

Prison University Project



photo by Philip Center

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From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

In July, a colleague from Chicago wrote to say she found it somewhat strange that the Prison University Project had not issued any sort of public statement about the hunger strike that was then going on in the security housing units at Pelican Bay. She speculated sympathetically that commenting on the situation might be difficult, given our need to maintain a positive relationship with the Department of Corrections, but stressed the importance of our publicly acknowledging what was happening.

For those of you unfamiliar with this situation, Pelican Bay is a maximum-security prison in northern California. The security housing units (SHU's) are frequently described as housing the "worst of the worst:" gang members, gang leaders, people who've committed or ordered murders while in prison, people who have assaulted prison staff. Conditions are characterized by intense isolation, as well as extreme material and sensory deprivation. These conditions are intended to block communication associated with gang activity, including violence against both staff and other prisoners, and to prevent the manufacturing of weapons.

When I first read the demands that were issued in conjunction with the strike, I was stunned by their simplicity: they called for adequate, nutritious food; constructive programming; an end to group punishment; and an overhaul of the gang validation process. They also called for implementation of the recommendations regarding the use of long-term solitary confinement laid out in the 2006 report of the US Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons.

The destructive impact of SHU conditions on the mental health of prisoners has been documented for decades. At a recent Assembly Public Safety Committee hearing, experts and family members also testified about egregious flaws in the administrative systems that determine who is placed in the SHU, and who is able to get out. Not only is Departmental policy deeply flawed, but years of inadequate training, supervision, and oversight have given rise to conditions that damage the health and safety of prisoners, staff, and, ultimately, the general public.

The fact that the prisoners themselves had to be the ones to raise these issues is a powerful commentary on the state of the California Department of Corrections, and on the State of California as a whole. Is it possible that there was no other way to draw the attention of the national and international media, the legislature, and, thereby, the Department of Corrections? Do people in the SHU's have to be prepared to die in order to make their voices heard?

Sadly, the reaction within the Department to the idea of discussing these grievances directly with the hunger strikers was almost

uniformly negative. Most believed that engaging in dialogue would amount to "negotiating with a disruptive group," and thus constitute a violation of departmental regulations. The fact that the strikers' mode of protest was non-violent, and that their grievances were so breathtakingly reasonable, was insignificant; what mattered to most people was the principle of their insubordination.

Their fear was presumably that communicating directly with the strikers might embolden the prison population at large, encourage further such actions, and thus undermine the Department's control over the entire system. I can see this point: structurally, control of a prison is reliant on the perception that staff and administration are in total control, and that resistance is futile. Were the Department to appear moved by the strike, that might indeed instill hope and embolden people to call for further changes. Yet given the current level of violence – and despair – that already exists inside California prisons, it seems both reckless and self-destructive for the Department to send the message that, per policy, it cannot distinguish between prisoners, for example, taking hostages, and their refusing to eat.

Some people (including staff at Pelican Bay) maintain that the organizers of the strike were mostly "shot-callers" from several different gangs, and that gang members were ordered to participate. I certainly am not in a position to judge the veracity of this disturbing claim. However, if it is true, the fact that the strike was organized *across racial lines* might be an indication that gang leaders are prepared to prioritize improving conditions over their traditional commitment to racial hatred. To anyone committed to reducing gang violence – which is theoretically one of the main functions of the SHU's – this would seem like an extraordinary opportunity.

If the strikers and those who support them want serious dialogue with the Department, the challenge they face will be conveying the extent not just of their resolve, but of their commitment to non-violence. Glorifying the specter of violent uprising, engaging in macho, posturing language, issuing threats and ultimata, only trigger the Department's deepest fears, and thus undermine those who advocate dialogue. At the same time, if the Department is seriously committed to its own transformation, it must actively support the expression of dissent within its own ranks, and continue the painstaking process of learning to work with "outsiders." These may well feel like existential challenges for both communities, but we have no choice. Forty years after Attica, we must finally work together, overcome violence and dehumanization, and make all voices heard.

