

# Frame-up victim and artist Gary Tyler speaks at the University of Michigan

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Gary Tyler, a frame-up victim who spent 42 years in Louisiana's notorious Angola State Penitentiary, spoke on "Art as Resilience" to an audience of more than 1,000 people at the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor, off of the University of Michigan campus, on Thursday, March 13.

The event was part of the distinguished speaker series sponsored by the Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design. It was held in collaboration with Detroit's Library Street Collective art gallery, which had sponsored Tyler as a speaker in July 2023. The event showcased an ongoing exhibition of Tyler's work. A renowned quilt maker, Gary Tyler has won many artistic accolades, including the Frieze Los Angeles Impact Prize.

In October 1974, Tyler was arrested and falsely charged with the murder of a 13-year-old white youth who was shot amid an anti-busing demonstration in Destrehan, Louisiana, incited by the Ku Klux Klan. Gary, then 16 years old, and other black youth, were on a school bus that was attacked by the racist mob.

The police singled out Gary and beat him viciously in an attempt to extract a confession. Speaking last Thursday at the Michigan Theater, Tyler recalled, "My mother walked into that room and saw what had happened to her child by grown men ... (They) didn't care if I lived or died."

After a sham trial, Tyler was convicted of first-degree murder and placed on death row at Angola State Penitentiary, formerly a slave plantation and notorious for its violence and harsh conditions. He won his freedom in 2016.

Gary Tyler became a symbol of America's brutal class injustices. The Trotskyist movement, the Workers League and the Young Socialists, forerunners of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, played a leading role in the fight for his freedom. They organized marches and meetings to publicize his case, collected 100,000 signatures demanding his release, and won support from unions representing hundreds of thousands of workers.

Introducing Tyler at the Michigan Theater, Leah Rutt, the director of operations at the Library Street Collective, spoke of the impact of the enormous campaign for Gary's freedom. "Everywhere I turn," she said, "I meet someone who is connected to him, his case, or his work in some way. Little did I know that Gary Tyler is the mycelium network that connects the forest of humanity."

Since his release, Tyler's artistic work has gained international recognition. In January 2025, Gary's piece "Rebirth" (2023) was showcased at an exhibition in Davos, Switzerland. His other notable achievements include the 2020 Art Matters award, an honorary doctorate in art and design from the Massachusetts College of Art & Design, and the 2024 Right of Return Fellowship from the Center for Art and Advocacy. Tyler's work is displayed at the Historical New Orleans Collective Museum, the collections of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C., and the City of Santa Monica's Art Bank.

Tyler began his talk by quoting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He explained

how King's words expressed his approach to life. Addressing an anti-war conference in Los Angeles in 1967, King said:

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of convenience and comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

Tyler went on to explain the horrific challenges he faced as a child in the maximum security Louisiana State Penitentiary. Gary said that almost 72 hours after he was put on death row he heard a horrific scream in the night. "It was so sickening," he said, "I thought it was on a tier that I was on." He then saw a man engulfed in flames. A prisoner had set another inmate on fire with gasoline.

He continued:

That was the most horrifying thing I was able to witness while in prison, knowing that I was sentenced to die. If this happens in this place, who knows that it could happen to me, and that was quite terrifying for me.

But to his surprise, Tyler found that inmates came to his assistance. "Lo and behold, the guys that were on the tier knew all about my case. ... They knew that I wouldn't survive this freaking life unless they helped me." Tyler said that these "frightening men who were built like gladiators" became his protectors.

I was this little kid in an adult prison who weighed no more than 100 pounds, around men who mainly weighed 250 to 300 pounds. ... These guys were buffed, they were built for war ... These men put their differences to the side and worked to make sure nothing happened to me, like what happened to the guy on the tier above me.

Tyler reflected on the mental anguish caused by years of battling the courts to clear his name. "The court," he recalled, "overturned my conviction, ordered a new trial, and then it returned and overturned that decision again."

In January 1977, the Supreme Court of Louisiana annulled Tyler's death sentence but upheld his first-degree murder conviction. Soon afterward, his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment without parole.

In 1980, the US Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit ruled that Tyler's

trial was “fundamentally unfair” and ordered a new trial. However, in 1981, the same court reversed its decision due to a legal technicality despite reiterating that the trial had been unfair.

Throughout his incarceration, Gary’s mother, Juanita Tyler, remained a pillar of strength in his support. In 1976, while Gary was on death row, his mother and his brother, Terry, traveled to Detroit to attend a Young Socialists conference to advocate for Gary. Mrs. Tyler spoke to the crowd of young people, receiving resounding applause and repeated standing ovations. The Young Socialists pledged to never give up the fight for Gary’s freedom.

Speaking at the Michigan Theater, Tyler continued:

I survived, and many people asked, were you bitter? Did you hate the people and what they did to you? I said I was bitter. It got to the point that I didn’t like white people because I felt they all had a part to do with it. But you know, they tell you either that emotions are there to serve us or you are there to serve them.

