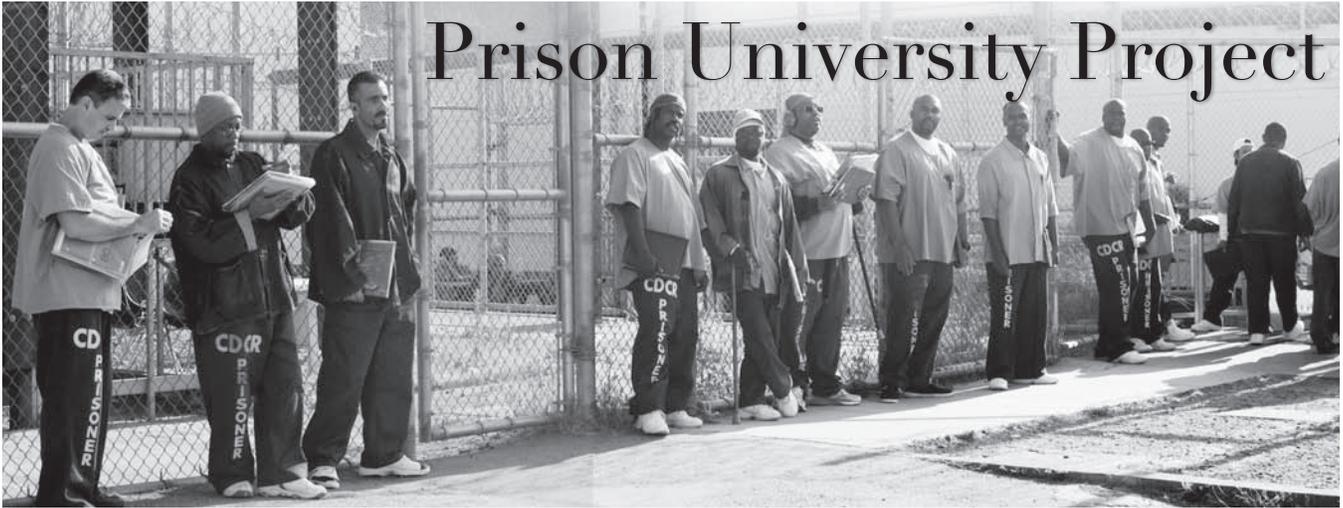


# Prison University Project



A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

September 2010, Vol. 5, No.2

## From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

A few weeks ago we got an email from a former student, now out of prison, who'd agreed to write us a letter about his current life for this newsletter. Derek Meade had been an exceptional student while in the program at San Quentin, had enrolled in school immediately after paroling to continue his studies, and had also managed to find a part-time job. He had sounded great for quite a while. When he didn't respond to one of our messages, we sent another, and he finally wrote to say that he had recently relapsed, and was close to being sent back to prison as the result of two positive drug tests. He said he hoped to send us the letter soon, with some better news.

Derek's assumption was, of course, that his current news was "unfit" for the newsletter. It was as if he had absorbed the pressure we often feel to provide nothing but upbeat success stories and clear evidence of our "results." And yet how many of our former students – or other people in recovery, for that matter – experience the same thing he was going through? What impact does it have on those individuals never to see their experiences reflected in publications about our programs? And equally important: how does this absence affect the public's understanding of our work – whether in terms of the value of education for people in prison, or the role education can play in the process of recovery?

Education increases one's capacity for introspection, strengthens communication skills, unearths potential, and makes finding work much more likely – and each of these is vital to the process of recovering from addiction. But as critical a tool as education is in the work of building a healthy life, it doesn't do that work for you.

Prison programs are often imagined, and judged, like carwashes that individuals with very complex problems can simply pass through, to emerge fully healed and transformed. In fact, many of us who facilitate programs probably end up perpetuating such simplistic notions, as we strive to convey the transformative power of the services we provide to an outside audience. Yet no matter how effective we are, and no matter how thrilling and miraculous recovery is, it is also a slow, often painful, and always complex physiological, psychological, and social process. Why, as with so many other things related to people in prison, do we constantly simplify the process of becoming a healthy human being? Imagine trying to get clean while living in a prison – one of the most stressful and depressing environments imaginable,

where drugs are plentiful and treatment programs, virtually non-existent. Or imagine all the ways in which the stigma of being a "parolee" or a "drug addict" affects recovery, employment, housing, and relationships.

In spite of his deep regret, in Derek's email I could hear the ways in which his education was supporting him in his struggle to hold on to his own life. Even in the face of this relapse, and knowing the drug tests would be positive, he'd continued to report to his parole agent, who was clearly trying to work with him but had now given him one last opportunity to turn around. He had entered a treatment program, and he was still reaching out to stay in touch with us. He wrote, "I am on my last chance. One more and I'm heading back [to prison]. It is so hard to stay clean! My freedom now rests on my ability to say no."