With warm regards, Jody Lewen

Hegemonic Masculinity: Redefining the Concept at San Quentin *By Borey Ai*

Note: this essay is excerpted from an ethnographic research paper written for English 204: Critical Reading, Writing, and Research

In most California prisons, gangs and people who are affiliated with some form of group or faction define masculinity. These groups, mostly drawn on racial lines, control prison life and induce violence and fear upon others (Goodman 2008); they dictate to the people around them how a man in prison should think and behave. Principles such as the “convict code” – which is centered around hegemonic masculinity – serve as tools to illustrate this form of dictation. From the convict code stems the belief that a man does not do any of the following: back down from a challenge, participate in homosexual activities, show weakness, allow people who have been convicted of a rape crime or child-related sex crime to walk the mainline, snitch on other inmates, talk to guards, steal, cross territorial boundaries without permission. Always pay your debt, stay within your own race or faction.

Failure to abide by this code causes others to view you as something less than a man and often results to physical harm to self. Being a man in prison demands that a person must conform and adopt the rules and policies within this environment in order to survive; however, assimilating to these social norms can sometimes cause a person to have a very limiting view of life. Many of these men are unsure about how long

they are going to live and believe they could die brutally at any moment; they accept this fate and live on the edge.

Despite the fact that the thirst to be acknowledged as a real man can manifest in an oppressive and violent culture in prison, this masculine identity appears to soften over time in many cases if a certain type of environment is provided. For example, the unique environment of San Quentin State Prison, which provides opportunities such as education and self-help programs, and offers a pro-social culture, redefines the principles of masculinity. These external factors encourage the men to embrace their own individuality and entitle them to deviate from their old belief system.

Through education, these men learn to think critically about themselves and the world around them; it also broadens their minds and helps reshape their belief system. For example, in school, these men are exposed to countless subjects such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and many others. Assignments require them to write essays about various subjects and give a critical analysis of what they read. This process helps them identify evidence and decode arguments that they have discovered in their research. Through this process, the men also learn to cross reference their ideas and viewpoints with other studies and acquire a deeper understanding of themselves, their abilities, and the world around them; this in turn promotes self-confidence and gives the men the ability to make wise decisions

Other English 204 students' research topics included the following:

Terrell Allen: Diabetes and possible cure through pancreatic graft and islet transplant. Are there interest groups that block this process?

Tex B: Three strikes in California. Has it worked as a deterrent of serious and violent crimes?

Jerome Boone: Although violence in sports is not outright condoned, the various owners and their sports franchises implicitly promote it, which encourages the acceptability of sports-related violence among fans.

Isiah C: Which of the health consequences of tobacco is caused by the plant itself, and which is a consequence of the chemicals added to it? Can we offer a healthier, natural version?

Chris D: How much responsibility do Major League Baseball owners bear for the steroid epidemic during the 90s?

James E: Project Green Light, Vera Institute of Justice and other programs like it that prevent homelessness among people leaving prison. How do we provide shelter for inmates upon release?

Sam Hearn: PTSD and its effects on recidivism

Jorge H: Do older or younger trees remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere more effectively? What consequences does clear-cutting old growth and replanting younger trees have?

Histon: The “in-sourcing” of IT labor to parolees and other disadvantaged communities, and its potential economic and social benefits.

Kimya H: Crime and maturity—the influence adults have on adolescents.

Sam Johnson: Prison—the mass incarceration of African-Americans

Lonnie L: race and criminal justice system

Felix L: Falling crime rates and the prison population. Do longer sentences equal a lower crime rate? Sociological aspects of criminal history.

Ron M: Jazz and spirituality in older African-American men

Ruben Ramirez: Mail system in the prison

Alexei: That immigration increases the rate of crime is a widely-held belief that has erroneously motivated much of the public discourse about immigration and crime despite facts that prove otherwise.

Carl S: The flooding of the Mississippi River, and its social and environmental consequences, as well as the government's response.

Sean Scales: History of San Quentin Prison

Sean Simms: The senseless killings behind the Air Jordan show brand and the psychology of the Air Jordan shoes in the inner city.

