awaiting trial but has since been released, said Budnick’s classes helped him to survive his time in juvenile hall. Classes offered him and his fellow inmates an opportunity to express their emotions in a healthy way.

“I’ll be stressed out—I’ll write about it,” Antonio said. “It’s a good outlet. I don’t have to fight somebody and dig a deeper hole.”

## Even Gardening Has Benefits

Budnick has been trying to help young inmates in other ways, too. In the fall, he persuaded the county to allow the teens to plant small gardens outside their brick dorms.

“I think the process of caring for anything—a human being, plant or animal—is great in teaching empathy. Most of them weren’t cared for, or they wouldn’t be here,” Budnick said.

Under the watchful eyes of guards, the prisoners pour soil into the beds and plant peppers, onions, lettuce, strawberries and herbs. Crude tattoos of Hello Kitty, the Dodgers’ logo and girlfriends’ names peek out from the sleeves of their baggy gray T-shirts.

Budnick’s work on behalf of juvenile inmates does not stop there. He has also been working to the fight some of the injustices he sees in the system.

## Telling New Kinds Of Stories

In the past few years, he has begun taking formerly incarcerated young people to meet with California state lawmakers. These visits have helped lead to improvements to the juvenile legal system.

In 2013, Budnick founded a non-profit organization devoted to keeping teens who are released from juvenile hall from committing additional crimes and ending up back inside. His organization provides various services for those teens, including support groups and yoga classes. The organization also offers help filling out college forms.

Throughout Budnick’s journey, he has kept in touch with the young men with whom he has worked. Many inmates in juvenile halls move on to state prisons when they turn 18. Budnick visits about 10 state facilities annually to see them.

At the end of last year, Budnick left his longtime production company to form a new entertainment business that will focus on social justice.

He said he woke up one morning and realized that he could make an even greater impact through the films he made. “Nonprofits can do incredible work. You make a film, it can touch tens of millions of people,” he said.

He added, “I love telling stories and I’m going to love, even more, telling stories that can have a social impact.”

## Quiz

1. Select the paragraph from the section "Telling New Kinds Of Stories" that describes how Scott Budnick's efforts have led to positive changes in the legal process dealing with juveniles.
2. What made Scott Budnick volunteer to give creative-writing classes to juveniles?
  - (a) He was bored of making movies.
  - (b) He was not successful in his movie-making career.
  - (c) He was feeling a lack of purpose while making movies.
  - (d) He wanted to explore life beyond his Hollywood projects.

3. Read the sentence from the article.

"My life is a gift but also a curse / My life has a lot of truths and a lot of lies / I like this gift but I don't because sometimes I see no light / I know my life is a gift but also a curse," he reads.

Why did the author include this sentence in the article?

- (a) It shows the writing capabilities of juvenile teens.
- (b) It helps portray the meaning of a juvenile's life.
- (c) It describes the raw emotions and thoughts of a juvenile.
- (d) It highlights the difficulties faced by juveniles while in prison.

4. Read the sentence from the article.

"It's a good outlet. I don't have to fight somebody and dig a deeper hole."

How does this sentence contribute to the article?

- (a) It helps show that juveniles are enjoying creative writing.
- (b) It helps to highlight how writing has made juveniles humble.
- (c) It shows how writing helps juvie teens express their feelings in a healthy way.
- (d) It describes the development of an emotional connect between juveniles and what they write.