



Photo by Cheriss May, Ndernay Media Group

The Prison University Project is a recipient of the 2015 National Humanities Medal! On September 22, 2016, the National Humanities Medalists, as well as the recipients of the National Medal of Arts, were honored at a White House ceremony, followed by a black tie dinner at the National Gallery of Art. Other medalists included (pictured above; top row, left to right): Terry Gross; Ron Chernow; Jack Whitten; Tom Viertel, Preston Whiteway and George White (on behalf of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center); José Andrés; Ralph Lemon; Louis Menand; (bottom row, left to right): Jody Lewen (on behalf of the Prison University Project); Elaine Pagels; Isabelle Wilkerson; Sandra Cisneros; Berry Gordy; Santiago Jiménez, Jr.; Luis Valdez; and Rudolfo Anaya.

A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

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Letter from the Executive Director

As new prison higher education programs sprout up across California and the U.S., one of the most critical components remaining largely unaddressed is teacher training.

In the traditional “correctional” context, teacher training mostly means teaching instructors to view their students as potential sources of danger. While institutions clearly need to provide the training they feel necessary, and teachers do need to understand the institutional culture, simply reducing students in the minds of teachers to the caricature of manipulative predators can fundamentally undermine quality teaching. It is also not in any real sense teacher training.

The prison classroom is a complex educational, psychological, social, and political space. Teachers need guidance, for example, on diverse learning styles; the impact of trauma on thinking and learning; ways in which issues of race, class, and gender may manifest in the classroom. They also need skilled, supportive people with whom they can reflect candidly, in real time, on their own experiences, including constantly confronting their own biases.

Many challenges are as much psychological as pedagogical: imagine a student who begins to dominate class discussions, or to monopolize the teacher’s attention. When interrupted they are hypersensitive and irritable; they reprimand the teacher for their perceived neglect. While a relatively rare occurrence, one of the most common complaints we get from students at San Quentin is that teachers do not do enough to “check” students who behave like this.

At least in theory, the solution to such a situation is simple. The teacher needs to communicate – firmly, but with compassion and without shaming – what the classroom norms are, and that anyone who refuses to observe those norms will not be allowed to remain in the class. And then they need to hold that line. This is critical not only for preserving a productive classroom environment, but for helping that student become more self-aware, and hopefully correct their own behavior.

If teachers are not prepared for such situations, everyone suffers. The problems intensify; valuable class time is wasted; other students are hugely frustrated. Some may either drop the class, or pressure the disruptive student to do so. Students, teachers, or program staff, believing they have no other recourse, may turn to prison staff to intervene, which can have severely destructive consequences for the student.

I always find it interesting that teachers so often have more trouble responding to such situations in the prison setting than they would on the outside. Perhaps because many have far more experience teaching middle-class 18-22 year-olds, when confronted with adults with far more diverse backgrounds and profoundly different life experiences, teachers are sometimes quick to doubt their own judgments, worry about offending, or simply be intimidated.

These dynamics can also have a gendered and/or a racial dimension. Women in general often struggle to communicate directly with men who violate boundaries; in the prison setting, teachers may also be concerned that a student will feel hurt or rejected, or even interpret a confrontation as stigmatizing or racist. A teacher who relies on the immediate approval of students to feel like a good teacher, or a good person, or even relies on the validation of their incarcerated students for a sense of political legitimacy, may be wary of doing anything that might strain the relationship.

Yet constructive confrontation can be enormously productive. In a related conversation, a student once shared his (autobiographical) belief that when people have been deprived of attention for years, and then encounter a woman [teacher] who is kind, they might assume she was in love with them, and feel that she “belonged” to them. What that person needed was help understanding the reality of the situation – that, as he put it, sometimes women are just nice.

Another student once shared insight about how his early experiences of extreme deprivation and neglect had been connected to his behavior in class. In his mind, he later realized, the teacher had become his absent caretaker; the other students, his competitor siblings. The proximity of women had become a trigger; his acting out in class was an expression of old rage and pain. He believed the healthy limit-setting of the program, combined with a therapeutic group he was involved with, had helped facilitated this self-awareness.

