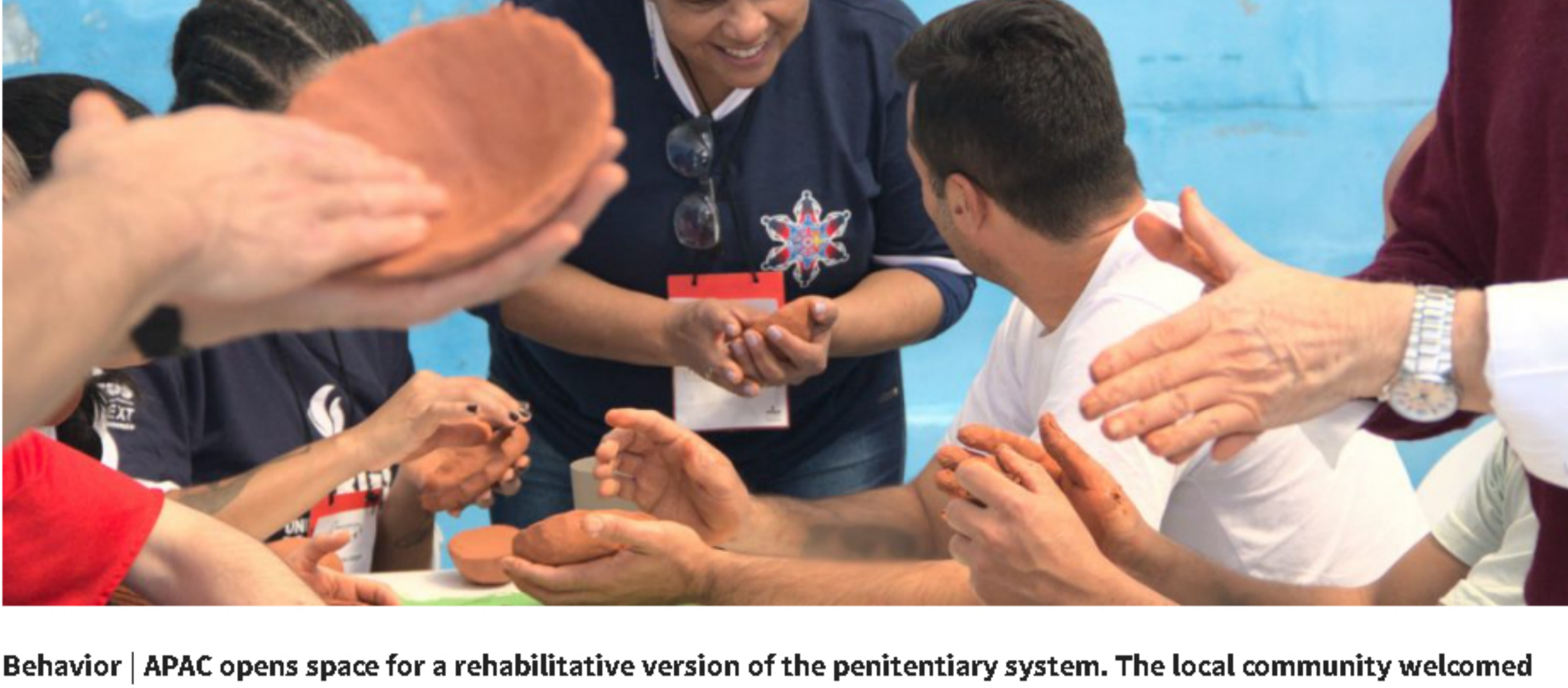


Association for the Protection and Assistance of Convicts develops trust-based system and promotes reintegration into society

Ana Gonzalez / 23 de setembro de 2024 / In English



Behavior | APAC opens space for a rehabilitative version of the penitentiary system. The local community welcomed the participants of this year's Coexistence Program

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*Photo: Ramon Moser/UFRGS

Entering the detention house of the Association for the Protection and Assistance of Convicts (APAC) in Porto Alegre does not involve thorough searches or massive bars. Despite sharing walls with the Porto Alegre Public Prison, the Social Reintegration Center (CRS) of the association operates entirely differently from traditional penitentiary complexes. At APAC, the objectives are clear and followed to the letter: rehabilitation of inmates (referred to as "rehabilitating people" (*recuperandos*)), protection of society, help for victims and promotion of restorative justice. Therefore, in this trust-based system with the ultimate purpose of reintegration into society, the rehabilitating people greet APAC visitors with smiles and a warm welcoming, without handcuffs or physical barriers separating the inside from the outside.

