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Unlocking lives

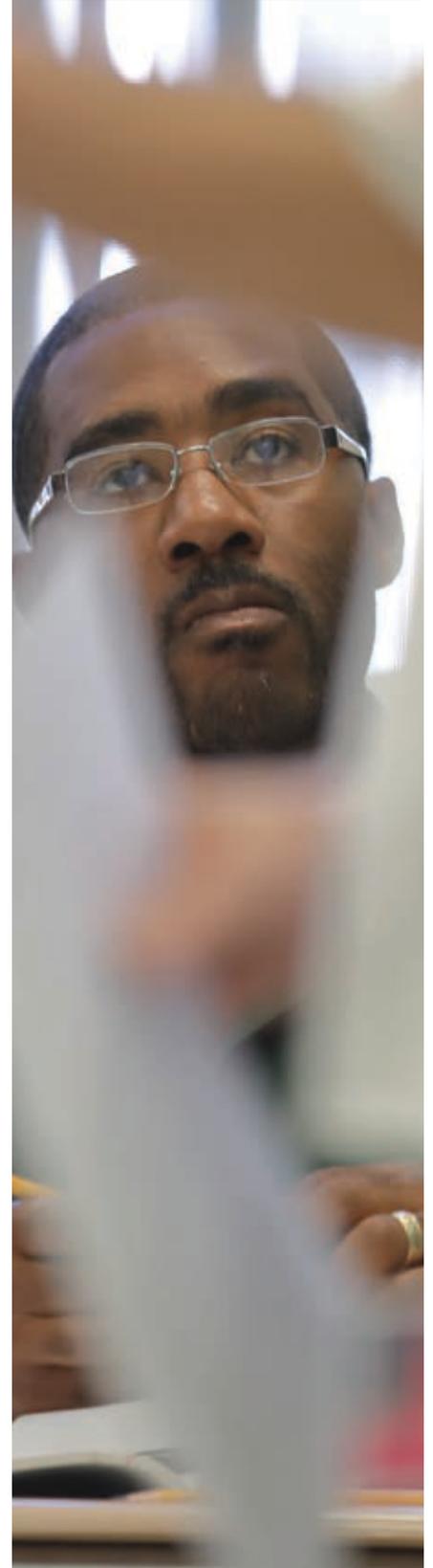
Postsecondary programs
go behind prison walls
to forge new futures



INSIDE



Inside-Out Prison Exchange



Bard Prison Initiative

On the cover: Jabbaris Dove, an inmate at the maximum-security Eastern Correctional Facility in Napanoch, N.Y., is also a college student. He and other inmates are using their time behind bars to pursue high-quality degrees through the Bard Prison Initiative, a postsecondary program offered by Bard College.

Editor's note: The stories in this issue of *Focus* were reported and written by Steve Giegerich. Giegerich, a former education writer for the Associated Press and a onetime journalism instructor at Columbia University, is a staff writer for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

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Prison Bridge Program

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

America has always been billed as the land of opportunity, the setting for second chances. Even centuries before the founding of the Republic, people were drawn to the New World because it was just that: new. This has always been the place to start fresh ... to break the mold ... to build a different, better life.

That quintessentially American idea endures, of course. Personal transformation is still possible. But if there's one place in our society where second chances are hard to come by, it's the criminal justice system. In too many places, and for far too many people, the mistakes that lead to prison — even when fully paid for — are never truly overcome.

The American criminal justice system holds more than 2.3 million people, 1.6 million of them in state and federal prisons. One in five of these prisoners — nearly half a million Americans — are being held for nonviolent drug offenses. Also, the racial and ethnic makeup of the nation's inmate population reflects a pernicious pattern of inequity. According to figures from the 2010 Census, whites represent 64 percent of the nation's population, yet they account for only 39 percent of those imprisoned. Latinos, 16 percent of the overall population, account for 19 percent of those behind bars. And African-Americans, who represent just 13 percent of the U.S. population, account for 40 percent of those incarcerated.



Even more pronounced, perhaps, are the *educational* inequities behind those prison walls. Nearly four in 10 federal and state inmates (37 percent) lack even a high school diploma or GED, and nearly twice that number (78 percent) lack postsecondary education. By comparison, fewer than two in 10 Americans "on the outside" are high school dropouts, and well over half have at least some college.

These educational inequities matter — not just to those directly affected, but to all of us as Americans. Research has proven that better-educated offenders are less likely to be rearrested or imprisoned again. In fact, studies suggest that graduating from college programs decreases recidivism dramatically — by as much as 72 percent.

Today, more than ever, successful second chances depend on high-quality postsecondary education. And that's what this issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus* is about. It goes behind the walls of the nation's correctional facilities to examine postsecondary programs that serve the people who need those programs most. In this issue of *Focus*, you'll read some inspiring personal stories. For example:

■ You'll meet Tyrone Werts, who spent 36 years behind bars after being sentenced to life imprisonment at age 23 when his partners in a Philadelphia robbery wound up killing one of their victims. Today, five years after his sentence was commuted, Werts helps lead the **Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program**, an educational initiative he helped create while incarcerated.

■ You'll learn about Alelur "Alex" Duran, a Bronx native who is up for parole this November, ending a 12-year prison term that included long stretches in solitary confinement. Fortunately, Duran's incarceration was also marked by his involvement in the **Bard Prison Initiative (BPI)**, a nationally known program founded in 1999 by students at Bard College in New York. Duran earned his GED in prison and, thanks to BPI, is thriving in postsecondary education — even participating on BPI's intercollegiate debate team.

■ You'll read about James Monteiro, a Providence, R.I., native who spent two decades behind bars after racking up 50 felony convictions in five states. Released from a Maryland prison in 2009, Monteiro returned to his hometown and vowed to turn his life around. His first step was to enroll in College Unbound, an innovative educational program for nontraditional learners. Today, College Unbound is a nationwide success story, and Monteiro is the founder and director of its **Prison Bridge Program**.

In addition to the real-life stories you'll find on these pages, there's a wealth of related information on our website, www.luminafoundation.org. There, *Focus* offers several extra items — including audio clips, additional photos, links to information about other prison-education programs, and a feature on former Sing Sing inmate Wesley Caines, a BPI graduate who helps ex-offenders make the transition to life on the outside in New York City.

All of these *Focus* features convey a vital message. They offer compelling evidence of the inherent value in every life, and of the transformational power of postsecondary education. At Lumina, we're convinced that every American needs to tap into that power ... just as we believe that everyone deserves a second chance.

Jamie P. Merisotis
President and CEO
Lumina Foundation

Innovative program turns prisoners into classroom peers

PHILADELPHIA — “Think about the worst thing you’ve ever done,” Professor Lori Pompa intones as class begins. Her students, here on the first day of an introductory criminal justice class at Temple University, sit for a moment in quiet reflection. “Now,” Pompa says, breaking the silence, “imagine what it would feel like to be judged forever by that experience.”

This first-day lesson in humility marks the students’ entry into the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, an innovative educational effort that operates at what might seem an odd nexus: the juncture of academia and the correctional system.

Lori Pompa, a longtime criminal justice instructor at Temple University, has been bringing her students into prisons since the early 1990s. Those visits led her to create the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, which she directs.





As the program's name implies, students in Pompa's semester-long course won't learn all of their lessons in the classroom — certainly not the most profound ones. And no grade or portfolio can adequately demonstrate what these students will gain in the weeks ahead.

Inside-Out allows undergraduates at Temple, St. Joseph's University and other Philadelphia postsecondary institutions to become classmates with men and women on the "inside" — that is, those being held in area correctional facilities.

The 15-week course that started it all, "Exploring Issues of Crime and Justice Behind the Walls," was first offered at Temple in 1997. Since then, the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program has grown to include more than 300 courses being offered in schools and correctional institutions in 34 states as well as internationally. The courses, which cover a variety of disciplines and a wide range of subjects, all use what Pompa calls "the prism of prison" to explore the material. The courses are credit-bearing — for students on either side of the prison walls. Through wide-ranging discussions of literature, philosophy, psychology and criminal justice, participants gain personal insight and, ideally, a sense of their own potential.