Last week I wrote to him to say that his Herculean efforts made me confident he was going to be fine, and I asked if I could share what he'd written here. He wrote back, "I am more than happy to let you use anything I wrote in your newsletter, especially if it may help someone else. I have 16 days clean right now and still struggle every day... Use my full name please."

It is a humbling experience to provide support to people who are engaged in a struggle this intense; every day I am awed and grateful for the opportunity to do this work.

Our deepest thanks to all of you for your commitment to our work, and for the faith in our students that it represents.

With warm regards, Jody Lewen

On June 25, Jeffrey Brooks, Yu Chen, Ricky Gaines, Jr., and Jonathan Wilson (counter-clockwise from top) celebrated their completion of the Associate of Arts degree at San Quentin. Special guests at the event included Sujatha Baliga, Restorative Justice Advisor at Community Works West, and Sophie Maxwell, San Francisco City Supervisor, District 10. □

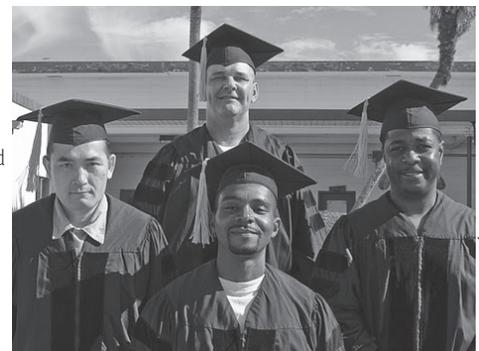


Photo by: Andrew Kenower

## Changing the World – One Site Visit at a Time

*Welcoming visitors to sit in on classes or participate in a group discussion provides members of the College Program with a valuable opportunity to educate the world outside of the prison, and to build bridges of insight and understanding across every kind of divide. Following is one visitor's response:*

Dear Students,

I am the chair of the Board of the Women Donor's Network, a community of women who multiply their energy, strategic savvy and philanthropic dollars to build a more just and fair world. We do this through cutting edge programming, innovative individual and collaborative funding, and partnerships with allies. One of our collective funding efforts is the Criminal (In)justice Action Circle. Many of their members came to our visit to San Quentin.

I know I speak for them when I say a belated thank you for hosting an incredible evening and experience for all of us, one that has totally altered our way of thinking about incarcerated men. The impact of education on your lives and the vulnerable and open way that you all showed up for your conversation with us was so powerful and moving. Brava to Jody et al. for creating this incredible program that so powerfully begins to rectify the horrible injustices of our criminal justice system and is bringing hope and light into your lives.

*With heartfelt thanks,  
Mary Willis*

## TEACHER

Sitting, listening to your words, thoughts erupt in my mind like fresh lava from a volcano. Sending them higher, catching fire a desire in me I thought no longer existed, damn... I almost missed this.

Now every word I read plants seeds in the open fields of my mind, growing tall rows of opportunity that make me face me, and enables me to see my dreams a reality, and it all started because you invited me, igniting in me a fire that burns hotter than fish grease.

So much time spent here by people who are free, mainly women who are not afraid to argue or disagree with me. Your courage amazes me as it pulls forth that which I hide inside like tears that suddenly over-flow from my soul in the middle of the night. Now who of you will admit to such an awful sight?

Your stage is a chalkboard where your hands dance to a tune I call "Inspire," romancing closed hearts until they open and reach for something higher. Passing grades become hands clapping that show our appreciation to you, for you, and from everyone else including myself, this poem is simply one way to say from our heart, thank you, for helping us express our inner-self.

*Mr. Julius "Kimya" Humphrey, Sr.  
P37812/5-N-20L  
S.Q.S.P.*

## TRANSITIONS

*This spring was full of transitions! Jennifer Scaife has left her position at the Prison University Project; Amy Roza has taken her place...*

**Jennifer Scaife Writes:** On July 12th, I started working with the Reentry Council of San Francisco. In this position, I will build on my work with the Prison University Project and continue making an impact on the life prospects of people impacted by incarceration in California. The purpose of the Reentry Council is to coordinate local efforts to support adults exiting San Francisco County Jail, San Francisco juvenile justice out-of-home placements, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation facilities, and the United States Federal Bureau of Prison facilities. <http://sfreentry.com/>



When I began volunteering with the College Program at San Quentin in the fall semester of 2005, I couldn't have predicted that I was taking the first steps toward choosing a challenging, fulfilling career in the field of criminal justice advocacy and reform. The last four and a half years have completely altered the course of my professional life, and have contributed substantially to my growth as a human being. I am deeply indebted to the staff and volunteer faculty of the Prison University Project, and to our treasured students at San Quentin, for being a part of that process.

