



A Newsletter of the Prison University Project



photos by Saalik Khan

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## From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

Over a year ago, a student in the College Program with a history of mental illness suffered a psychotic episode while on the prison yard. He had been deteriorating for weeks. Shortly before the incident he had sought to see someone in Mental Health but for unknown reasons had been turned away.

One evening in June, he was observed on the yard by staff, eating grass. The responding officers intended to place handcuffs on him and escort him to Mental Health, per protocol. When he refused to comply as they wished, they tried using force, and he fled from them, across the yard. An alarm was sounded, and he was pursued and ultimately restrained by a large group of officers.

When that incident was over, the student was taken off the yard on a stretcher, having been severely beaten. Witnesses described him as semi-conscious and covered in blood. Through a prison disciplinary hearing, he was later charged with, and found guilty of, attempted murder of a correctional officer for allegedly grabbing a pen from one of the officers who was trying to restrain him. He was sentenced to three years in isolation, where he is today.

Prisons have an uncanny capacity to isolate, and even render speechless, not just those who are incarcerated in them, but anyone who spends time inside of them for an extended period. Working in a prison is like living part of the time on a different planet. It's not just the peculiar physical environment, or the highly specific institutional rules and cultural norms; it's the almost religious investment in "protocol," the institutionalized repudiation of empathy, the normalization of paranoia. Basic trust, good will, and logical reasoning are treated as unwise, peculiar and suspicious.

Events that in the non-prison world might seem extraordinary, inside are routine. A film is barred because of a brief image of a naked child, or because the person reviewing it considers it "anti-American." A student is put in solitary confinement for writing a thank you note. An officer makes up rules and his supervisors decline to confront him, for fear of appearing to "side with" Volunteers. A staff member relentlessly torments inmates, or his own colleagues, and goes unchecked. Acts of physical violence go unreported, for fear of retaliation. A student commits suicide, and his best friend and cellmate, who discovers him dead in their cell, is placed in solitary confinement for days – per protocol.

Why is it so hard for those of us who work or live inside to talk about such issues with people who do not? Sometimes the

stories require too much background information; other times I personally can't bear to hear the same incredulous reactions that I had myself years ago: But that doesn't make any sense! Why do they have to do it that way? Why doesn't anyone do something? Isn't that illegal? The fact that such reactions often sound excruciatingly naïve to me today makes me feel both powerless and complicit.

Those working within non-profit, volunteer-driven organizations face a particularly schizophrenic set of challenges: we want to inspire volunteers, not overwhelm them with grief or anger. We want donors to feel hopeful and effective. We want legislators to be supportive. We want members of the media to find our work "uplifting." And above all, we don't want prison staff or administrators to perceive us as their enemies.

I love sharing inspiring stories about the miraculous community of the College Program. And yet at times I also worry that in focusing almost entirely on the positive, we may inadvertently misrepresent the overall landscape of human experience inside the California prison system. I understand well the tensions between our Program and the institution, but by continually sidestepping the indescribable dysfunction and misery, we not only miss an opportunity but evade a responsibility. In order for the whole situation to change, the public must be brought to understand what types of senseless destructiveness reign within the prison system in the name of justice.

Above all, I reject the premise that what we're witnessing are solely the sins of the Department of Corrections. This system is the sin of every citizen of the state of California. The catastrophic collision in the story I shared above, as well as countless others, are the culmination of not just individual actions but massive systemic failures – in criminal law, sentencing, prison policy, mental health care, public education, and staff training. We have got to overcome the delusion that what goes on inside of California's prisons is solely the problem and the responsibility of those working within the Department.

Shortly before this incident, the student had agreed to write an essay for this newsletter, about mental illness and incarceration. By mail we updated the prompt. On the following page is a piece he wrote in response to the question, "What would you want a correctional officer to know about what it feels like to experience a psychotic episode?" I hope one day we can publish a piece of writing that conveys what it's like to be a correctional officer confronting a person in the midst of a psychotic episode.