A way to find meaning

A second facet of the program dispatches Inside-Out staff and college faculty into correctional facilities to moderate open-ended dialogues about the same subjects

covered in the undergraduate classes. No one involved — whether inside or out, faculty or student — emerges from the program unchanged.

"The people serving a life sentence are the most inspiring people I have ever met because they have found meaning in a totally meaningless structure," says Tricia Way, associate director of Inside-Out. Way leads a gender and masculinity course at the medium-security state correctional institution at Chester, a half-hour outside Philadelphia.

The program that thrust Way into this world behind walls has its origins in the early 1990s, when Pompa led her criminal justice students on visits to area jails. It was a conversation during one such visit — to the State Correctional Institution-Dallas, near Scranton, Pa. — that set the current model in motion.

Pompa moderated the exchange between her undergrads and the inmates. The discussion, she recalls, "very quickly became very deep and complex. Spending years incarcerated leads to a lot of reflection," Pompa says. "Not just self-reflection, but reflections on justice and social systems. And that can go to places you don't expect."

The conversation had a profound effect on one person in particular, a man serving a life sentence.

"I'd been incarcerated about a decade," recalls the inmate, Paul (the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections asks that the media not publish the last names of men and women actively serving time). "It was so liberating to know someone cared."

After the discussion, Paul pulled Pompa aside to discuss the possibility of establishing a program to unite



Tricia Way, associate director of Inside-Out, confers with students in her gender and masculinity course at a medium-security facility in Chester, Pa., near Philadelphia.



During Inside-Out classes, incarcerated students and those who visit from the “outside” purposefully sit side by side to encourage productive interaction. Here, inmate Omar sits to the left of Yaa, a senior at St. Joseph’s University. (To comply with corrections department policy, all participants are identified by first name only.)

Temple students and the incarcerated on a weekly basis. “You ever see how a dog tips its head ever so slightly?” Paul asks. That was Pompa’s response.

“I told him I’d think about it,” recalls Pompa. “And I couldn’t do anything *but* think about it.”

Five years later, following an equally intense student-inmate dialogue at the Graterford State Correctional Institution, a maximum-security facility an hour northwest of Philadelphia, Pompa found herself in a strikingly similar conversation with another inmate: Tyrone Werts, president of the prison’s “Lifers Organization.” Werts recommended that Pompa formally present a plan to implement an ongoing student-inmate program to the Temple administration. For his part, Werts said he’d try to sell the idea to officials at Graterford. He assumed that increasing the faculty presence inside wouldn’t pose a problem, but he worried that officials would balk at the idea of facilitating regular interaction between college students and hard-core felons.

Then 53, Werts was 30 years into a sentence of life without parole for his ancillary part in a botched 1975 robbery that led to the murder of a Philadelphia man.

He’d put the time to good use, earning a high school equivalency diploma followed by an undergraduate degree from Villanova University. His education wasn’t limited to books; the years also had taught him how the system works. Werts knew that written proposals tended to get lost in the bureaucratic shuffle and that his best strategy was to leverage his stature as a prison leader to discuss the matter personally with officials at every level of the Graterford hierarchy.

He made his pitch and braced for the worst, thinking: “There’s no way a maximum-security prison would let a group of students through the gates on a weekly basis.”

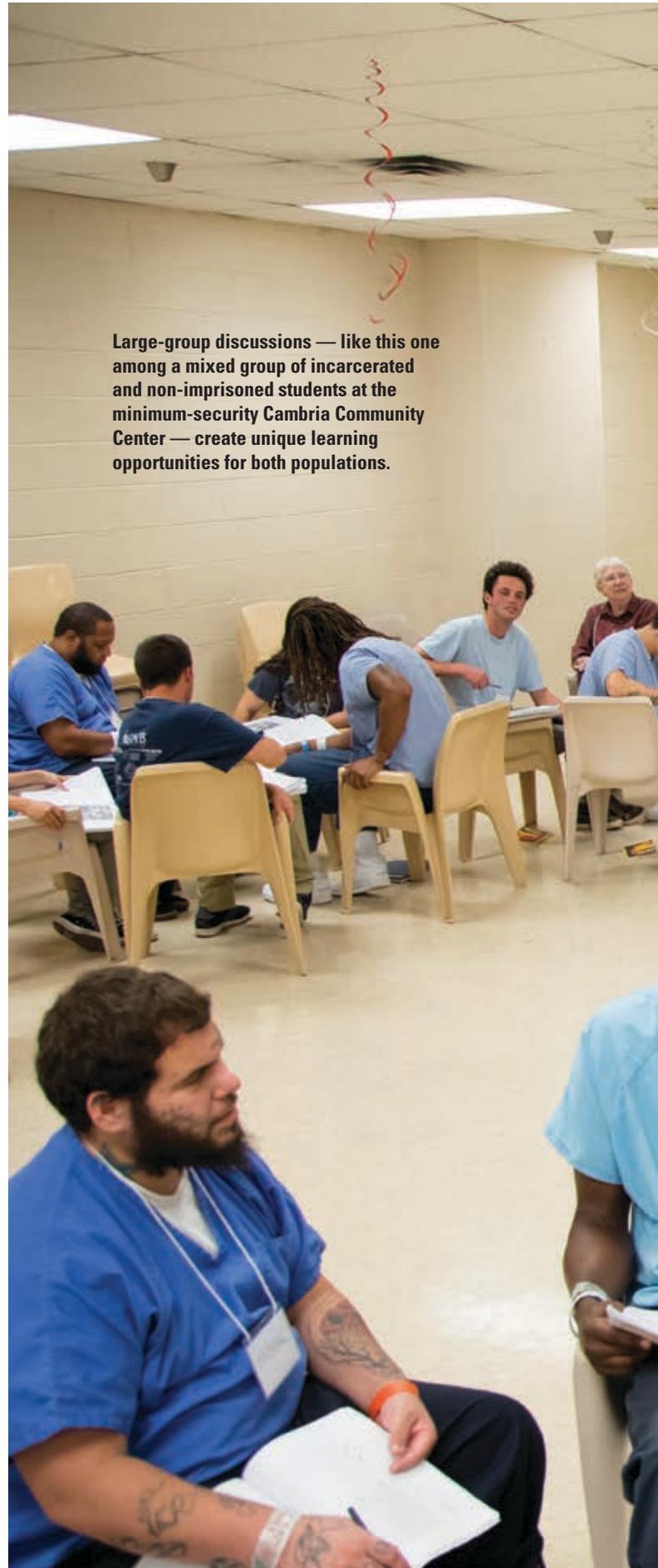
It turned out, Werts had sold himself and the prison short. Graterford approved the proposal quickly.

Soon after, Pompa received a congratulatory letter from a Graterford resident who’d conferred with Werts as he lobbied prison officials. The writer was Paul. Unbeknownst to Pompa, he’d been transferred to Graterford since raising the prospect of a student-prison education program while incarcerated at Dallas.

New twist on ‘town and gown’

On a late September afternoon a decade and a half later, 16 St. Joseph’s University (SJU) undergraduates stepped off mini-buses at the Cambria Community Center, a minimum-security unit operated by the Philadelphia Prison System. The unit is located in a complex a short drive from the Main Line campus of the 8,600-student Jesuit university.

Over the next few hours, the SJU contingent furthered the mission envisioned by Pompa, Werts and Paul. Passing through two secured doors, the students entered an all-purpose room where they were greeted by an equal number of residents at Cambria, a work-development facility for men serving sentences of up to 23 months.



Large-group discussions — like this one among a mixed group of incarcerated and non-imprisoned students at the minimum-security Cambria Community Center — create unique learning opportunities for both populations.





Kasie, a junior at St. Joseph's University, listens intently to Jermaine, one of her imprisoned peers at the Cambria center. She says her family and friends sometimes "just don't understand that the people here are just as smart or smarter than I am."

In a new twist on "town and gown," students and inmates (all identified here by first name only), promptly occupied alternate seats in a circle of chairs, "inside" participants seated next to those from the "outside." Yaa, an SJU senior, plopped next to her "best friend," a heavily-tattooed inmate called Frank.