Providing teachers with information and strategies that allow them to fully recognize and support their students – intellectually, neurologically, and psychologically – is both a moral imperative and an extraordinary opportunity. And if we do things right, the programs we create today will become models of inclusive educational practice, not only for prisons across the country, but in the world beyond.

Jody Lewen



National Humanities Medal

*awarded to the
Prison University Project
September 22.*

Executive Director Jody Lewen receives the National Humanities Medal on behalf of the Prison University Project from President Barack Obama. PUP alumnus Pat Mims, as well as alumnus and PUP staff member David Cowan (Operations Manager), also attended the ceremony.



On Thursday afternoon, Jody, David, Pat and Dmitriy visited with Congressman Jared Huffman and his staff. From Congressman Huffman's Facebook page: **What an honor to meet my constituents from the Prison University Project at San Quentin, who yesterday received our country's highest award in the humanities, the National Humanities Medal, from President Obama at the White House. They are helping transform the lives of incarcerated individuals through education, and I'm proud to represent them in Congress.**



Dmitriy Orlov (PUP alumnus and Program Assistant), Pat, Jody and David attended the dinner at the National Gallery of Art, which was hosted by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities.



Photo by Cheriss Moy, Ndemay Media Group

Dinner entertainment included an extraordinary performance by musicians from Youth Orchestra Los Angeles (pictured here with Berry Gordy). YOLA provides free instruments, intensive music training, and academic support to students from underserved neighborhoods. It was founded by LA Philharmonic conductor Gustavo Dudamel, who also spoke at the dinner.

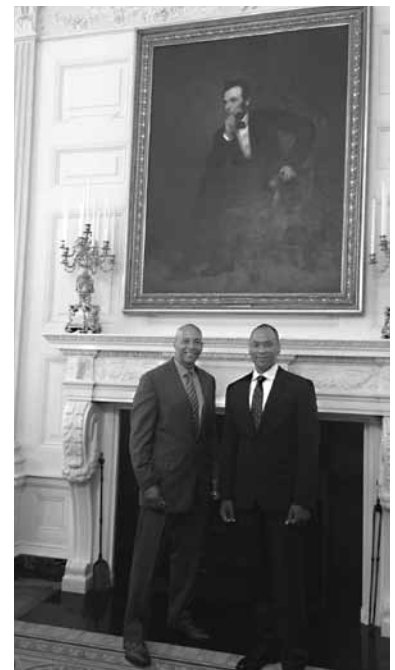


Photo by Cheriss Moy, Ndemay Media Group

On Wednesday afternoon, Jody and Dmitriy participated in a panel discussion with several other medalists, hosted by NEH Chairman William "Bro" Adams, at the New York University Washington, DC campus.



On Wednesday morning, David, Pat, and Jody went to the Eisenhower Executive Office Building (White House complex) for a meeting with long-time PUP volunteer Dan Hammer (in photo). Dan is currently the Senior Policy Advisor to the U.S. Chief Technology Officer, Megan Smith, who has made broader inclusion in STEM [science, technology, engineering, and math] education one of her major priorities. Several other colleagues of Dan's whose work intersects with PUP's mission also joined the meeting, including from the US Digital Service (the Police Data Initiative), and the Domestic Policy Council. Thank you, Dan and colleagues, for a terrific visit.



David and Pat with Abraham Lincoln at the White House.

Confounding them with my patience

An Interview with Rodney Scott

How did you first get involved with the college program at San Quentin?

I started fall of 2005. I had left custody of my son to my mom. She past away in 2005. The people who had guardianship of Sie (my son) wouldn't bring him to see me, or allow phone calls, and wouldn't accept my letters. Jody told me to write to him even though he didn't get the letters. I still have them all. I took it to court and lost. Yeah, college gave me something else to focus on. It was a really tough time for me. When I got transferred in 2009, I got in so much trouble so fast, like three write-ups in six months. I was heading for destruction. Then you had me brought back to Quentin, in 2011. Sie wrote to me that year for the first time. I graduated in 2012. When I say you literally saved my life, I mean that, and I can't thank you enough.

How would you say that the program has impacted your life since then?