Aly T: The transfer of CA prisoners to out-of-state prisons, and its consequences for prisoners, friends and family, and society as a whole.

Mark T: The de-socializing effects of incarceration. Why is re-integration upon release so difficult? What kinds of reform programs might help with transition? How about setting up a support network?

Monta Kevin Tindall: Pollution in the ocean and the extinction of fish. How will this affect our food consumption?

that can aid them in achieving personal success within prison and when they return to society.

In interviews with ten college program students at San Quentin who were raised in an environment that endorsed hegemonic masculinity in men, and lived through the effects of the convict code in other California prisons, the men stated that education helped reshape their view of what a man should be. One student, Ruben Williams, said, "All those things people used to tell me about being a man, when I was growing up, I used to believe them. But now that I'm a little more educated, and I know a little more about life, I think it's all BS. Those tough guys' act is the reason why I'm locked up." Another student, Henry Montgomery, stated, "Education helps you to analyze facts; it allows you to explore other theories, instead of accepting everything that people give you at face value."

Student Phuum You claimed that education helps him resolve conflict through verbal communication rather than physical violence. "I remember I used to always want to fight when I get into an argument with people, because I don't know how to talk, but now I'm a little better with vocabulary, so I can express myself better, verbally." These interviews show that education plays a big role in reshaping people's social construct of masculinity, and how they communicate with others. What is taught to you and is reinforced for you to believe can be redefined when the proper tools are provided. □

COURSES OFFERED IN FALL SEMESTER 2011

English 99A (two sections)

English 99B (two sections)

English 101A (Reading and Composition)

English 101B (Critical Thinking, Reading and Writing)

English 204 (Critical Reading, Writing, and Research)

Neuroscience

Comparative Religion

Communication

Ancient History

US History

Spanish 102

Spanish Conversation

Elementary Algebra

Intermediate Algebra

Geometry

Statistics

Pre-Calculus I

Calculus

Math 50

Study hall (tutoring in writing, math, and Spanish) and assorted individual math tutorials

Visual Concerns in Photography at San Quentin

Sunday, late afternoon; I am in stand-still traffic, heading home from San Quentin, "wasting my time" in idleness. Normally in such situations I would be frustrated and angry, the best I could do would be to turn the radio on. But today I am thankful for this extra quiet time alone because my mind is full, recounting the class I just taught and pondering the various conversations I had with students about photography and the meaning of images. I wish I had this entire newsletter to talk about the students, their insights and the willingness of the class to push itself and confront their own thoughts and feelings as we talk about the work being shown.

The first assignment for this class asked students to describe a non-existent photograph they wished they had of a significant moment in their life. The responses were amazing; below is an example, written by Troy "Kogen" Williams:

The photograph is a picture of six men in a prison cell. The cell is 10x12'. The back and sidewalls are made of concrete. The door and entrance is made of steel bars. The bars and walls are painted gray. There are three double bunk beds positioned parallel to the sidewalls and along the left side of the back wall. A single unit steel toilet is positioned in the corner along the right side of the back wall. There is a pay phone centered along the back wall in between the bunk and toilet about 4" off the ground. Five of the beds in the cell are filled with men of every race. Four of them are wrapped underneath blankets sound asleep. The fifth man is wrapped in his covers but wide awake and compassionately observing a sixth man on the telephone. The sixth man is situated on the floor beneath the phone. He is holding the receiver to his ear with one hand and his head with the other. Wet tears on top of dried tears are streaming from the man's face as he stares intensely- seemingly beyond any object in the dim lit cell.

When I tell people I teach at San Quentin many ask if I worry about being there. The answer is no. What I do worry about is what will happen when I go back to teaching photography at Sacramento State University in the fall. Will my classrooms be filled with students who are as engaged and curious, will they be as open, responsive and as respectful of learning as my students this summer at San Quentin?