An English major with a double minor in Spanish and Latin American studies, Yaa disclosed plans to enroll in law school following graduation.

"Will you bust me outta here?" Frank asked, drawing a giggle.

McNeil, another SJU student, had little exposure to the criminal justice system when she enrolled in "Dimensions of Freedom," the Inside-Out course introduced in 2009 to students pursuing philosophy or general education credits in a nontraditional elective. Just four weeks into the semester, this interactive class that examines freedom through the lenses of literature,

philosophy and psychology had already imparted lessons that McNeil will carry the rest of her life.

"I've learned I can relate to people on every level," she says. "I never thought I'd find that out about myself in a men's prison. But they bring up ideas in a different plane — and in a world I hope I never have to experience personally."

SJU philosophy Professor Elizabeth Linehan, who has co-taught "Dimensions of Freedom" since its inception, witnesses similar epiphanies every semester the course is offered.

"They never think of incarcerated people in the same way again," says Linehan. "Instead of seeing (them) as dangerous or bad guys, they just see them as people."

Kasie, a junior English major at SJU, says she sometimes struggles to explain to family and friends how the men she has met at Cambria are no better or worse than anyone else. "They just don't understand that the people here are just as smart or smarter than I am," says Kasie.

The easy banter between Yaa and Frank continued as SJU English Professor Ann Green walked the group through a reading and interpretation of *Slick and the Beanstalk*. Equal parts maddening and mirthful, the inmate-written essay draws a line between the nurturing of a bean plant and the absurdity of petty institutional rules.

To Frank, the essay clarified the idea that freedom is little more than a state of mind. In the same way, the Inside-Out construct gives Frank another type of liberation.

"Your brain becomes mush if you don't use it," he says.

In addition to course content, Inside-Out strives to spark self-awareness and personal growth. Jerry Stahler, a professor in the Geography and Urban Studies department at Temple University, was among the first faculty members to venture from campus to prison.

His area of expertise — substance abuse — holds special relevance for students studying the web of



Jerry Stahler, a professor in Temple University's Geography and Urban Studies department, says the Inside-Out program "has recharged my batteries as far as teaching" and helped him adopt a dialogue-based approach in his regular, on-campus classes.

connections between drugs and prison.

"(Inside-Out) has recharged my batteries as far as teaching," Stahler says. "Now, when I'm on campus, I draw on pedagogic lessons from Inside-Out in my classrooms. It has moved me toward a dialogue-based approach. And I've moved that way because of Inside-Out."



Kristi Polizzano's entire career path has been altered by her experience with Inside-Out. She arrived at Temple as a pre-med student and was pondering law school when she neared graduation. But a criminal justice class — and the classroom visits to Graterford State Correctional Institution — inspired her to take a job with the Inside-Out program.

Kristi Polizzano is another who credits Inside-Out for a personal transformation. Polizzano arrived at Temple as a pre-med student in 2011, a career path that eventually morphed into a major in psychology with a minor, criminal science, that landed her in Pompa's class.

Nervous and anxious on the first trip from North Philly to Graterford, Polizzano felt her anxiety dissipate the instant she cleared security. By the time Polizzano arrived at the classroom, her apprehension was forgotten. Trepidation has a way of "falling away layer by layer after you come into that room," says Pompa.

Polizzano was leaning toward law school as graduation approached, but the emotional wallop of a late-semester visit to Graterford turned her career arc in a whole new direction.

"I realized I was in the perfect position to change paths," Polizzano recalls. Forsaking her plans, she instead went to work as an intern in the Inside-Out office. Since then, a series of promotions have led to her current role: coordinating the instructor and student exchanges at Graterford and other corrections units in the Philadelphia vicinity.

A national champion in the sport of power lifting, Polizzano has also introduced the sport to many Graterford inmates. Meanwhile, she's also forged a close relationship with an Inside-Out co-worker who took a decidedly different path to the program office: Tyrone Werts, the former "lifer" who helped get the program going at Graterford.



Tracing a changed life

Werts is on the outside for good now, having been released in 2011 when his sentence was commuted by then-Gov. Ed Rendell. His past is clearly past, but the story is worth recounting in some detail.

It began on the evening of May 6, 1975, when Werts set out with three North Philly neighborhood friends to rob a drug dealer. Werts was 23 and recently married, a new father working to support his family as a mechanic — while struggling to end a pattern of petty crimes that had frequently landed him behind bars for short stays.

On this night, thanks to his disastrous decision to join his friends, that pattern of short jail stints indeed ended.

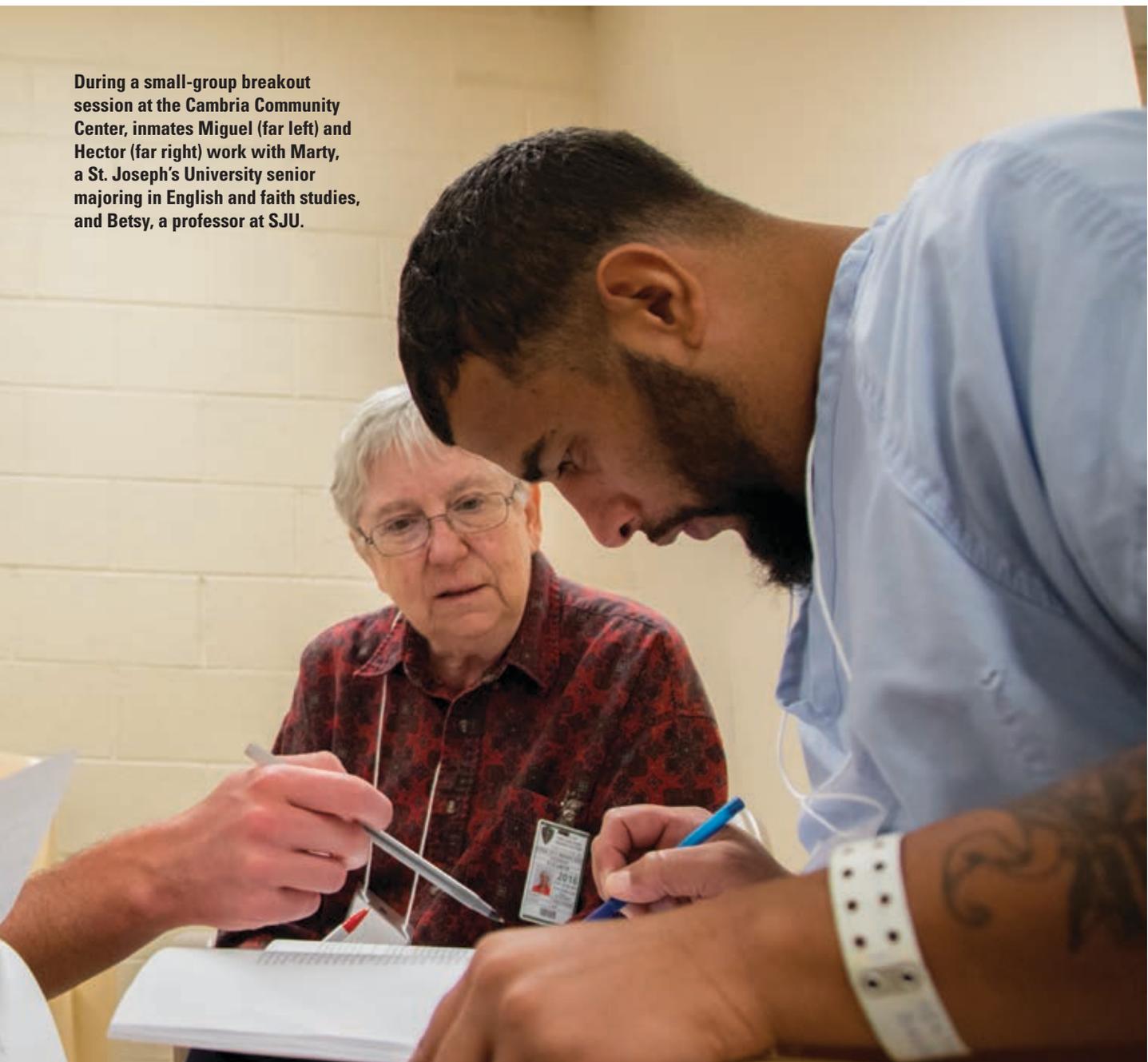
Instead, Werts careened down a path toward long-term confinement.

