



A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

October 2008 Vol. 3, No. 2

### *From the Executive Director*

Dear Friends,

This fall the Prison University Project is embarking on a set of exciting and ambitious initiatives, each intended to strengthen either our academic programs, or the impact of our work beyond the San Quentin community. These include expanding the Associate of Arts Degree and College Preparatory Programs, introducing a Learning Differences Program, and implementing a rigorous, full-scale Program Evaluation to measure the short- and long-term impact of the San Quentin College Program on its participants. With each of these projects we intend not only to develop strong models and gather useful data, but to find ways of conveying to a much larger audience that the lives of people in prison matter as fully as those of people anywhere else.

In order to devote ourselves as an organization to this work, we are launching our first major fundraising campaign to raise the funds we will need through 2011: a total of \$2.1 million. (See page two for details.) Our hope is that you all will not only contribute as individuals, but that you'll invite your friends, colleagues, and family members to join you in supporting us. Even in these uncertain financial times, we hope everyone will remember what a huge impact each contribution makes, no matter the size.

One of the most thrilling aspects of working with the Prison University Project is the extraordinarily collaborative and interdependent quality of everything we do. We are excited to be taking on this latest project, and thank each of you for the many ways in which you contribute.

With warm regards,  
Jody Lewen

## *'Some People Are Just Different': Understanding Learning Disabilities*

*Many students in the College Program at San Quentin face special challenges, such as differing learning styles, "learning disabilities" like dyslexia or ADHD, an intense fear of math or of school in general, or issues specific to adult learners of English. After several years of watching these students work unbelievably hard, and yet often repeat classes and frequently drop out from sheer frustration, we have resolved to learn how to better address their special needs.*

*One student who has strongly motivated us to pursue this work is Billy Green. In August Billy agreed to do an interview about his experiences with learning, so that we could share with others what he's been teaching us. Following is an excerpt of the conversation; the original 50 minute recording can be found on our website, under the "Highlights" section.*

**JL:** Can you describe some of the difficulties you had in school as a child?

**BG:** I remember writing something I think in a history class, and I took it home to my mother [laughs] and she said, what language is this? I think I had like all capital letters; there was no punctuation – there was just word after word. Everything's close, there was no space in between.

What I do sometimes – for example, with arithmetic, I'll do a math problem, and instead of a three, I'll write a five, or instead of seven, I'll write a eight, and to me it's, you know, I didn't make a mistake.

**JL:** So when you look at it, if you meant to write a five, you see a five.

**BG:** Yeah. It happens a lot. It seem like it's twisted in my head. The numbers are out of sequence. Even with my writing – instead of "me" I'll write

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**Graduation 2008** On June 19, Michael Carter; Michael Tyler; Sam Johnson, Sr.; Lamarr Mainor, Sr.; Eric Phillips (from left to right above), and Michael Gallardo (not pictured) celebrated the completion of their Associate of Arts degrees at San Quentin. Highlights of the ceremony were the keynote address by Julio Medina, CEO of Exodus Transitional Community, and a special appearance by Rahman Green, who was released from San Quentin in March after 25 years in prison for a murder he did not commit. (Photos: Leland Kenower)

## PUP NEWS, ACCOMPLISHMENTS, AND SPECIAL EVENTS



photo by Andrew Kenower

**College Program offerings for the 2008 fall semester include:** Introduction to Composition, Introduction to Literature, American Government, Philosophy, Public Health, Journalism, U.S. History, English 99A, English 99B (both college preparatory classes), Math 50 (developmental math), Algebra, Geometry, Pre-Calculus, and Calculus.

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**The recent CNN documentary “Black in America,”** which was viewed by over 13 million people around the world, featured a segment on the San Quentin College Program. The whole two-part documentary is now available on iTunes and Amazon.com.

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**Is It Safe? Essays by Students in the San Quentin College Program,** PUP’s newest publication, is available for purchase on our website. Thousands of travelers from across America and the globe have enjoyed the exhibition of the same name (pictured above) at Alcatraz Island since June.

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**“Academics Belong in Prison,”** an article by Jody Lewen, appeared last month in the Publication of the Modern Language Association, as part of a special issue on prison education.

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**PUP’s first symposium, on Proposition 9** (also known as Marsy’s Law, or the Victims’ Bill of Rights of 2008), was held at San Quentin on Friday, October 3. The event brought together a diverse group of stakeholders to critically examine the initiative. Sessions addressed the bill’s content and intentions; its potential fiscal, human, and community impact; and victims’ perspectives. The student organizers of the event, who also presented on panels, included Leonard Rubio, George Lamb, Vu Pham, Will Packer, Michael Harris, Troy Williams, and Hector Oropeza. They were joined by invited outside experts, including attorneys, academics, representatives from the Yes on Prop. 9 campaign, and victims of violent crime. More information and video of the event will be up on the PUP website shortly.