*With warm regards,  
Jody Lewen*

## My World has Folded in on Itself: Articulating Psychosis

*I can compare it to a feeling of fright that continues unabated. Have you ever been startled by a scary movie or suddenly surprised by someone? Well, initially there is a feeling of the heart skipping a beat, adrenaline pumping, constriction of the chest, blood goes to the big muscles and the fight or flight response is generally engaged. Now imagine that not shutting off, and continuing night and day. Now, repeat that ten times and you would be experiencing the worst episode I ever had. It is basically pure fear.*

*So what could I tell someone who encounters me when all I hear is “wa-wa-wa” like the adults in “Peanuts?” The only difference is that Charlie Brown understands those adults. I do not understand you. I am freaked out. My world has folded in on itself and I am filled with fantastic delusions. Everything has a warped sense of meaning. It would seem a helping hand or friendly words might help. However, I become so paranoid and afraid that the best thing is: to leave me alone, but show compassion, use slow words. I am delusional, not stupid.*

*What I can't stand and what makes things worse are threats and demands. I really resent having to be placed in handcuffs. Yes, when I am rational and normally functioning I can understand this is part of procedure, but I do not agree with it and furthermore I am not acting/thinking rationally. So, optimally I would like to be caught ever so gently like in a giant butterfly net, if I have to be caught. But pepper spray and baton strikes just prove to me you want to hurt me, whether or not you do and I get set off all the more by the threat of those.*

*I am a person who honestly believed my cellmate was an android and I made him lift his shirt to prove to me he was real. So, if I have doubts about a real live person – there is no way I can understand your threats. What I cannot understand is how if I have not done anything wrong why I have to put my hands behind my back so I can be escorted to Mental Health for help.*

*Let me explain. Hands are a vital link to the outside world. We feel with our hands. Our hands bring us integral information to help us stay in contact with reality, which we so desperately need if we are experiencing a psychotic episode or mania. We talk with our hands and with our hands cuffed (and this is especially true for the deaf) we are effectively gagged. We may not be able to talk, but an open hand can communicate, “Stop! You're hurting me.”*

*This is all the more reason custody officers should be trained to handle mental health patients, and not just operate with the old manual, which encourages officers to use force and ask questions later, because most officers if they see someone acting weird think they must be on drugs. Unfortunately, seemingly the only tool that correctional officers can avail themselves of is to restrict movement or use restraints. However, forcing and attacking mental health patients (and then blaming them for their own defensive violence) is hardly wise. Unfortunately this seems to be the norm, especially for untrained staff.*

– K.D.

### **Regina Guerra** College Preparatory Math Program Director



Regina Guerra grew up in Chicago, IL. She moved to California in 1996 to attend Mills College, where she earned a B.A. in Math and Physics. In 2005 she moved to Johnson City, TN, where she earned her Masters in Education from East Tennessee State University. In addition to teaching high school math at the laboratory school on campus, she also mentored student teachers from the College of Education and conducted classroom Action Research on textbook literacy and alternative assessment. She holds teaching licenses in Tennessee and California.

#### **Q. What kinds of changes are you planning for the courses?**

*My biggest goal for the pre-college math*

*program, and Math 50 specifically, is to create systems that help more students matriculate into the credit math classes. I want to address individual student needs and track student progress so all students can be successful in math and get the resources they need. My hope is that as students progress through the pre-college program they are building skills for the college credit classes and see themselves as capable of being successful in higher level math classes.*

#### **Q. What is it like to work with the volunteer instructors?**

*I am continually impressed by their dedication. I am in awe at how many of them there are, and how personally invested they are in making the pre-college math program a success. Let's face it, long division is not one of the most inspiring topics, and yet volunteers take personal responsibility for helping students master basic skills. PUP volunteers*