Unable to find a dealer, the five men decided to rob the patrons of a neighborhood gambling house, known in Philly street parlance as a “speakeasy.” What they intended as a robbery ended with the slaying of a speakeasy customer.

Werts, who had remained in the car throughout the episode, turned down a plea deal. Reasoning that “I never got out of the car, I never touched a weapon,” Werts opted for a trial by jury.

His strategy backfired. Convicted of second-degree murder, he was sentenced under a section of the Pennsylvania criminal code that allows homicide accomplices to be sentenced to life without parole.

During a small-group breakout session at the Cambria Community Center, inmates Miguel (far left) and Hector (far right) work with Marty, a St. Joseph’s University senior majoring in English and faith studies, and Betsy, a professor at SJU.





Classroom peers Frank and Yaa have developed an easygoing and mutually beneficial relationship through their Inside-Out encounters. Yaa, a senior English major with a double minor in Spanish and Latin American studies, is planning to enter law school after graduating from SJU.

Remanded to Graterford, Werts at first fixated on a single thought: “How am I going to get out of this horrific place?”

The question nagged at him until a motivational speaker visiting the prison issued a challenge to Werts. Promise me, the speaker told him, “that as long as you are here that you do everything you can to make a good life for yourself.”

The words resonated.

“I started seeing myself in a different way,” Werts says.

Drawing on a new outlook, Werts threw himself into earning his high school equivalency certificate. Not only did he pass the GED test on the first try, he recorded the highest score in class. The diploma became a springboard to a series of successes: an undergraduate degree from Villanova University (“in one semester my mind expanded like I’d never known”), the Graterford leadership position, the implementation of Inside-Out, and the 2011 commutation of his sentence.

Now 65, Werts’ official title is National Think Tank Coordinator for Inside-Out, and he remains a fierce advocate of prison-based education. “Inside-Out changed my life,” he says. “It cracked me open and revealed things about me that I didn’t know myself. I grew immensely.”

Thirty-six years after he departed his hometown in a

prison van, Tyrone Werts returned to Philadelphia and took an Inside-Out leadership position, a job that he says “humbles me.” After spending most of his adult life in a maximum-security prison cell, Werts now reports each morning to an office on the Temple campus, three miles north of the Liberty Bell.

Having spent the better part of four decades at Graterford, Werts could be excused for never returning. But he revisits regularly to discuss issues arising from life-without-parole sentences. The Graterford visits offer Werts an opportunity to rekindle friendships — none deeper or more enduring than the one with the man who shared his original vision of a prison-based education program.

Today, the relationship between Tyrone Werts and Paul is tinged with poignancy. When the meetings end, Werts heads to his car for the drive home to Philadelphia; Paul is ushered, under guard, back to a cell.

Barring gubernatorial commutation, Paul will never leave Graterford. He’s still being defined by the worst thing he’s ever done. But, true to the subtext of Pompa’s first-day lesson, that’s not how Paul defines himself.

“We learn in Inside-Out that it doesn’t matter what you’ve done in life,” he says. “It’s where you *are* in life. We all have a voice. And that voice is worth hearing.” ■



Tyrone Werts, who spent 36 years behind bars before his life sentence was commuted in 2011, is now the national coordinator of the Inside-Out program. "Inside-Out changed my life," he says. "It cracked me open and revealed things about me that I didn't know myself."

Exercise in student activism opens doors to academic achievement

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. — Hunched over a keyboard, Bard College senior Shiloh Hylton tackled a formidable task: transcribing the 34,000-word handwritten draft of his capstone project into a Microsoft Word document — an exercise made all the more onerous by mandatory footnoting, to say nothing of the subject matter.

The Bard faculty expects weighty tomes when these fourth-year assignments come due. But “Racial Feminist Politics: A Reconceptualization of the ‘Women Question’ during the Civil Rights Era, 1960-1980” just might raise the bar for future Bard seniors.

Bard College senior Shiloh Hylton confers on his capstone project with adviser Delia Mellis. This academic conference isn't like most, however. It takes place, not on campus, but in a high-security state prison in southeastern New York.





Briefly distracted from his transcription task, Hylton explained that his choice of topic stemmed from a long personal interest in the civil rights movement, augmented by many scholarly articles focusing on how that movement minimized the role of women.

Bard faculty salute Hylton's dogged research into a monumentally complex issue. Unfortunately, Hylton himself couldn't spare more time for elaboration — on his research or on his even more impressive personal odyssey from 10th-grade dropout to undergraduate scholar. Access to the computer lab was strictly limited, you see. Hylton's a fine student, but he doesn't live on the Bard campus. Not even close. He's being held in the Eastern Correctional Facility, a high-security state prison in Napanoch, about an hour to the southwest.

Academic activism

Still, Hylton's story — the academic side of it at least — in a sense begins at Bard College. It was there in 1999 that a volunteer group of idealistic undergrads, with the blessing of then (and current) President Leon Botstein, established a continuing education program at Eastern Correctional. The student activists made this move in the wake of Congress' 1994 decision to deny Pell Grants to the 1.1 million men and women then incarcerated in state and federal facilities.

That act of Congress reinforced the notion that the U.S. system of criminal punishment "reveals our collective cynicism about the future — and particularly about our young people," Max Kenner, head of the nascent Bard Prison Initiative (BPI), said at the time.

Fast-forward two years. Kenner, a freshly minted Bard graduate, took his model to the next level by turning BPI into a nonprofit organization affiliated with his alma mater. The program has since become synonymous with the prestigious liberal arts college.

Kenner now finds himself in the pantheon of distinguished Bard graduates, including musicians Walter Becker and Donald Fagen, who as Bard undergrads in the late 1960s formed the nucleus of Steely Dan. Lyricist Fagen famously vowed in a signature tune that he was "never going back to my old school" (though he reneged when he received an honorary degree in 1985). Kenner, on the other hand, never left Bard.

On the days he isn't traveling, the BPI founder and executive director is a fixture at the college. He still reports to the program headquarters on the edge of campus: a ranch house once owned and occupied by acclaimed, Nigerian-born author Chinua Achebe, who taught at Bard from 1990 to 2009. (BPI will soon relocate to a larger suite of offices nearby.) Nearly 20 years later, Kenner is slightly bewildered that an idea born of student activism is widely considered the standard for prison education, and that he is the person who shepherded it to success.

"I never imagined it would be me taking on" the stewardship of BPI, he says. "I just thought it would be a nice thing to leave (Bard) with."





Outside a classroom in the Eastern Correctional Facility in Napanoch, N.Y., Bard Prison Initiative founder and Executive Director Max Kenner confers with incarcerated students Carlos Polanco (center) and Elias Beltran.

Under his guidance, the program has earned wide acclaim and has been covered by *The New York Times*, *60 Minutes* and countless other media outlets. Celebrated filmmaker Ken Burns is now completing work on a documentary on BPI that is scheduled to air on PBS stations in 2018.

From its beginnings in a single prison, BPI has grown into a program offered in six medium- and maximum-security institutions across New York State, enrolling over 300 students and providing re-entry services to more than 400 alumni. BPI's prototype has also expanded into partnerships with a host of other postsecondary institutions, including the University of Notre Dame, Washington University in St. Louis and Wesleyan University in Connecticut. Those partnerships have boosted nationwide enrollment in BPI programs to more than 800 incarcerated students in at least 13 states.

Daniel Karpowitz, director of policy and academics, expects the BPI model — which is supported almost entirely by grants and donations — to be introduced in at least five more states over the next 12 months.

"Our work is at the crossroads of mass incarceration and affordable education," Karpowitz says. He and other program officials say proof of BPI's value is obvious: in the more than 400 alumni — each a parolee — who can now be counted as productive members of society.