—Nigel Poor is a Bay Area artist and an Associate Professor of Photography at CSU, Sacramento. Her work can be found in many museum collections including: SFMOMA, the M.H. deYoung Museum, San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES

We are pleased to announce the following additions to our staff:

Kara Urion, Program Associate

Kara holds a BA from Mills College in Literary & Cultural Studies with a concentration in Spanish. She has been co-teaching English and Spanish classes with the Prison University Project since 2009. She has worked in prisons and with communities affected by the prison system for the past ten years – including at a women’s prison in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala; in the Adolescent Reception and Detention Center at Rikers Island in New York; and with the Fifth Avenue Committee in Brooklyn, NY.



Jacqueline (Jackie) Nelson, Operations Manager

Before joining PUP, Jackie served as a House Manager at the Center for Women in Transition and as a Workforce Development Specialist at the Human Development Corporation in St. Louis, MO. She holds an M.P.A. (with an emphasis in Human Rights and Social Justice) and a B.S. in Industrial and Labor Relations (with a concentration in Inequality Studies), both from Cornell University.



Sabrina Qutb, Development Director

Most recently, Sabrina served as development director for HandsOn Bay Area, an organization that mobilizes volunteers for nonprofits, parks and schools. Prior to joining HOBA, Sabrina served as the communications and development manager at the Earned Assets Resource Network, which promotes asset-building as an effective poverty-fighting strategy. Prior to her work with EARN, she served as the communication and development director of Just Detention (formally Stop Prisoner Rape). Her fundraising and media outreach efforts helped to establish the organization as a nationally-recognized expert on sexual violence in detention. Sabrina was a 2006 Full Circle Fund Community Fellow and has a B.A. from Yale University.



We are sad to announce the following departures:

Miguel Kaminski, former PUP Operations Manager, left California this fall to begin a graduate program in Creative Writing at the University of Wyoming. **Maddy Russell-Shapiro**, interim Development Director, left to pursue a Master’s degree in education policy at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. We miss them both very much, and wish them the best of luck!

SAN QUENTIN STUDENTS IN THE NEWS!

In June, **Fox News Latino** published online an op-ed piece by students **Stephen Liebb** and **Hector Oropeza**, about the recent supreme court ruling related to overcrowding (Search: US Supreme Court Ruling Fox News Latino).

Later that month, **NPR’s Morning Edition** aired an eight-minute piece about the Prison University Project that was heard by an estimated 13 million people (Search: NPR Inmates Go To College).

A voicemail message from former San Quentin student Lance Gardner this July...

...I’m in summer school! I pulled 13 units this spring – I signed up for 13 and completed 13. I’m working on a double major in engineering – mechanical engineering and electrical engineering. I’m halfway there. I have enough units now to go to State but I’m not going to leave, I’m going to stay at City College and do as much as I can before I go to State.

I got hit on my mountain bike the other day coming from school. It destroyed my laptop I bought too – I had bought a \$1000 laptop just for my two engineering majors. I ended up in San Francisco trauma center with a baseball-sized knot on my head. They thought I had bleeding in my brain, they thought my neck was broke. They cut off all my clothes on the street, threw me in an ambulance and whisked me away. Horrible weekend! But I went to school today! And I went to math! And I have basic Public Speech tomorrow and another math class tomorrow.

I have not lost sight of the prize, and I’m still doing what I need to be doing, staying in school. And I owe it all to you and your inspiration. Thanks for not giving up on me, and for encouraging me...

Who We Are and What We Do

The mission of the Prison University Project is to provide excellent higher education 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 and across the United States.

The College Program at San Quentin provides approximately 20 courses each semester in the humanities, social sciences, math, and science leading to an Associate of Arts degree in liberal arts, as well as college preparatory courses in math and English, to over 300 students. The program is an extension site of Patten University in Oakland. All instructors work as volunteers. The Prison University Project receives no state or federal funding and relies entirely on donations from individuals and foundations.

Major expenses include textbooks and school supplies, publications, education and outreach activities (including conferences), office rent and utilities, and five full-time staff salaries. PUP’s annual cash budget is approximately \$700,000, but when the value of all volunteer teaching hours (and other pro bono labor) is included, PUP’s annual budget exceeds \$1 million.