Gaining an Associate of Arts degree while incarcerated has benefited me in so many ways. I have developed my communication skills, which has enriched my relationships. I've gotten employment, and housing, because of my involvement in education. I believe the education has made me aware of the things in life that really matter. I try to encourage everyone in my family to go to college. I now want to continue my education to get a Bachelor's degree and beyond.

Right now I work at Chabot College and UC Berkeley to recruit formerly incarcerated people into higher education. At Chabot I work with Open Gate. At Berkeley

I hold two positions. I am the ambassador for Underground Scholars for Merritt College, and I also work with the Student Athletic Center. These are all part-time work, I enjoy it.

Do you think your being in school while you were incarcerated impacted the lives of your kids?

I asked my grandkids how they think the fact that I received some education while incarcerated has affected them. Ranila, my 17 year-old granddaughter, says she thinks it has made me nicer, and that I come around a lot. I take her places, I'm teaching her to drive.

My 10 year-old granddaughter Ta'Varejha says, she is glad I came to her graduation, and she thinks it's good that I can help her with her homework, and ride bikes with her. I take her places and invite her to events. My 19 year-old granddaughter Kashia says, I don't know, that's a hard question. I have tried to encourage her to stay in school, she just graduated from high school, but she went to Job Corps. I've asked my daughter Tiffany to go back to school to get her nursing license.

She is signed up for this coming fall semester.

I know for a fact that I'm more tolerant of people, including some family, as a result of my education. I have developed the skill through education to express myself in a socially acceptable manner, when I don't agree with something. I got to tell you, in some ways I enjoy confounding them with my patience.

Education is the key to breaking the cycle of recidivism. I went to prison five times. Education has worked for me, and I want others to experience it as well.



From left to right: Ranilla 17, Rodney, Ta'Varejha 10, and daughter Tiffany 36.



Prison University Project

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stamp

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 meaningful public dialogue about higher education access and criminal justice in California and across the United States.

We provide approximately 20 courses each semester leading to an Associate of Arts degree in liberal arts, as well as college preparatory courses, to approximately 350 students. All instructors work as volunteers; most are faculty or graduate students from UC Berkeley, Stanford, San Francisco State, USF, and other local colleges and universities. We receive no state or federal funding and rely entirely on donations from individuals and foundations. The program is an extension site of Patten University in Oakland, CA.

PRISON UNIVERSITY PROJECT, BOARD MEMBERS

Maddy Russell-Shapiro, *Board Chair*

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What Matters?

By James King

Creative Writing, Summer 2016

*I first met my father when my mother pointed him out
on the television screen.*

*He was holding a Black Lives Matter sign.
Does mine?*

We never played catch

We never had the talk

*He never told me that gangs promise blessings,
but deliver curses*

Does a life still matter when it's resting in those hearses

My favorite rapper raised me

he told me that money matters

hoes don't

I respected him cause he went platinum

and when I went to his concert a riot broke out

only one person died, but three girls got shot

I don't think bystanders matter when the gun goes off

when my son was born I took off too

what else could I do?

I'm where a million fathers are gathered

a million lives are shattered

and what matters most is beyond

my skill to comprehend.

virile young men paying an unearned debt

with interest

solid matter won't break or bend

neither do I, neither do we

I feel for my father

my son

and for me

FALL SEMESTER 2016 COURSE OFFERINGS

COLLEGE PREPARATORY PROGRAM

Strategies for College Reading

ENG 99A: Fundamentals of College Writing and Critical thinking, Course I
(two sections)

ENG 99B: Fundamentals of College Writing and Critical Thinking, Course II
(two sections)

MTH 50A: Basic arithmetic, decimals, fractions

MTH 50B: Pre-algebra

MTH 99: Elementary Algebra

ASSOCIATE OF ARTS DEGREE PROGRAM

ENG 101A: Reading and Composition

ENG 101B: Critical Reading, Writing and Thinking

ENG 204: Interdisciplinary Reading, Writing, and Research

COM 146: Communications

HIS 101: U.S. History I

PHL 271: Introduction to Philosophy

PSY 255: Child Growth and Development

ENG 220/SPA: Literature of the Spanish-Speaking World

MTH 115: Intermediate Algebra

PHY 154: Physics I

ART 220: Introduction to Film