Megan Callaghan, BPI's director of college operations and a member of the teaching faculty, traces the outcomes to a core principle.

"We are just an extension of Bard College in different locations," explains Callaghan. "Our goal is to create access to academic resources in places where that access doesn't normally exist."

Once BPI put those resources in place, the over-arching



Daniel Karpowitz, director of policy and academics for the Bard Prison Initiative, says BPI has already proven its worth by virtue of its alumni — nearly 400 individuals, all parolees, who are back in the community, living within the law, working and contributing.

objective, Kenner says, is to see that "education becomes the most important thing in (the) lives" of men and women served by the program.

Professor Melanie Nicholson's Intermediate Spanish 1 class — held on an early September afternoon in the education wing of the maximum-security Eastern Correctional Facility — demonstrates the academic rigor that BPI imposes on students. The imprisoned undergrads may have bantered in slang-tinged English prior to class, but once they enter Nicholson's domain, it's all Spanish, all the time.

Finding Plato in prison

Down the hall, 15 first-year humanities students immerse themselves in the nuances of Plato's *Republic*, part of the canon in BPI's introduction to college-level studies. Four years ago, by analyzing one section of that seminal work (the *Allegory of the Cave*), Alelur "Alex" Duran proved to himself that he belonged in a college classroom.

Duran, a Bronx native who left high school in the 10th grade and was convicted of manslaughter at age 21, spent



Eastern inmates Alexander Hall (foreground) and Rodney Spivey take to the chalkboard for another language drill in the Intermediate Spanish 1 class taught by Bard College Professor Melanie Nicholson.



Elias Beltran (left) and Jabbaris Dove focus intently on the lesson presented by Professor of Spanish Melanie Nicholson. Here, just as in Nicholson's classes on the Bard campus, no English is spoken.

years shuffling from one high-security prison to another until he was finally assigned to Eastern. Now 32, he's up for parole in November, ending a 12-year sentence that featured long stretches in solitary confinement — time that Duran leveraged to his advantage.

"I was always a voracious reader," he points out, "and being in a cell by yourself, you have a lot of time on your hands."

Duran devoted a portion of down time to earning a high school equivalency certificate. However, the resumption of his formal education began with the first-year humanities class — a course designed in part to reassure BPI students, many of whom never considered themselves college material, that they have what it takes to excel at higher learning.

It was the *Allegory of the Cave* — a work featured in other prison education programs — that convinced Duran. In his extended metaphor, Plato portrays cave-bound prisoners whose view of reality consists solely of shadows cast on the cave wall before them — shadows of puppets manipulated by unseen people.

To Duran, the parallel between the allegory and his own circumstances — the "senseless hopelessness that

can seep in and leave you to the whims of the system" — was inescapable. Summoning Plato for inspiration, Duran threw himself headlong into what BPI had to offer.

And then some. He's now part of the BPI Debate Union. Three members of that team, to quote a *Washington Post* headline from last year, "crushed" a squad from Harvard University in head-to-head competition. (In September, the Debate Union was preparing for its next opponent: Yale).

Make no mistake, Alex Duran didn't just stumble into a BPI classroom. Indeed, before he could be introduced to Plato, he underwent an admissions process similar to that of a highly selective university. The process for Eastern Correctional students kicks off in the spring, when Callaghan and her staff circulate the applications that will ultimately identify the 100 men most likely to succeed in the BPI program.

The admissions system emphasizes potential over past performance. An interpretative writing exercise winnows the number of promising candidates to 40. The final stage, which includes a personal interview, ends with the selection of 16 to 18 first-year students to fill the seats in the associate degree program.



Inmate Alelur “Alex” Duran makes a point to his Bard classmates at Eastern Correctional Facility, including Jonathan Alvarez (right). Duran, who has spent 12 of his 32 years behind bars and is up for parole in November, has made the most of his time in prison. He earned his GED, enrolled in college, and competed on a headline-grabbing debate team.



A two-year degree does not guarantee automatic entrance into Bachelor's Studies, a program with its own, equally arduous set of admissions standards. In an institution with 1,250 residents, there is intense competition to be among the 65 to 70 men with access to BPI classrooms. And those who gain admission take nothing for granted.

'No playing around'

"There is no time to be lazy," says student Michael Pledger. "There is no playing around; these texts are tough."

The success of BPI at Eastern, Fishkill and four other New York correctional units has turned those participating facilities into — as odd as it may sound — preferred prison destinations. The chance for a BPI education prompted Jonathan Alvarez to seek a transfer from the relative freedom of a medium-security facility to Eastern, where inmate movement is closely monitored and severely restricted. Despite those strictures, Alvarez says the move was a "no-brainer."

True to the program's commitment of delivering a high-quality education in an unconventional venue, there are no shortcuts in BPI. The incarcerated, in fact, encounter far more obstacles as they work toward a degree than do their counterparts on the Bard campus.

A Bard student, for example, can capture research information from the internet with a few keystrokes on any number of electronic devices. Not so at Eastern, where prison rules prohibit access to email and all other forms of online content. While the rest of higher ed learns on a high-tech platform, it's still 1993 at Eastern, where every bit of information — be it a math equation or historic tract — undergoes intense scrutiny by prison officials. Once the material is approved, a Bard IT specialist uploads it to the computer lab desktops at the prison. Every text and handout distributed by the BPI faculty gets equal vetting.

Predictably, the incarcerated students grouse about the digital blackout. But Callaghan says many members of the Bard instructional staff view these limits as a plus.

"The papers are so much better when students can't lean on the internet," she explains. Indeed, for faculty, the students' total engagement is "part of the draw" of teaching a BPI course. And finding instructors willing to work in the program has never been a problem; in fact, there's a waiting list.

Jed Tucker's introduction to BPI teaching came as he worked toward a graduate degree at Columbia University, while also teaching a community college anthropology course. Thirteen years later, Tucker can still be found at the front of BPI classrooms — that is, when he's not tending to his primary duties overseeing the re-entry of paroled BPI graduates.

"(BPI) teaching grabs you," Tucker says. "Attendance is never an issue, and I'm not being ironic about that, because they could miss class by claiming to be sick or find another reason not to attend. They are just hungry to learn."

Tucker estimates that, even under ideal conditions, a college instructor typically gets through no more than two-thirds of the material outlined in a syllabus. Not so in the BPI anthropology classes, where he says students plow through the entire syllabus and then some.

"It's amazing," Tucker marvels. "Everyone does the extra work."

A plan for re-entry

As the director of re-entry, it is Tucker's job to integrate and acclimate the 60 or so BPI undergraduates and alumni who are released each year from New York prisons into the everyday world — a vital part of the BPI mission. The process begins with the issuance of a 29-page handbook detailing the top post-release priorities. The list includes scores of steps — everything from reporting to a parole officer to creating an email account, obtaining a cellphone, applying for public assistance and updating a resumé.

Tucker supplements the pamphlet with personal consultations in which he stresses the importance of leveraging the BPI education. These one-on-one discussions require what Tucker calls an "intensive, light touch" that helps prepare inmates for all kinds of disconnections on the outside.

"A particular problem with our re-entry students is that the real world doesn't anticipate (parolees who are also) graduates with liberal arts degrees," he explains. "Our job is to bridge those gaps."



Jed Tucker, who has been teaching BPI courses for 13 years, says he still loves it because incarcerated students "are just hungry to learn" and typically work harder than students in traditional settings. Tucker also acts as BPI's "director of re-entry," helping program participants acclimate to the everyday world once they're released.

Faced with the prospect of freedom for the first time in years, if not decades (the average BPI student serves ten years), many re-entering individuals struggle to frame a future for themselves in a non-structured environment. When that occurs, Tucker says he firmly but gently "teases it out of them."

Students who leave the facility before obtaining a degree are counseled on how to earn enough credits on the outside. BPI graduates are advised on how to best continue their education in grad school.