## Introducing the New Leadership of

*are truly the salt of the earth.*

#### **Q. What has surprised you the most since you started working with PUP?**

*I've been most surprised at how my own perception of prisoners has changed. The students at PUP are in many ways the “dream” students for teachers because they are engaged, eager to learn, and set high standards for themselves. Before coming to PUP I imagined prisoners as one-dimensional, defined by their capacity to commit crime. However, the conversations I have with students, the issues that come up in classes, the skills that students struggle with, are the same as in my other teaching experiences. Often there are times when I am working with students that I forget I am in a prison. I am also surprised at how much blue I have in my wardrobe that I cannot wear to work!*



## Prison University Project Through the Eyes of a Visitor from Australia

I visited PUP in January 2012 because I wanted to see first hand how higher education in prison works. I wanted, importantly, to witness the interaction and conceptual exchanges between university teachers and prisoners as students. I guess, in some basic way, I also wanted to experience what some say is not possible, or worse, should not be permitted. The size of the College Program (over 300 students) struck me as an immensely important achievement – that higher education was not a niche activity within San Quentin but instead had developed into an integral part of prison life. To borrow from one academic, PUP appeared to positively impact the “moral climate” of the prison writ large. One student reflected this sentiment by commenting that at San Quentin, prisoners “talk about Socrates, Machiavelli and sociology, not who hurt who, or who owns what...” How many prisons could boast of such conversations taking place on their wings/tiers?

I also met students who reported learning of PUP while incarcerated at other facilities. The desire to enroll in higher education clearly affected how prisoners at these alternate locations conducted themselves as they sought transfer to San Quentin to engage in study. It occurred to me that in a small but meaningful way PUP has very likely created a series of “micro-climates” of pro-social or esteemed behaviour in several of California’s prisons. I certainly heard several students attest to such circumstances.

Another element that impressed was the degree to which

the prison administration saw fit to support PUP. One example of such is the policy aimed at avoiding, as far as is practicable, the sudden or random “vanning” of students enrolled in PUP from San Quentin to other facilities. All students (not just prisoners) need stability and continuity of educational environments.

Perhaps the aspect of PUP that endures for me was its capacity to treat and address prisoners as people – meaning that their dignity was not only left intact but significantly enhanced through education. At “Study Hall” a student touched on this issue by remarking, “You have to remind people that they can learn. Many prisoners think they can’t learn – [but] they just never had a good educational experience.” For me, this is a profound observation – the idea that there are cohorts of people for whom learning (not just in the academic sense) has become anathema.

Since returning to Australia, I have drawn on my time at San Quentin to further advocate for piloting the delivery of higher education classes to prisoners in South Australia. Due to the efforts of several colleagues, it is likely that my University will support such a trial in 2013. If initiated, it will be a small step in what needs to be a much larger journey concerning the role of higher educational institutions in criminal justice/correctional settings.

Many thanks to the PUP staff, teachers, and students who made me feel welcome and who responded patiently to my many questions.

*Mark Halsey, Professor of Criminal Justice, Law School  
Flinders University, Australia*

## the College Preparatory Program...

**Ronald Cunningham**  
College Preparatory English  
Program Director



Ronald Cunningham is a graduate of Georgetown University with a B.A. in English literature and US history. He also holds an M.A. from Howard University in US history. Over the last 15 years he has developed and taught a range of English and history courses in summer programs and schools throughout Washington, DC; Atlanta, GA; New Orleans, LA and most recently the San Francisco Bay area. Ronald began working with the Prison University Project in June of 2012.

### Q. What was your first impression of your students at San Quentin?

*I was immediately impressed for several reasons. Firstly, there seemed to be a range of*

*distractions and challenges, waitlists to enter classes, and a host of bureaucratic systems that limited everything from students’ basic movement to their ability to acquire necessary resources. Despite those challenges so many of the men were resilient and continued to be patient and do their very best.*

*Secondly, while I anticipated that the range of skill levels would be extreme, I was still taken aback by the diversity. While some new students struggled with basic skills, there were also quite a few among them whose written and oral communication skills would rival students at any stage in their post-secondary education and at any university. It seemed that their life experience had resulted in original thinkers who came to class with new perspectives that were not as invested in the programmatic mode of thinking that populates most university classrooms.*