**Announcing Amy Roza:** Amy brings ten years of relevant experience to her work with the Prison University Project. With the Center for Court Innovation, she designed and led prevention and intervention programs for court-involved families and for families from New York City neighborhoods over-represented in the criminal justice system. She also served for four years with the Prison Education Initiative, a collaborative of educators leading academic classes at New York City's Rikers Island jail. Prior to this work, Amy was a classroom teacher and then supported and trained new teachers in under-resourced public schools. Most recently, she led assessment-driven program improvement at a national literacy non-profit. Amy holds a Masters in Teaching from Trinity College and a BA in Public Policy and Anthropology from Pomona College. Amy began volunteering with the San Quentin College Program in 2009.



**Summer semester 2010 course offerings** included: English 99A, English 99B, English 101 (Introduction to Composition), English 102 (Introduction to Literature), Physics, Ethics, Social Psychology, World Music, Math 50, Algebra, Geometry, Pre-Calculus, and Calculus.

## English 101: Food, the Environment and Landscape —Kelly Jane Rosenblatt

A friend recently asked what topics I teach in the composition and literature class I've taught at San Quentin for three semesters now. He wanted to know how I was preparing students for the "real world" – a question we humanities scholars face on a regular basis. "First," I said, "we talk about food." Then I walked him through the rigorous course I teach that is not-so-secretly about developing skillful written reasoning.

With recent material including *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *Fast Food Nation* and news pieces covering topics from school lunches to guerrilla gardening taught alongside literary classics like *The Jungle*, students immerse themselves in the politics of food, environmental justice and food revolutions. Our discussions are both intensely personal – about the quality of institutional food and the future we feed our children – and wide-ranging, as we discuss questions of policy and values on a national and institutional level.

From there, it's a short jump to examining the politics of land use and the environment. We ask what sustainability means for agriculture, prisons and technology. Wrapping up we turn to artistic representations of the environment by Ansel Adams, Sandow Birk and the Center for Land Use

Interpretation, asking what makes a landscape beautiful and valued. How, we consider, do our aesthetics (beauty = untouched wilderness) shape our use and misuse of our environment?

In short, I prepare my students for the front-page debates that are of critical importance to our society. More importantly, students exiting this class are prepared to engage in ethical arguments on complex topics respecting diversity of opinions. They develop their positions through skillfully crafted arguments both written and spoken that consider audience, skeptics and issues that are timely, pressing and complex enough to merit serious academic, personal and political attention.

My students are scholars, pragmatists, fathers, community leaders, out-of-the-box thinkers. They bring innovative ideas to questions that stump our politicians, environmentalists and scientists. In the real world they live in every day they are role models for their children, families and communities.

—Kelly Jane Rosenblatt is a doctoral candidate in English at the University of Oregon, and a new board member of the Prison University Project. She is currently at work on a dissertation about sustainability and labor in 18th century English georgic poetry.

## The Fraternal Order of English 101 —Achilles Mason Williams

I registered at Patten College in San Quentin because I felt it was the "right" thing to do. I mean, since I was in the only correctional facility in the state with a "college campus," I should pursue a higher education. I was 61 years old serving 25 to life for a petty theft, so I questioned myself: what could I possibly do with an A.A. degree?

My first class at Patten was English 101. Arriving there I came to meet professors Mary Elliott and K.J. Rosenblatt. During a lecture K.J. said that the five paragraph essay that we had grown accustomed to in 99A and 99B was to be hurled into the dustbin of history. She then proceeded to unearth new and different forms such as counter-arguments, summaries, paraphrasing and the exact usage for quotations for longer essays. Handouts, books and exhausting reading assignments were generously dispensed. Group discussion of distributed materials was animated in the following sessions. Later, the experience morphed into a fluid structure of interfacing instructors pounding in information on how to write a thesis statement, topic sentence, conclusion, and essays for college.

I had an extensive vocabulary which I thought encompassed the full extent of English, but I was wrong. I had read and memorized the dictionary at an early stage in my life. So while my interest in English 101 soared, my confidence in English 101 sagged. I reflected on the extent of my daily activities: 1) my job at Prison Industry Authority, 2) my rigorous workout routine, 3) family problems, and finally Patten College. There were simply too many planes in the air. I had to make a choice. I chose to by-pass college



but immediately I was confronted by an avalanche of opposition from both the likeliest and unlikeliest of sources: my fellow students, Amy, Jody, and even non-students! I was then forced to re-consider my choice. I couldn't believe the level of reaction to my absence in class! Who was I to elicit so much inquiry and criticism and response? This was my personal choice. "We really miss you in class. Why did you leave?" A friend said about my absence from the classroom, "Are you familiar with the Gestalt theory that says that the sum is greater than the individual parts? In other words, your opinions help to lift the level of discourse."