Most paroled undergraduates return to one of the five boroughs and complete their degree in the City University of New York system. An impressive number of those who have completed the four-year program also wind up at Columbia University, New York University and Cornell. Still other BPI alumni are landing jobs in private industry, the nonprofit sector, the arts and education. Upon release, BPI students can also take re-entry courses in subjects such as public health, food systems and computer technology — courses that allow them to



Paul Kim, a BPI student who was imprisoned for 17 of his 35 years, is now out on parole, finishing up his senior chemistry project. Here he works in a Bard College biotech lab, doing interspecies comparative genetics research.



Glenn Rodriguez, 42, has been incarcerated since age 16. He sought a transfer from a medium-security institution to Eastern Correctional, a maximum-security facility, to enroll in BPI as a social science major. "It's difficult," he says of the coursework, "but it's worth it."

build on the liberal arts degree and prepare for careers and further academic study.

Tucker and Kenner downplay a seemingly eye-popping statistic that is often cited in media coverage of BPI: the 2 percent rate of recidivism among its graduates. (Nationally, nearly *half* of all parolees re-enter the criminal justice system in some way within three years of release.) "People make too much of recidivism," Kenner contends. For him and other BPI officials, the goal isn't merely to change cycles of illegal behavior. The idea is to change lives. "This is about providing education in places where it will work, where the students will take advantage of it," he says.

One such student is 35-year-old Paul Kim, who is completing his senior project in a Bard College biotech lab. Kim is researching a possible genetic link between the hair cells that act as hearing receptors in humans and a similar organism in zebrafish.

BPI provided Kim with books, computer access and classroom time while incarcerated. But a science lab will never be located behind prison walls. Still, despite the inability to conduct lab experiments, Kim lauds BPI for helping him cope with prison life, particularly in the final stages of a 17-year sentence.

"I used to count down my time by the semester," he recalls. "I knew that one day I'd be coming out and coming home. I wanted to do something to maximize my potential, and you don't pass up an opportunity to do something like (BPI)."

When completed, Kim's senior project will be added to the stack of his predecessors' works, all original, now cramming a closet shelf in the BPI conference room. When the program relocates to its new headquarters on Bard's campus, the library of projects will follow.

Shiloh Hylton's analysis of female participation in the civil rights movement will be soon be added to the growing repository of work — as will Alex Duran's study of community policing, a project to which he intends to devote full attention after his release.

Duran says he'll leave Eastern Correctional with no illusions about how society is likely to treat him as a paroled felon.

"A bachelor's degree is not a panacea," he says. "But it does allow you to say you used your time in prison constructively — and that you're not the person you used to be. That may get you over the hump."

A chance for inmates to get over the hump. That's all Max Kenner and a small group of Bard undergrads hoped for when they gathered nearly 20 years ago to create BPI.

Today, 60 times a year in New York alone, Kenner and his team see to it that prisoners can pursue a high-quality postsecondary education, one equal to or better than that offered to undergraduates on every campus in the nation.

"Students come to BPI with terribly little formal education," Kenner says. "But with just a window of access, they make the most of an opportunity, and they leave with so much." ■

Student-centered approach works inside the walls, too

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Kyle Campbell's vision for his future is as clear and crisp as a New England autumn afternoon.

After completing his undergraduate degree, he'll establish an independent, nonprofit social services agency that focuses on meeting the needs of young people struggling to get ahead in hardscrabble neighborhoods — not unlike the one where he grew up. The program will combine deterrence, education and accountability in a street-level effort to reverse a trend that results in the incarceration of one out of six African-American men.

Campbell already knows the name he'll hang on its shingle: the Juvenile Justice Diversion Initiative — never mind that the initiative has yet to serve a single person. The pieces are

Kyle Campbell (right) and Brandon Robinson are both incarcerated at the John J. Moran Medium-Security Facility in Cranston, R.I. They, along with 12 other Moran inmates, are also college students, thanks to the College Unbound Prison Bridge Program.





all in place: A plan, a detailed organizational chart and the determination to serve the community. Only one obstacle stands between Kyle Campbell and his objective: parole.

Imprisoned since age 17, the 40-year-old Campbell is serving a life term and has no idea when he will walk out of the John J. Moran Medium-Security Facility in Cranston, R.I. — or if that day will ever arrive.

Uncertainty about parole (and about his appeal on the grounds that he received an adult life sentence for murder as a juvenile) hasn't deterred Campbell from honing the message he intends to drive home to the young men and women at the Juvenile Justice Diversion Initiative.

"I'm going to tell them about the men here who wish they knew then what they know now," he says.

With 23 years on the inside, Campbell has had ample time to consider what he will say if he ever returns to the Providence neighborhoods of his youth. But it wasn't until 2015 that Campbell began to formulate the vision of the future that is so clear to him now — a life of

purpose and service, lived in a world beyond the perimeter wall and the razor wire. It was then, just last year, that Campbell was introduced to the College Unbound Prison Bridge Program. For him, and for 13 of his fellow inmates here at the Moran facility, the program indeed serves as a bridge to a far better future.

The program's origins

The program is innovative and unconventional — in many ways, as unlikely as the connection between the two men behind its creation: Dennis Littky and James Monteiro. Littky, 72, is a nationally known educator who holds two doctorates from the University of Michigan and has spent nearly five decades as a passionate advocate for personalized learning. Monteiro, 47, is an eighth-grade dropout who spent most of his adult life in prison before earning two degrees and turning his life around. As founder and director of the Prison Bridge



James Monteiro (below), founder and director of the Prison Bridge Program (PBP), confers with colleagues Kaiya Letherer and Dennis Littky. Littky, the founder of College Unbound, is a longtime proponent of individualized educational programs such as PBP.

Program (PBP), Monteiro is now dedicated to helping others turn things around the same way he did.

What Littky and Monteiro share, besides their history with PBP, is an unshakable belief that education is a key factor — *the* key factor — in the formula for success. Monteiro came to that realization the hard way, after being convicted of multiple felonies and spending some 20 years behind bars in five states. Toward the end of that dark period, while serving a 10-year sentence in a state prison in Baltimore, Monteiro saw a spark of light in a news story. He read about Andres Idarraga, an ex-offender from Rhode Island who, after his release, enrolled and graduated from Brown University and went on to earn a law degree from Yale.

"I was so amazed by that," Monteiro recalls. "I couldn't believe that someone from the ACI (Rhode Island's Adult Correctional Institution) was going to Brown University and then to Yale. I just couldn't believe it. That made *me* want to go back to school."

Inspired and determined to change, Monteiro enrolled

in college while incarcerated, earning an associate degree in psychology, with honors. Upon his release in 2009, Monteiro was eager to continue his turnaround story. "I didn't want to get stuck in the cycle again," he says. And so he returned home, to the Mount Hope neighborhood in Providence, determined to act on his commitment to build a workforce-development program for local youth. He also wanted to continue his postsecondary studies but, like many ex-offenders, he found that task wasn't so easy on the outside.

"When I transitioned back home and I tried to go to school, it was nearly impossible," Monteiro recalls. "I had to weigh between: 'Do I go back and finish my (bachelor's) degree or do I get a job and pay these bills?'"

Fortunately — and, in a way, thanks to Littky — Monteiro found a way to do both. While working as a nonprofit case manager and youth program coordinator, he enrolled at Roger Williams University through what was then a new program: College Unbound (CU), an innovative effort that Littky launched to better serve



first-generation, low-income college students. Three semesters later, after earning his bachelor's degree in community development, Monteiro found another job. Littky hired him to serve as an academic adviser in the CU program — in part because of Monteiro's perspective as an ex-offender who had forged a new path and was eager to help others do the same.

"One of James' projects as a College Unbound undergraduate was in starting a youth jobs program that was connected to issues around incarceration," recalls Adam Bush, CU provost.

Throughout his time as a CU adviser, Monteiro says, he was nurturing the idea that would blossom into the Prison Bridge Program. Reflecting on his own post-prison pathway, he saw what most ex-offenders see: a tough road traversed in halting steps. It starts tentatively, with the actual release; then progresses to functional stability, and finally (and all too rarely) leads to what Monteiro calls "*real* freedom."

"Freedom isn't just about being out of prison," he explains. "It's about having adequate employment and support and being able to really compete out here in society." Once

"Freedom isn't just about being out of prison. It's about having adequate employment and support and being able to really compete out here in society."