## Learning Disabilities *continued from page 1*

“be.” You know, in “believe” or “receive” I’ll still be forgetting “i” before “e” except after “c” – I’ll just put it down backwards. It takes me longer to write cause I have to go back, and I have to edit everything.

**JL:** This must be so frustrating!

**BG:** It is – sometimes I just take a break. And you should know cause I took English 99A three times [laughs], and finally I said well I’ll just take a break for a while.

**JL:** Is there anything in particular you would want teachers to understand about a student like you?

**BG:** Well for example the math class – when I do my fractions problems I go straight down, but there in the book we were taught to go across and that just threw me completely off to where I couldn’t do my math because I had to do it a different way. And then the one teacher, he told me well do it the way you do it, as long as the answer’s right – as long as you can show me how you got the answer then that’s OK. So I guess what I’m saying is that teachers have to understand that some people are just different. I mean Einstein was different from what I’ve heard, he was a weird guy – he thought different, and look what happened.

## The Prison University Project FUNDRAISING INITIATIVE

To reach our fundraising goal of \$2.1 million to support general operations through 2011, we are now seeking individual and institutional donors who will support the work of the Prison University Project with contributions ranging from \$5 to \$200,000. Below is a breakdown of what we envision. Note that the Prison University Project receives no state or federal funding whatsoever. Our costs per student are extremely low as a result of the thousands of hours of teaching and other labor contributed by our volunteer faculty.

DONATION LEVEL	NUMBER OF DONORS NEEDED
\$200,000.00	4
\$50,000.00	5
\$30,000.00	8
\$15,000.00	10
\$5,000.00	10
\$1,000.00	20
\$500.00	25
\$100.00	300
\$25.00	1800
\$5.00	300
<b>Our Goal</b>	<b>\$2,100,000.00</b>

### What your money buys

**\$6.50 = a quality pocket dictionary**

**\$150 = a graphing calculator suitable for calculus**

**\$1000 = annual cost for a single student (enrolled in two classes per semester, three semesters per year)**

**\$4500 = Algebra textbooks, calculators, and all other supplies for a 25 student class**

## Measuring Our Impact: Program Evaluation News

Since 2003, Amy Lerman has worked with the Prison University Project on projects ranging from teaching Political Science to providing IT support; this past year, thanks to a grant from the Verbena Fund, she not only oversaw the preparation of the organization's infrastructure for the upcoming evaluation, but also collaborated with the firm Rockman et al on developing the evaluation design and written proposal. This fall Amy left California for Princeton University, where she joined the faculty as Assistant Professor of Politics and Public Affairs. We are very sad to see her go, but wish her tremendous luck and success.

PUP is currently planning a 3-5 year program evaluation, in order to evaluate the program's effects on students, families, and volunteers; to document what we do and how we do it in order to create a template for others; and to safeguard and improve the quality of the services we provide. We'll measure a variety of outcomes for current students, including: academic progress and achievements, including pre-college and college level courses completed, and degree

completion; social life and relationships, including friendship networks and family relationships; participation in other prison programs (such as educational, vocational, and self-help); and mental and physical health.

For students who have left prison, we're interested in tracking continuation of higher education and the completion of higher degrees; rates of employment, salary, and job satisfaction; rates of substance use and relapse; social relationships; quality of life, including mental health and psychological well-being; rates of housing stability and homelessness; and rates of recidivism.

We also intend to convene an advisory group of experts in the fields of education and criminal justice to assist in further refining the research design. Our hope is that the information amassed through this project will provide insight and evidence that will be of use to practitioners, advocates, and funders.

— Amy Lerman

### Alumni News

#### Email from Robert Murcia

Well here I am, I just finished summer school. I took Math 15 (Statistics) at Santa Rosa Junior College and I got a B!! Let me tell you, it wasn't easy. I have a 2.59 GPA now. For Fall I'm taking Math 27 (Trig) 5 units, Econ 1A 4 units, and Spanish 1 3 units (this I'm hoping will be an easy A lol :-p). So things have been good for me. I've been doing positive activities, going to the gym, volunteering at a food bank, and of course school. I'm trying to stay as busy as possible. I was recently put on mail in check ins with my parole officer. He was probably bored of coming to my house and hearing no bad news. But my life has definitely not been a walk in the park! As you are aware I went to Immigration detention. I was released on bail and have been fighting my case since March. I'm not allowed to work, can't renew my I.D., and I'm struggling financially. My family has helped out as much as they can God bless them. And I try to help with my nephews or around the house as much possible. So we have pretty much exhausted all our resources up to this point. However, I continue to have a positive outlook because I know there's a bright light at the end of the tunnel and these are just obstacles to overcome. In about 90 days I'll find out



whether I'll be able to get my work authorization back while I continue to fight my case. And that's not even the good news, I was just given the opportunity to apply for a pretty big scholarship through Hanna Boys Center, a Catholic School I went to when I was younger. I think I meet all the requirements. Your program, yourself, and your staff have been a big help to me and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for everything you have done for me and every one there. Thank you for your time and effort and not giving up on people like me.