And that was how the group of students participating in the Coexistence Program, promoted by the Department of Education and Social Development (DEDS) of UFRGS, was received at the APAC reintegration center: with celebrations, smiles and music – courtesy of the choir formed by the rehabilitating students. The program proposes a week-long interaction between the UFRGS academic community and popular communities of Rio Grande do Sul, and this edition brought together 15 students from different undergraduate courses at the university, as well as technicians, professors and alumni. According to Rita Camisólo, a DEDS staff member, the choice for APAC to host the project this year was driven by a need for immersion and exchange of experiences in a humanized and rehabilitative context of the prison system. "We think it was very relevant to bring this topic to the university at this moment," she says.

APAC Methodology

Despite the friendly and welcoming environment, rehabilitating people arriving at APAC must follow some rules. One of them is studying, which is mandatory for everyone. Whether in basic, technical or higher education, all rehabilitating people are enrolled in educational institutions of some level.

In Brazil, over 649,000 people are imprisoned today, making it the third largest prison population in the world. Besides being deprived of liberty, Brazilian inmates are also deprived of the right to education in the common penitentiary system: only 20% of prisoners in the country have access to educational activities of any level – of those enrolled, less than 2% are in higher education. Contrasting with these alarming numbers of a system that employs retribution without rehabilitation, at APAC, 18 of the 47 rehabilitating people are enrolled in higher education programs in areas ranging from Social Work to Administration, while the others attend other educational levels. "In the common system, there are no educational opportunities. Even though many people want to study, there are few vacancies for many interested parties," explains Edson, who has completed an elderly care course through APAC. Despite no restrictions on the identification of the rehabilitating people, this news report chose to use only their first names.

Carlos, a rehabilitating person, was 26 years old and had completed up to the fourth grade of elementary school when he entered the common correctional system, where he managed to complete the seventh grade in EJA (Education for Young & Adult Students). A professional pizza chef, he was drawn to APAC by the opportunity to finish his studies in pursuit of brighter prospects for a free future. Passionate about cooking and expected to be released on parole in 2026, his intention now is to complete basic education to take professional baking and confectionery courses simultaneously with high school before regaining his freedom. "My goal is a certificate with my name on it", aspires the *recuperando*, who had been at APAC for one month when the Coexistence Program was initiated.

In addition to studies, those in rehabilitation must also follow a strict routine, starting at 6am, when they wake up, and ending at 10pm, when they go to bed, including five daily meals. Specific times of the day are dedicated to labor therapy, an occupational therapeutic approach using labor activities as a means of reeducation. In the case of the rehabilitating people from APAC, the majority dedicate themselves to handicrafts. Proudly, they show visitors the works produced during the workshops: some sew rag dolls, others make bead jewelry, wooden miniatures, crochet accessories or origami – regardless of the type of work, the important thing is to keep mind and hands occupied. "An idle mind is devil's workshop", they explain.

Many of the craft techniques are passed from one rehabilitating person to another in a self-sustaining support system, encouraged by the association's methodology, extending beyond labor therapy. One of the 12 elements of the APAC methodology, the mantra "one rehabilitating person helping another" is put into practice in several ways, including in the so-called "Method School" – a 90-day training that all rehabilitating people undergo upon arrival at APAC, coordinated by longer-term rehabilitating people, with the purpose of teaching them the rules and adapting to the association's methodology, which differs in every way from the system they are accustomed to. "In prisons, we are known by nicknames and told to always keep our heads down. Here, we are always called by our names and treated with respect. It's a very important difference for us", exemplifies the rehabilitating person called Rafael.

Despite all the essential pillars for the proper functioning of the CRS, one of the most important principles at APAC is trust – and it is also what surprises outsiders the most. From the first day they arrive at the reintegration center, the *recuperandos* are free from the handcuffs and bars imposed by the conventional system and can move freely around the facilities within the established schedule, both in closed and semi-open regimes. Rehabilitating people themselves manage the gates, distribute medications, and prepare food in an organized and efficient system.

The rehabilitating person called Clóris was surprised to receive, in one of his first weeks in APAC, the keys to the closed regime's pavilion so that he could take care of the reception. This unexpected sign of trust meant a lot to him – a change of perspective and a step out of the cycle of suspicion and fear that inmates in the traditional system are conditioned to. At no point, he says, did he even feel tempted to break the system and escape, justifying his reasoning: "No one runs away from love."