— James Monteiro, founder and director of the Prison Bridge Program

fully free himself, Monteiro made it his mission to ensure that type of freedom was attainable for other ex-offenders.

"I did a whole lot research about what would really make a good re-entry program," he recalls. "I found out that there were lots of programs, but nobody was making the connection between what happens inside the prison and what happens outside. Lots of people take part in education behind the walls. The hard part comes when they get out."

As part of his research, Monteiro talked to several people whose insights helped shape the Prison Bridge Program. In addition to CU's educators, Monteiro consulted experts on incarceration at every level — from Rhode Island Department of Corrections Director A.T. Wall II to Andres Idarraga himself, the inmate-turned-attorney whose story had initially inspired him.

Armed with months of research, and with what he had learned from his own transition experience, Monteiro drew up a plan for the Bridge Program and took his idea to Littky.

Littky recalls the conversation.

"James told us, 'Hey, there's a lot of people going in and out of prison who are a lot smarter than me. Why don't we start a specific program for them? Let's work in

the prisons; and most important, let's make sure we're there to help them on the day they get out. Let's make sure they don't get lost.'"

Littky was sold immediately. "I said, 'Great!' and James just took off with it," Littky recalls. "He built it as a College Unbound initiative, within our structure, but he really built it himself."

Monteiro and his CU colleagues agree that it's the "bridge" portions of the Prison Bridge Program — the features designed to smooth students' transition from prison to the outside world — that set it apart from other such efforts.

"The Bridge Program isn't just College Unbound going into the prison to run a degree program or offer free credits. There are plenty of other programs and colleges that do that," explains Provost Bush. The difference, he says, is that PBP is "fully enmeshed within a re-entry process — in the same way that (College Unbound) is totally enmeshed in our other students' lives."

That central idea behind CU — creating a highly personalized program — has long been a hallmark of Littky's work, as ubiquitous as the colorful African kufi caps he favors. In 1995 Littky co-founded Big Picture Learning — an individualized middle and high school model in which, for example, a biography of LeBron James might be assigned reading for a student with a passion for basketball. The formula for determining NBA scoring averages could likewise find its way into that student's math studies. The history of an NBA city would fulfill a social studies requirement.

The BPL model — pioneered in Providence on its primary campus, the Met Center — has proven successful for two decades and is now offered in 65 schools in 23 states and in 70 schools internationally. In 2008, Littky decided to adapt this model to serve nontraditional students at the postsecondary level, and College Unbound was born.

A CU student typically enters the program after attaining prerequisite credits at a community college or other degree-granting institution. The program's format rejects what Bush calls "an environment that tells people what to do. In higher education — and certainly behind prison walls — it is considered almost subversive to give students an opportunity that allows them the freedom to learn in their own way."

CU has been approved by the Rhode Island Board of Higher Education and is moving toward regional accreditation. A Connecticut-based online institution, Charter Oak State College, is conferring CU degrees until the program is accredited. A timetable for awarding accreditation is not yet established.

The invitation for students to create their own courses of study is not all that sets College Unbound apart from the traditional higher education model. Standard classroom lessons are also absent. Instead, CU enrollees participate in collaborative, peer-to-peer instruction — an informal, small-group structure to accommodate the real lives of older learners, most of whom are working parents.



Kyle Campbell takes a break before his “Globalization” class to confer with Kaiya Letherer, assistant director of the Prison Bridge Program. Letherer, a College Unbound graduate herself, is nominally the class instructor, but she sees herself more as a facilitator, guiding the incarcerated students through what she calls “the process of self-transformation.”

"Everyone says students have to be college-ready. Forget that," Littky says. "What we're saying is that colleges need to be student-ready."

As he and his colleagues are learning with the Bridge Program, the value of that student-centered approach is even more apparent behind prison walls.

Kick-starting college

For as long as he remained incarcerated, Kyle Campbell limited his educational aspirations to the associate degree he obtained through Rhode Island Community College courses. The opportunity to earn a four-year degree existed, but the cost of tuition had to come from his own pocket, an expense out of reach for most inmates.

"I was practically stagnated," Campbell says, "because getting a bachelor's in here was almost impossible."

His stalled education was kick-started the day the Rhode Island Department of Corrections invited residents of the medium-security unit (as well as other facilities) to apply for a spot in the Bridge Program. The program appealed to Campbell, not least because tuition was free. He signed on eagerly.

On a late August morning, Campbell and his 13 classmates filed into a drab classroom in the prison's educational wing. The color of the cinderblock walls — beige — matched that of the inmates' jumpsuits. Two large fans whirred futilely in the heavy, uncooled air.

The men took their seats in a semicircle around instructor Kaiya Letherer, assistant director of the Prison Bridge Program and herself a College Unbound graduate.

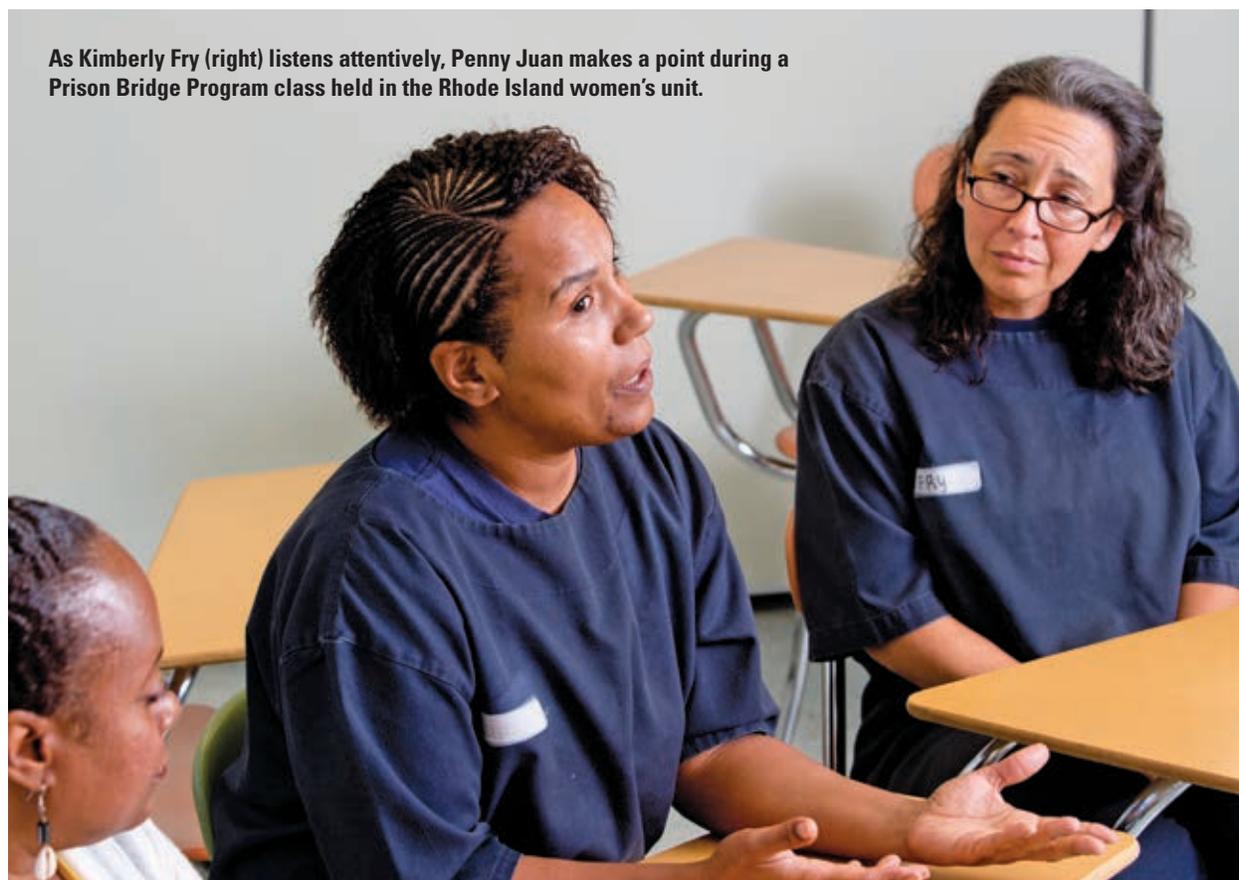
CU offers a single course per semester to a cohort of students, a group that moves sequentially — and together — toward a degree. Today's course is titled "Globalization," and as its name implies, it covers a lot of ground.