#### Letter from Miguel Ceja

I'm sorry I took a while to write to you, but as you may know, I've been busy with so many things. One of them has been getting through my HVAC [Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning Certificate] training school and finally graduating in April. I was even encouraged into speaking at the graduation and in my speech I simply described how it was for me to accomplish my goal to graduate because I had to work during the day (it was a night class 5-9pm) and sometimes I was so tired that I could barely stay awake in class, let alone focus on my studies but my determination and faith has always helped me not to let up on something worthwhile.



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I want to take this chance to thank you and all the staff at the Prison University Project. The help you gave me was a positive push to pursue my goal to change my life for the better by continuing my education I had put on pause ever since I graduated from high school in 1990. Thank you for everything and for all the hard work and all the positive vibrations you and your staff bring to the students at San Quentin State Prison.

I want to let them know that it is possible to make it anywhere, if they stay focused on their education and goals with an open heart towards other people regardless of color then anything is possible. That life is good when we begin to live it the right way, with the help of God almighty we can do great things in life!

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## **STUBBORN EYES OF MINE**

*A Sonnet from Introduction to Literature  
by Edmund Johnson (TALEB)*

It's been a long time since I've cried!  
I have kept all the pain inside  
But Now, I recognize. That I must let go  
so my tears can flow  
Down the dark streets of my face.  
One day the levee will break  
And my dry eyes, And, my frown, will be evicted from this place.  
My pride is tyrant; the Master, Builder, The Ruthless Guardian of the floodgates.  
Working overtime to make sure that not even one tear is released.  
As a result of this - my body is weak; I am ill; and I am getting sicker  
I gasp, I moan, I yell - As I shiver  
My heart speaks  
"Oh how I live with this Excruciating Pain for Long days, weeks, months, and years  
O' please cry Stubborn Eyes of mine, For even the Heavens shed tears!"

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## **Who We Are and What We Do Prison University Project**

### **Our Mission**

The mission of the Prison University Project is to provide excellent higher education programs to people incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison; to create a replicable model for such programs; and to stimulate public awareness and meaningful dialogue about higher education and criminal justice in California.

### **Programs**

The College Program at San Quentin is the central project of the Prison University Project. It provides approximately 12 college courses each semester in the humanities, social sciences,

math and science, as well as intensive college preparatory courses in math and English, to 250 students. It is the only on-site, degree-granting higher education program in all of California's 33 state prisons. The Program is an extension site of Patten University in Oakland, CA. All instructors in the Program work as volunteers; all primary instructors in credit earning classes hold at least a master's degree in the given field.

In order to enroll, students must hold either a high school diploma or a GED. No consideration is given to length of sentence or commitment offense. All students begin in the College Preparatory Program, unless they place directly

## **Remembering Matthew Solomon**

Matthew Solomon, a former student in the San Quentin College Program, was shot and killed in San Francisco on Thursday, September 4 while standing on the street, talking to his friend Noel Espinoza, who was also killed. Matthew was 23 years old. He was an extraordinarily kind and creative person who had been building a life and working hard to support his two small children. Articles about his death (and the overwhelming number of shootings that have occurred recently in San Francisco) appeared in the SF Chronicle and in the Goodwill Industries newsletter, where he worked and had recently received a promotion. Those who knew him will always remember his sweet smile and his stunningly brilliant spoken word poetry.

In case anyone would like to send a donation, Goodwill has established a designated account at Wells Fargo to help defray burial costs and provide support for the children:

Matthew Fund  
c/o Goodwill  
Industries  
1500 Mission Street  
San Francisco, CA  
94103  
Attention: Vince  
DeVictor



into credit classes through exam.

The Prison University Project also produces a bi-annual newsletter and an annual journal of student writing, and hosts an annual graduation ceremony, a literary reading series, and numerous other special academic and cultural events.

### **Funding**

The Prison University Project receives no state or federal funding and thus relies entirely on donations from individuals, private foundations, and corporations. Students pay no fees or tuition. All textbooks and school supplies are provided by the Prison University Project.