



photos by Kara Union

# Prison University Project

A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

November 2014, Vol. 10, No. 2

## Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

One of the most striking features of the California prison system is the fact that no one working within it feels at all in control. One might assume that custody staff would, just by virtue of their position. But in fact, staff often feel not just physically vulnerable, but mistreated by the system as a whole, largely as a result of policies and working conditions that they consider chaotic, unjust and even dangerous.

Understandably, staff often hold their supervisors responsible. Yet those supervisors tend to blame the institution's leadership, which often faults their leadership in Sacramento. The Department's leadership is apt to point out that most significant corrections-related policy decisions are controlled by the Governor's Office and the legislature; most of *them* would likely say that prison policy is dictated by public opinion, the media, and law enforcement groups such as the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (the prison guards' union.) Ironically, the membership of CCPOA comprises precisely those individuals working inside the system who feel powerless and betrayed.

Yet one belief that nearly everyone shares is that, whoever may be making them, the decisions themselves are governed more by concerns about political self-preservation, than by any sense of moral responsibility, or reason. The problem is not that everyone is immoral or incapable of reason; rather, years of experience have taught them to expect no support if they dissent. Everyone has stories about the time that they or someone they knew spoke up, or acted according to principle, and the ostracism, intimidation, or retaliation they suffered as a result.

The consequence of this professional climate – cultivated over decades – is an environment in which everyone feels compelled to contain personal risk, rather than uphold any deeper values or higher goals. This is a system that destroys people's sense of agency, integrity, or unified purpose, and their capacity for innovation and healthy risk-taking. These systemically-induced deficits undermine the entire organization's capacity for problem-solving and moral reasoning, as people eventually cope with the stress by trying not to care, or even think. My point is not to disparage those within the system, but to cast light on their day-to-day reality, and on the challenges faced by those working to effect change from within.

One example of an administrative practice that is profoundly impaired by this climate is the use of solitary confinement. The use of solitary as a form of punishment within CDCR has recently received substantial attention. Yet one of the most common reasons why people are placed in solitary, is not because they have been *found guilty* of a specific rules violation, but because they have been *accused* of one. Accusations trigger investigations, and standard procedure during the investigation of a prisoner includes placing that person in solitary (also known as "the hole," "administrative segregation," or "ad seg.")

People are commonly held for months because of an anonymous accusation that has been passed to staff. (This is also known as the "dropping of a note" or a "kite.") Students routinely end up losing an entire semester or more as the result of such an ordeal. When and if they do emerge, cleared of wrongdoing, they are exhausted and shaken from the experience of prolonged isolation, combined with the deafening noise that characterizes those cellblocks 24/7.

Some notes are dropped not to accuse, but to warn of, or threaten, impending violence. The standard institutional response to such threats is to put the target in solitary. This is officially for protection, yet everyone knows that the majority of notes – whether accusations, threats or warnings – are dropped not to transmit truthful information, but to inflict harm, or get rid of someone. In other words, the institution's predictable response – of locking the person up – is deployed as a weapon.

Most would agree that the steadfast adherence to protocol in the case of threats serves not so much to prevent violence, as to protect the institution from liability. The controlling risk is not that something bad will happen; it is that something bad will happen and then someone will say, *they knew and did nothing* – and then someone will get blamed or fired, particularly if the Department gets sued. And indeed, this type of scapegoating *has* gone on within the Department for decades. Thus this ritual, which is both destructive and unfair, is also, from the standpoint of the institution, necessary. In order to survive professionally, staff must always be able to say that they "did something," and above all, that they followed protocol. To most, reflecting on either the efficacy or the cost of that protocol is an unaffordable luxury.

I wonder in what kind of moral or political universe, people who think independently and take risks for compassionate reasons, live in constant fear of being punished for their integrity and good sense. Yet this is the reality of people working throughout the California prison system. Clearly we need leaders – from the rank and file to the very top – who will speak out, watch the backs of their colleagues, and tolerate some professional risk. At the same time, however, those of us who live and work on the margins of these universes must also find ways to provide those leaders with support. This is complex and exhausting work, but the need is dire, and the benefits will be immeasurable.