Letherer is technically the instructor, but "facilitator" is a more apt description. Globalization students, Letherer says, "have made the choice to begin the process of self-transformation." Her role is to guide them through that process.

For the benefit of visitors — including Ralph Orleck, who directs education programs for the Rhode Island Department of Corrections — the Globalization class that morning outlined projects ranging from setting up a practice as a substance abuse counselor, to establishing a school to train service dogs, to operating a diner staffed by newly released inmates. The intent of each project was for participants to make amends for past transgressions.

"Most men in the program feel that if they give back to their community they are giving back to themselves," says Campbell.

The projects of the eight classmates in the Rhode Island women's unit Bridge Program convey that sense of purpose. "A lot of us have had horrible experiences in life that led us off track," says student Kimberly Fry. "College Unbound helps us to think more reflectively and incorporate our past into a future to create a whole new ideal of ourselves."



As Kimberly Fry (right) listens attentively, Penny Juan makes a point during a Prison Bridge Program class held in the Rhode Island women's unit.



Bridge Program participant Julie Robat (center) confers with her classmates in the Rhode Island women’s unit, including Merissa Piccoli. Monteiro, as usual, is a quiet but respected figure in the background — a living symbol to his incarcerated peers that real change is possible.

As PBP’s founder and director and an ex-offender himself, Monteiro believes the goals set out by the incarcerated can help them complete a circle. “It’s a ripple effect,” he says. “These guys are getting an education, and they want to go back to the communities where they caused problems to address social issues.”

In that way, the program conveys a potent message to inmates who otherwise would experience little beyond the tedium of prison. “It shows them that they can lead a meaningful life, support themselves and support their families,” says First Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Ojetta Rogeriee Thompson, a member of the College Unbound board. “It shows them how to have hope. Education is having the quality of your life changed.”

Been there himself

Monteiro, seated among the students, brings a quiet presence to every PBP class. At the medium-security unit, Monteiro’s blue shirt sets him apart from the rest of the men. He says little, but words aren’t necessary; his presence speaks volumes.

“James being one of us makes it a lot easier,” explained Fred Wilding, a former restaurant cook with a post-release plan to open a food truck that serves the

homeless. “We’ve seen everything he has done, and we think, ‘If he can do it, why can’t we?’”

Monteiro understands both the practical and symbolic aspects of his position and his presence. “It’s motivation for them to see someone who has come from the (corrections) system,” he says.

Working in tandem for a little more than a year, Monteiro and Letherer have assembled and refined a program designed to serve a group of students whom Wall, without irony, calls “classic adult learners.”

As the nation’s longest-serving corrections director, Wall recalls a time when prison-based education programs essentially began and ended with the requirements for a high school equivalency certificate. He acknowledges that penal institutions, along with many of those housed within, once viewed learning behind bars with suspicion, if not disapproval. No more.

“In a sense it’s now cool to pursue an education here,” Wall says. “It is a sign of respect.” Proof that attitudes have changed can be seen in the fact that institutions’ commencement exercises now stretch over two days — a marked change from the handful of high school equivalency recipients in the past.

“In essence, adult basic education ended with earned GEDs,” says Wall. “It has become evident that there was a hunger for something more.”

That hunger among the students is evident, Wall says, during his visits to the medium-security unit classes coordinated by Letherer. In most cases in the prison, he says, his arrival would prompt furtive, sidelong glances — a signal among employees and inmates that a high-ranking official is on the premises.

“But when I go into (PBP) classes, no one pays attention to me,” Wall says. “They are so immersed in their work that they aren’t distracted by the fact that ‘the man’ is there.”

Recidivism rates are monitored closely by those in Wall’s line of work. Repeat offenses are less common in Rhode Island than in other states, but the numbers are still cause for concern. The most recent study determined that 31 percent of the state’s parolees were standing before a judge within a year of release and nearly half — 48 percent — had somehow violated the terms of parole within three years. Nationally, two-thirds of ex-offenders have an encounter with law enforcement within three years of release — a rate that the National Institute of Justice says jumps to three out of four by the time five years have passed.

Parolee perseverance

For Bridge Program enrollees, the groundwork to slow recidivism is established in the classroom. Once released, it is incumbent on them to draw on their personal development — refined on the inside to



José Rodriguez, 33, was a middle-school dropout who served three years for attempted murder before earning his associate degree through College Unbound. He’s now working toward his bachelor’s degree while holding down a job with the nonprofit Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence.

persevere on the outside. And the staffer overseeing the transition, College Unbound Case Manager Wanda Brown, is there to assist the young men at every stride. Young men like Marquese Jones.

In and out of trouble since age 12, Jones hadn’t yet reached the age of consent before he entered the adult criminal justice system. “At 17, the court had had enough of my silliness,” recalls Jones, now 29. He was introduced to PBP last April, two weeks before his release, and the introduction couldn’t have come at a better time.

“Coming home with a felony, I knew the best thing to do was get an education,” says Jones. “My goals have always been negative; I’ve never had a positive goal.”

Enter Wanda Brown. The case manager took Jones under her wing the moment he returned to the Providence neighborhood where, as a teen, he’d known little but trouble.



College Unbound Case Manager Wanda Brown (left) talks with Keila Florentino (right) and Marquese Jones, who was introduced to the Bridge Program shortly before his release in April. “Coming home with a felony, I knew the best thing to do was get an education,” says Jones, adding that Brown has been instrumental in keeping him focused on that goal.



Chris Aina, another ex-inmate making the transition under the watchful eye of Wanda Brown, juggles his College Unbound classes with a job in the construction trades. He plans someday to have his own contracting firm.

"I never met Wanda before," says Jones. "But she treated me as if she'd known me since I was a kid." In the five months since his release, Jones had scrupulously avoided the traps that had landed him before so many judges in the past.

"I know the best way to stay out of trouble is to stay busy," he says. "The more time I have, the more I get in trouble."

He can (and does) thank Brown for limiting his idle time. It is she who makes sure Jones is constructively occupied when he's not in a College Unbound classroom or at work. Since April — by phone, email and face-to-face encounters — Brown has been a constant presence in Jones' life. She's shown, through words and actions, that she believes in Marquese Jones. And for the first time in his life, Jones believes in himself.

"I know if I keep reading, keep studying and get a degree, I can do anything," says Jones, already making inroads to work as a counselor in the Rhode Island Training School, the state facility for juvenile offenders.

The College Unbound team recognizes that the process of turning a life around begins with the individual.

"Everything begins with the mind and what you believe in," says Chris Aina, a Brown protégé who juggles his College Unbound classes with a construction job —

a job he sees as a stepping stone toward running his own contracting company.

José Rodríguez is building something, too. He spent his formative years believing he was destined for nothing better than the dead-end jobs reserved for a middle-school dropout with a charge of attempted murder and a three-year stint in state prison on his record. The ease with which he attained an associate degree through College Unbound taught him otherwise. Today, a 33-year-old who once feared he'd "never make it to 21," Rodríguez works as a case manager in Providence with the nonprofit Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence.

On the rebound from a reversal, Rodríguez is back in College Unbound classrooms, moving toward his bachelor's degree — and his studies come with a self-imposed deadline. If all goes per plan, Rodríguez and his daughter, Marilyn Resto, next spring will become the first parent-child combination to receive diplomas simultaneously from Littky-led programs — Rodríguez from College Unbound; Resto from Big Picture Learning.

College Unbound and the Bridge Program "retained a part of me I thought I'd lost by giving me an opportunity to position myself for post-prison success," Rodríguez says. "I thought I'd lost everything, that the rest of my life would be meaningless. This program gave me hope and made me realize there is a part two to this story." ■



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