If APAC gets positive results in exercising its potential for change on those in rehabilitation, the same is true for outsiders. For Collective Health student Joana Lopes, the week that the Coexistence group spent at CRS was a transformative experience in every aspect. "It contributed beyond the professional level, it helped my development as a human being," she reports.



Coexistence Project brought activities to the Association for the Protection and Assistance of Convicts (APAC), promoting extension and socio-educational experiences (Photos: Ramon Moser/UFRGS)

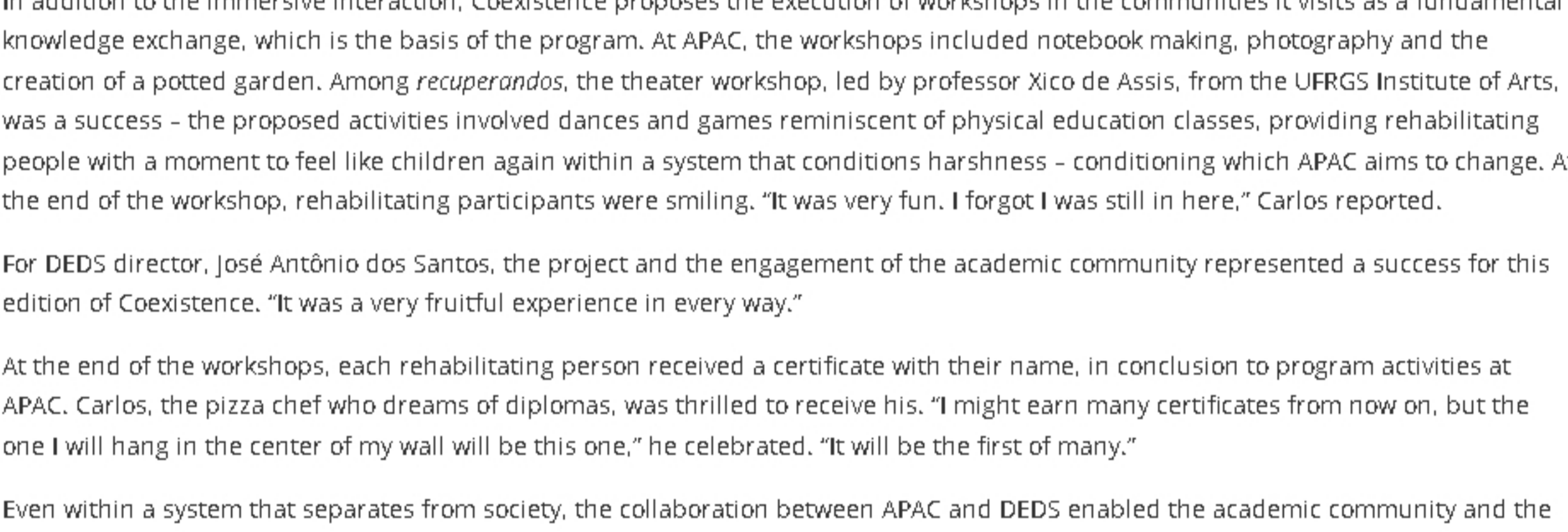
Exchange of experiences

In addition to the immersive interaction, Coexistence proposes the execution of workshops in the communities it visits as a fundamental knowledge exchange, which is the basis of the program. At APAC, the workshops included notebook making, photography and the creation of a potted garden. Among *recuperandos*, the theater workshop, led by professor Xico de Assis, from the UFRGS Institute of Arts, was a success – the proposed activities involved dances and games reminiscent of physical education classes, providing rehabilitating people with a moment to feel like children again within a system that conditions harshness – conditioning which APAC aims to change. At the end of the workshop, rehabilitating participants were smiling. "It was very fun. I forgot I was still in here," Carlos reported.

For DEDS director, José Antônio dos Santos, the project and the engagement of the academic community represented a success for this edition of Coexistence. "It was a very fruitful experience in every way."

At the end of the workshops, each rehabilitating person received a certificate with their name, in addition to program activities at APAC. Carlos, the pizza chef who dreams of diplomas, was thrilled to receive his. "I might earn many certificates from now on, but the one I will hang in the center of my wall will be this one," he celebrated. "It will be the first of many."

Even within a system that separates from society, the collaboration between APAC and DEDS enabled the academic community and the rehabilitating people to share, albeit briefly, the same reality, without physical or social barriers. In the end, the motto that echoes among the rehabilitating students resonated among all the parties involved in the project: "Whoever enters APAC never leaves the same".



The images accompanying this article were produced by rehabilitating people from APAC, who participated in a photography workshop. The aim was to document other activities during UFRGS Coexistence2023



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