At that time, I was young, immature, and didn’t understand the magnitude of what really happened to me. But in the prison, there were men who educated me until I was able to understand what happened and why.

Tyler said that from a whole series of experiences he came to realize that the problems were bigger than racism and that the society itself was unjust.

I realized that not only my family, my neighbors, and the community that I was raised in [supported me, but] that there were also whites who saw the injustice, people who realized that this system once again was victimizing people... they knew there was something wrong with this picture.

## The drama club and quilt making

At Angola Prison, Gary became president of the drama club and ran the organization for three decades. He quipped that the club was an “equal opportunity organization” that took anyone who wanted to join. That meant that the guards would often send the most difficult inmates to the drama club. “I got the worst of the worst in prison,” Gary said, adding that he set about winning these inmates’ respect with strict rules.

Tyler said he told club members, “The drama club is not a democracy, it’s a dictatorship.” They were allowed to miss only two meetings without a valid excuse. Otherwise, they were out. But, he related, he combined this discipline with compassion and guidance.

When they had problems, we talked the problems out. When they needed an ear for someone to listen to, I gave that ear. When they needed someone to tell them that what they were doing, they were headed for a car wreck, I told them.

You know what, you talk about talent, many of these guys didn’t realize until they got in the drama club that they had something in them. These guys were able to not only act, but also sing, dance, and rap. These guys became good players. I had guys that were functionally illiterate, that couldn’t read or write, and within six months, these guys literally took apart what had been written for

their part.

The drama club won wide acclaim after its production of “The Life of Jesus Christ” was featured in the *New York Times*.

Tyler told the audience that while he hadn’t been a big fan of the play because he wasn’t religious, he re-wrote most of it and made it suitable. The production featured men from Angola who were serving life sentences. The women came from the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women (LCIW) in St. Gabriel, Louisiana. Everything needed for the play, including the props, was designed and built by the inmates. They even managed to procure a camel.

The biggest challenge, Gary recalled, was finding someone willing to play Judas. “Judas was a rat. Judas was a Judas. Nobody wanted to touch it,” he said.

Tyler convinced his players by drawing a parallel between their own lives, “betraying” the hopes of their parents and friends and “making certain decisions.” Showing Judas in the light of a shared humanity, Gary won the inmates over and they committed themselves to the play.

He explained that quilt making surprised him. A friend asked for his help to make a quilt, and he remembered that his mother and grandmother used to make quilts. However, he became worried that the inmates would think less of him because quilting was seen as a feminine activity. Then he realized, “This is in my DNA.” He gained deep respect while working in hospice services, giving his homemade quilts to dying inmates and passing them on to their grieving families.

At the conclusion of the presentation, Gary spoke of his ties to Michigan and Detroit, explaining that many students at the University of Michigan supported his case over the years. “Yes, I had a great deal of support from people in this area. So, it is an honor to be here,” he said.

That itself, along with the moral support that I was getting from people throughout the world, kept me going. It was able to sustain me, along with everything else in my struggle. It made me who I am today.

## Q & A session

Many attendees stayed to ask questions after Tyler’s presentation. One attendee, Luke Galvin, a member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), thanked him and stressed that his experiences were “incredibly relevant to the conditions young people and workers are experiencing today as the Trump administration and the Democratic Party are arresting some for protesting the war.”

Galvin asked Tyler, “Given that you mentioned your case was taken up internationally by workers ... I was wondering if you could speak on your experiences with the Workers League, in particular.”

Tyler replied:

Let me say this. Young people, they’re the future of this world and this country in particular. And when I see young kids protesting, demonstrating about the ills of this country, the policies of this country ... history has proven that when we have young people hit the streets and demonstrate and protest, history shows that they’re on the right side!

As the crowd erupted into raucous applause, Tyler continued:

Never lose faith! Sometimes people need to ... let young people speak about things; not that they know everything, of course, but you all know what you're doing and what you're saying. So, I encourage what you're doing.

Shifting to his latest artistic focus, Tyler highlighted the devastating impact of the Los Angeles wildfires, which ravaged much of Altadena, where he resides.

He said:

If you go through that city, it's like a bomb went off, so I've been going around taking pictures because I want to create a life-size collage of all these burnt-out homes, cars, and everything else.

Tyler concluded:

Art speaks for itself. In fact, it's the universal language of everything.

At the close of the Q & A, this reporter spoke to Tyler and the audience:

Gary is only a few years younger than I am. I was out there as a young person in the 1970s fighting for his freedom. Then we had the Young Socialists. Today, we have a group on campus called the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. We are continuing that same fight.

Gary is an extremely unusual man. We can see that now. He would never have been able to get that kind of second chance without a struggle. So, I think what Gary is saying today—please correct me if I'm wrong—is that we must continue the fight.

Tyler endorsed these statements, saying:

Of course. The struggle is endless. If we decide that we don't want to struggle, they are going to take us backward.



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