The thing is, there are new rules when you get into education in prison. Prison code or rules, to some extent, do not apply – the rules about minding other people's business do not apply, often, people do the opposite as in my particular case. For example, "Did you do your homework?" If you say "no," people say "why?" You want to say, "mind your business," but this is a positive force which I happen to welcome. It is a change, and that's it. That's the spirit of Patten College. I really wanted to quit, and I couldn't. That is what some people call fraternity.

## ALUMNI NEWS

### Harrison Seuga

Today is July 07, 2010 and tomorrow will be the third month since being released. Driving away from San Quentin on April 8, 2010 was to say the least a gut wrenching experience. Seeing the other side of walls that I looked at everyday for nearly 10 years and feeling something dying in me, something being finally put to rest was emotionally overwhelming. I've spent nearly twenty-one years of my life in prison, beginning at the age of seventeen. It was a mixture of overwhelming joy and sadness for the beautiful people, friends, and mentors I left behind. People that was just as deserving to experience the totality of life and living as free human beings, to share their beauty with the world and their families.

So far I have been adjusting well. My family and a network of new friends and long time friends have been the sole reason for this adjustment being so successful thus far. I am currently in the process of enrolling in school to complete my Bachelor's Degree and doing well in a transitional program, which has allowed me to gain more experience, as an intern, in the field of addictions counseling. I hope to take my certification exams in a couple months, to be a certified addictions counselor.

My family's coming to visit from Hawaii and Washington next week, giving me a chance to meet my little nieces and nephews. Also to be able to spend quality time with loved ones in a normal and healthy setting. I look forward to that, being able to experience my family, my life, and my hopes in a much more normal setting.

### German Yambao

I was released from San Quentin after spending twenty-eight years and three months in prison. My parole officer picked me up. Getting in a car after twenty-eight years was scary for me, I felt like I was in a jet, not that I have been in a jet before but anyway I am talking speed. I arrived at my destination the parole office in less than an hour. I had no memory of the ride except that I was in a freeway holding on to a door handle and it was raining. All I was thinking about during the ride was, we are going to crash and die. After an hour of getting mug shots, fingerprinted, piss in a bottle, interviewed, I felt like I was getting arrested all over again. My parole officer then took me home, this time the ride home was more relaxing, and a little bit slower. The ride was amazing, and the City of San Francisco is beautiful, buildings everywhere, a lot has changed since the last time I was out, everyone seems like they are moving fast, the people have no social



Harrison with his nieces and nephew

skills, their social life revolves around technology, they chat in computer, you walk downtown all you see is people with their headphones on, listening to their ipod, no eye contact, not a word, a nod of any sort, people are in their little world.

I went to church and thanked God for my release. Afterward I went to the place where the youth was murdered in my case, wanted to pay my respect and make amends and ask him to forgive me. I then went to my father's cemetery to pay my respect, made amends and asked him to forgive me for my past. My mom, sister and I then came in a circle around my father's tomb stone and prayed, an amazing thing happened while we were praying, it was raining at this time, while we were in the midst of praying the sun pierced through the cloud and shined upon us while it was raining all around us. I knew then my father was at peace, because the heavens opened up for him and it was time for him to leave the earth knowing I am free from prison. The book was closed for him.

I am presently working with United Playaz Organization, a violence prevention program, as a Case Manager. I am assigned to three different High School sites. I work with High School kids who are involved with Juvenile Justice Center, failing grades, behavioral issues, etc. I advocate for them, I write letters for them, attend hearings and support their families. Just because I'm out in society doesn't mean that my rehabilitation is over. I'm still in the process, doing what I'm doing out here with the youths is part of my rehabilitation and healing. I know there are many guys behind bars that are more worthy than I am to be out here, and believe me I am making a difference out here. All you cats that are behind the wall, keep your hopes up and keep doing the right things, and one day you will see the promise land – freedom.

### 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.

The College Program at San Quentin provides approximately twelve 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 nearly 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 three full-time staff salaries. PUP's annual cash budget is under \$500,000, but when the value of all volunteer teaching hours (and other pro bono labor) is included, PUP's annual budget exceeds \$1 million.



German with his wife, Kristy, and their daughter Leah