### Q. What kinds of changes are you planning for the courses?

*One is to increase the number of writing opportunities. “People do best what they do most.” Thus, all English 99 classes will now write a minimum of five essays. Another is to encourage more content-specific instructional staff development by providing clear and consistent trainings on everything from differentiated instruction to effective evaluation of writing assessments and working with students who have learning disabilities. By offering greater support for instructional staff I hope not only to enhance classes at PUP, but also to offer the volunteers skills that they can bring to their jobs outside of PUP, both now and in the future.*

## Fall Semester 2012 Course Offerings

### College Preparatory Program

- Math 50
- Elementary Algebra
- English 99A (two sections)
- English 99B (two sections)

### Associate of Arts Degree Program

- English 101A: Reading and Composition
- English 101B: Critical Reading, Writing, and Thinking
- English 204: Critical Reading, Writing and Research
- Comparative Religion
- US History, 1865-Present
- Introduction to Sociology
- Archaic and Classical Greek History
- Intermediate Algebra
- Pre-Calculus
- Calculus
- Justice Human and Divine: The Morality of Sin and Transgression (World Literature)
- Key Issues in Western Art: Renaissance to Present
- Introduction to Neuroscience
- Chemistry with Lab (!)



photo by Elizabeth Fall

## LIFE AFTER MURDER

Nancy Mullane's recent book, *Life After Murder: Five Men in Search of Redemption* profiles five men formerly incarcerated at San Quentin, all of whom were students in the College Program: Don Cronk, Richie Rael, Eddie Ramirez, Jesse Reed, and Phillip Seiler. We're happy to announce two upcoming events related to the book:

- **City Arts and Lectures**, Tuesday, October 30, at 7:30pm: Nancy will host a conversation about social justice and redemption with the men profiled in the book at the Herbst Theater in San Francisco. Tickets can be purchased on the City Arts and Lectures website.

- **An exhibit and lecture series** related to the book is currently on-going at **Alcatraz Island National Park** and will continue through November 17. The show features photos by Elizabeth Fall. For more information, see the National Park Service website.

## 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 ten staff salaries. PUP's annual cash budget is currently under \$1 million, but when the value of all volunteer teaching hours (and other pro bono labor and donations) is included, PUP's annual budget approaches \$2 million.

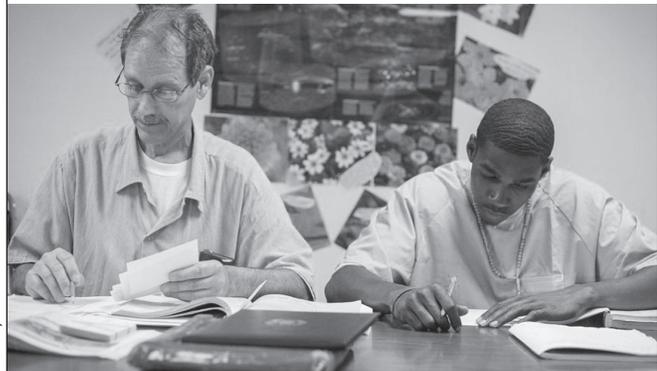


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**Did you know?** Most of the over 4,000 people who receive our newsletter are not donors. The primary purpose of our mailings is to stimulate interest and discussion about the lives of incarcerated people across the country and the world. We include a reply envelope and insert to make it as easy as possible for those who want to donate to do so. If you're not interested in or able to donate, we hope you'll use these to update or correct your address – or to send us a message! Please know that just by reading, discussing, and even passing on our newsletter to a friend, you're helping to advance our mission.

**got connections?** If you love PUP and know of an individual, foundation or company that might want to support our work, please let us know! Helping us make a direct connection could make a huge difference.

To share questions, comments, or fundraising leads, please e-mail Sabrina Qutb, our development director, at [squtb@prisonuniversityproject.org](mailto:squtb@prisonuniversityproject.org) or call her at 415 455-8088, ext. 4.