With warm regards,  
Jody Lewen

# What It's Like Preparing for the Board of Parole Hearings

—By Kim (Al-Amin) McAdoo

Preparing for my first Board of Parole Hearing is truly the most important event of my life since being incarcerated. It is an opportunity where I can possibly regain my freedom.

Preparing is, no doubt, very stressful. There is so much preparation required that it is hard to cover all aspects. For example, time has to be invested in arranging a portfolio. All the information placed in this booklet must consist of my entire life (prison) history. I must also be able to show the Board Commissioners that I have devoted my time while incarcerated to rehabilitating myself, remaining disciplinary free, along with making positive changes in my life.

Mandatory to my portfolio is a crime impact statement, an accountability statement describing my remorse and my understanding of the harm I caused the victims and their families. In addition, I need support letters from family members, friends, prison staff, outside volunteers and job supervisors. Certificates and laudatory chronos that I earned from participating in self-help groups, school programs, volunteer work and job assignments are helpful as well. Furthermore, I must have well thought-out parole plans, detailing my place of residence, job offers, family support, short term and long term goals, a description of my daily activities, as well as a relapse prevention plan that expresses how I will keep myself from returning to my previous criminal lifestyle.

In 1996, I was charged and convicted of homicide and attempted homicide. The trial judge sentenced me to fifteen years to life, plus an additional life sentence, with the possibility of parole. I was young, extremely nervous, and fearful entering into the California prison system for the first time. I worried a lot about my personal safety and my ability to fit in with other incarcerated men.

I began to serve out my sentence on a level four maximum-security prison where the most dangerous, hardened, and notorious criminals are sent. While serving level four prison time, I observed many racial riots where men were stabbed and badly beaten. I also recall the fear I felt when live rounds were shot from the barrels of prison guards' mini-14 assault rifles. I was almost certain that I would become a casualty in one of the violent melees I witnessed. Fortunately, as I have worked my way down in custody to a level two, through years of good behavior, I have been able to put the anxiety I felt on the level four-prison yard behind me.

However, now that I am preparing to attend my very first board hearing, my anxiety level is consistently rising once again. The feelings I am experiencing are similar to the ones I experienced during my journey through the court system over 18 years ago.

In spite of the negative aspects of prison life one of the biggest lessons I've learned is being both accountable and responsible for my actions as well as recognizing the harm I've caused to so many people. This revelation is what I will take with me to the board hearing and what I want the people in control of my freedom to understand.

One of the challenges that many of us inmates face at the board hearing is articulating insight. Insight is where we have to demonstrate a clear understanding of the causative factors that led up to us committing our crime and to show our understanding of what remorse and regret mean to us, as well as the impact and magnitude of the harm that we caused our victims and all who were affected. Many California prisoners are denied parole because of their inability to express insight that meets the criteria set by the board.

Overall, the hardest part for me when it comes to preparing for my board hearing is revisiting those memories and moments that led up to my life crime. I was a reckless gang member who terrorized my community by selling drugs and living a criminal lifestyle. My destructive behavior eventually sent me to prison for my role in a drive-by shooting that mistakenly ended the life of an innocent teenager.

I am very regretful for my bad choices in life and feel immense guilt and shame because of the trauma and pain I caused the victims, their family, as well as my family members and society as a whole. I recognize that I cannot escape these memories because they are a part of me. I believe that talking about my previous lifestyle and the wrong I have done is one way of atonement and making amends. Plus talking about my crime at the board hearing is an opportunity where I can express my empathy and remorse.

When I think about being found suitable for parole I get jittery feelings. I am concerned about my ability to adjust to a society that has changed so much since the onset of my incarceration. Will I be accepted as a returning citizen despite my parole status? Will my parole status hinder me from attaining employment? Will it be difficult for me to adjust to the many new technological advances? Technological skills are the most critical aspects of society which prisoners are deprived of. Many prisoners, like me, who have been locked away for decades are computer illiterate. We are like dinosaurs when it comes to technology. For me, just learning technological terminology is like learning a foreign language.

