



Prison University Project

A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

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From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

A few weeks ago we got an email from a former student, now out of prison, who'd agreed to write us a letter about his current life for this newsletter. Derek Meade had been an exceptional student while in the program at San Quentin, had enrolled in school immediately after paroling to continue his studies, and had also managed to find a part-time job. He had sounded great for quite a while. When he didn't respond to one of our messages, we sent another, and he finally wrote to say that he had recently relapsed, and was close to being sent back to prison as the result of two positive drug tests. He said he hoped to send us the letter soon, with some better news.

Derek's assumption was, of course, that his current news was "unfit" for the newsletter. It was as if he had absorbed the pressure we often feel to provide nothing but upbeat success stories and clear evidence of our "results." And yet how many of our former students – or other people in recovery, for that matter – experience the same thing he was going through? What impact does it have on those individuals never to see their experiences reflected in publications about our programs? And equally important: how does this absence affect the public's understanding of our work – whether in terms of the value of education for people in prison, or the role education can play in the process of recovery?

Education increases one's capacity for introspection, strengthens communication skills, unearths potential, and makes finding work much more likely – and each of these is vital to the process of recovering from addiction. But as critical a tool as education is in the work of building a healthy life, it doesn't do that work for you.

Prison programs are often imagined, and judged, like carwashes that individuals with very complex problems can simply pass through, to emerge fully healed and transformed. In fact, many of us who facilitate programs probably end up perpetuating such simplistic notions, as we strive to convey the transformative power of the services we provide to an outside audience. Yet no matter how effective we are, and no matter how thrilling and miraculous recovery is, it is also a slow, often painful, and always complex physiological, psychological, and social process. Why, as with so many other things related to people in prison, do we constantly simplify the process of becoming a healthy human being? Imagine trying to get clean while living in a prison – one of the most stressful and depressing environments imaginable,

where drugs are plentiful and treatment programs, virtually non-existent. Or imagine all the ways in which the stigma of being a "parolee" or a "drug addict" affects recovery, employment, housing, and relationships.

In spite of his deep regret, in Derek's email I could hear the ways in which his education was supporting him in his struggle to hold on to his own life. Even in the face of this relapse, and knowing the drug tests would be positive, he'd continued to report to his parole agent, who was clearly trying to work with him but had now given him one last opportunity to turn around. He had entered a treatment program, and he was still reaching out to stay in touch with us. He wrote, "I am on my last chance. One more and I'm heading back [to prison]. It is so hard to stay clean! My freedom now rests on my ability to say no."

Last week I wrote to him to say that his Herculean efforts made me confident he was going to be fine, and I asked if I could share what he'd written here. He wrote back, "I am more than happy to let you use anything I wrote in your newsletter, especially if it may help someone else. I have 16 days clean right now and still struggle every day... Use my full name please."

It is a humbling experience to provide support to people who are engaged in a struggle this intense; every day I am awed and grateful for the opportunity to do this work.

Our deepest thanks to all of you for your commitment to our work, and for the faith in our students that it represents.

With warm regards, Jody Lewen

On June 25, Jeffrey Brooks, Yu Chen, Ricky Gaines, Jr., and Jonathan Wilson (counter-clockwise from top) celebrated their completion of the Associate of Arts degree at San Quentin. Special guests at the event included Sujatha Baliga, Restorative Justice Advisor at Community Works West, and Sophie Maxwell, San Francisco City Supervisor, District 10. □



Photo by: Andrew Kenower