Although it is overwhelming preparing for my Board Hearing, I have learned to cope with these feelings and have come to understand that I cannot worry too much about the things that are out of my control. I have to keep in mind that whatever decisions the board members might make for or against me, it should never deter me from maintaining my journey towards positive change and a peaceful way of life. ■

*Note: on November 4, Al-Amin was found suitable for parole! - JL*



## Who Better to Ask than the Students Themselves? Teaching Public Health at San Quentin

—Lauren Baker, MPH, Instructor



photo by Jody Leven

The students of Introduction to Public Health, summer semester 2014, with instructors Lauren Baker and Emanuela Argilli.

My experience teaching Introduction to Public Health at San Quentin this summer was challenging, rewarding and ultimately life-changing. From our very first class discussion I was overwhelmed with the insight, thoughtfulness and level of critical thought that the students demonstrated.

The culminating project for the class was for each student to identify and analyze a significant public health problem, and to devise an intervention strategy for that problem. Especially in considering public health issues that have afflicted their lives, students have a deep perspective on the link between violence, crime, health disparities, and the veritable health of their own community. Who better to ask than the students themselves, to develop program plans and interventions? The programs they developed address addiction, youth violence, and mental illness, among other issues. Ultimately, students created sophisticated and impactful programs that several intend to develop upon their release.

Leading to the development of these interventions, we explored the theoretical models of health behavior, investigated the state of healthcare in prison, conducted a thorough needs assessment report, and examined the physiological basis of addiction, among other themes.

While we thoroughly addressed the learning outcomes that we set upon at the beginning of the semester, it is perhaps I who learned the most. Students broadened my worldview and challenged my beliefs on higher education, incarceration, and the focus of my future endeavors as a public health professional. My commitment to the Prison University Project is resolute; I hope to continue to contribute to this incredibly important and valuable program for years to come. ■

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## The Neglected Health Consequences of International Sex Trafficking in the United States

—By Kevin Lee, Student

There is an urgent need for courage and for the political will to act against the global exploitation of young international women. The challenge for government today is to recognize that prostitution is a massive and growing industry, while not ratifying prostitution as a job, and to provide rights and protections for young women in conditions of sex trafficking and prostitution, while acknowledging that sex trafficking and prostitution violate women's rights and bodily integrity. The challenge for governments today is to punish the growing numbers of sexual exploiters – traffickers, pimps, and buyers – while not penalizing the young women who find themselves in conditions of sex trafficking and prostitution.

Most importantly, governments and non-governmental organizations must put resources at these young women's disposal such as credit, micro-lending programs, enterprise training, and other needed services, and provide medical care, shelter, voluntary counseling, and educational programs for those young women who have been harmed by sex trafficking and prostitution. A young woman's prior sexual history, or status as an illegal immigrant or stateless person, shouldn't be used against her. Trafficked young women should be provided with refuge, visas, refugee status, protection from traffickers, and voluntary repatriation whether, as victims of sex trafficking, they have entered a country legally or illegally. ■

### Fall Semester 2014 Course Offerings

English 99A, Pre-College Writing,  
Part I (Two sections)  
English 99B, Pre-College Writing,  
Part II (Two sections)  
English 101A, Reading and  
Composition  
English 101B, Critical  
Reading, Writing and Thinking  
English 204, Reading, Writing  
and Research  
Spanish 101  
Biology with Lab  
American Government  
Ethics  
Journalism  
Math 50A (Developmental  
Mathematics)  
Math 50B (Developmental  
Mathematics)  
Elementary Algebra  
Intermediate Algebra  
Pre-Calculus II  
Math Study Groups  
Study Hall (tutoring in writing  
and math)

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, and to stimulate public awareness and meaningful dialogue about higher education and criminal justice in California and across the United States.

We provide 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; most are faculty or graduate students from UC Berkeley, Stanford, San Francisco State University, University of San Francisco, and other local colleges and universities. We receive no state or federal funding and are sustained entirely by donations from individuals and foundations.

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For more information, please call Gail Reitano 415-215-1526, or  
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