



A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

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Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

Many students in the College Program at San Quentin develop an almost fanatical commitment to their education. They show up for class, cheerful and prepared, after waiting in the pouring rain, in spite of extended lockdowns, even on Super Bowl Sunday. For some students, persistence seems to become a kind of sport, an assertion of selfhood, or even a kind of resistance against the degradation of prison.

But that level of resolve can take a while to build, and can be difficult to sustain. Sleep deprivation and constant noise are the norm. New students may be intimidated by the classroom environment, or doubt their own intellectual abilities. Some people may become overwhelmed by their workload, especially when carrying other responsibilities like legal work, other self-help groups, athletic activities, or preparation for the parole board. People struggling with mental health issues, physical illness or injury, or grieving the death of a loved one, often find it difficult to concentrate on school.

These types of challenges can be particularly destabilizing for students for whom attending class, doing homework, staying organized, prioritizing, sacrificing, and avoiding distractions have not yet become second nature. This is especially true if becoming a dedicated student constitutes a major shift in identity, or in peer group. People who are in the midst of breaking away from drug-involved or “gangbanging” pasts expend enormous energy resisting peer pressure, as well as managing feelings of isolation, guilt, and self-doubt. They are also often highly vulnerable to anything that undermines their morale or breaks their momentum.

One type of challenge stands apart for its formidable capacity to undermine academic progress, and that is when students become entangled within the prison’s disciplinary system. This most commonly occurs when people are investigated or punished for an alleged rules violation such as the possession of cell phones, marijuana, or other drugs, or a conflict with staff.

Prison punishment generally entails the denial of privileges such as yard time, packages, phone calls, visits, or recreational activities. One may also be confined to one’s cell or dorm for days or weeks, or on successive weekends, allowed to leave only for work, or for critical appointments or activities. Because any program not operated directly by CDCR is generally treated as “recreation,” people punished with the denial of “privileges” are routinely prohibited from attending their college classes, or other self-help or recovery programs.

In some cases, people are placed in solitary confinement (i.e., administrative segregation, or ad seg) for weeks or months, or even given more prison time. More often than not, people are held in solitary simply because of an investigation, not because they have been found guilty of any wrongdoing. From an educator’s perspective, whether the individual is guilty or not, there is little more frustrating than having a student not only miss precious class time, but eventually be forced to drop his classes, or miss the start of a new semester, because he’s being held in ad seg. What’s frustrating is not just the overuse of solitary confinement, or of these kinds of deprivation generally; it’s the

complete disconnect between the moral rhetoric of discipline and the reality of its actual effects.

The rhetoric is that people must follow rules, and if they don’t, they should suffer some negative consequence, which will teach them to behave differently. The reality is that a great deal of prison “discipline” is not only ineffective in achieving these goals, but it actually does more harm than good – above all, when used to control behaviors that manifest complex underlying problems.

For example, drug use in prison often co-occurs with underlying struggles like chronic pain, addiction, anxiety, PTSD, and/or depression. Drug trafficking, at least at the lower levels, stems from material poverty, coercion, or some combination. Cell phones – a serious matter from the prison’s perspective because of their potential criminal uses – are most commonly used to stay connected to family. Institutional concern about each of these issues is entirely valid, but the response does little or nothing to mitigate them.

But it does do harm. In the context of education – as well as other programs where people are emotionally and intellectually challenged in new and often uncomfortable ways – the institution’s rituals of punishment routinely set back or even destroy emerging personal change. They not only disrupt participation; they overwhelm people with feelings of anger, powerlessness, isolation, and the sense of being persecuted. For people who are already prone to self-destructive behavior in the face of extreme frustration, the destructiveness of the institution becomes just another trigger – one more reason to give up.

Clearly the institution can always say, this is not our problem; it’s the responsibility of the individual to persist in the face of adversity. But each of us should ask ourselves what kind of force we want to be in the world, and what kinds of attitudes and values we want to model. One of the greatest demands that the institution makes of the incarcerated community is for respect. If this demand is ever to mean anything more than total deference to power, the system as a whole must strive not only for control but for moral legitimacy. Staff and administrators alike should be prepared to reflect critically upon their actions, take responsibility, and use their imaginations; they should not only mandate but model self-reflection, accountability, and the capacity for change.

With warm regards,
Jody Lewen

We are pleased to announce that PUP Executive Director Jody Lewen was one of this year’s four recipients of the James Irvine Foundation Leadership Award, which included a grant of \$200,000 for PUP. Among those celebrating at the February award luncheon in Sacramento (in photo above) were: Maddy Russell-Shapiro, PUP Board Chair; Kevin Tindall, PUP Alumnus; Kelly Jane Rosenblatt, PUP Board Member; Amanda Howell, PUP Program Associate; Nancy Goldberg, PUP Board Member; Pat Mims, PUP Alumnus; Kara Urion, PUP Program Director; Jody Lewen; Leonard Rubio, PUP Alumnus and Executive Assistant; Gail Reitano, PUP Development Consultant; and Sonja Tonnesen and Katherine Katcher, Deputy Director and Executive Director of Root & Rebound. Jody was nominated for the award by long-time PUP supporter State Senator Loni Hancock. More about the Awards (including a related video) is at: www.irvine.org/leadership.

Pouring Water in the Free World: An Interview with Henry Frank

PUP Alumnus Henry Frank completed his Associate's Degree at San Quentin in 2012; in April 2013 he was released from prison after 19 1/2 years. He is Native American, an artist, and a student; his latest up-and-coming skill is photography.

PUP: What are you up to these days?

HF: Currently I just finished the Art of the Americas show in Marin. It is my second art show since my release and I have two more lined up for the year – one in Novato and the other in Pleasanton. I am currently enrolled into the spring semester at San Francisco State University, where I am working towards a Bachelor's Degree in Business Management and a Minor in Communications. I am working at the United Markets in San Anselmo as a courtesy clerk I (bag/cart boy) with the possibility of promotion to courtesy clerk II (checker/stocker) soon.

I will be a guest instructor at the San Francisco Art Institute on Block Printing on March 11. Last month I went and spoke at the Oakland Tech High School to four different art classes on printing and shared what art means to me and how it has helped me. I am member of the Asian Prisoner Support Committee, the Vice President of the Alliance for Change at SFSU, and I am still donating art pieces to various non-profits.

I am still doing ceremonial sweats and have had the honor to pour water for sweat ceremonies several times. I remember being asked after my first time pouring water outside of prison, "How does it feel different to pour water in the free world?" I closed my eyes and checked in with myself and then answered, "It feels the same." My heart smiled because I remembered telling the brothers inside prison during ceremony that every lodge, past, present, future and no matter where it is – they are all connected. When I was in there and every time I am in there I feel every brother I ever sweated with and I feel every lodge I ever sweated in.

PUP: What have been some of the greatest challenges and the greatest joys of leaving prison?

HF: Greatest challenges since my release were admitting that I was institutionalized and was experiencing PTSD symptoms and then seeking and asking for help. I had a psychologist, therapist and a strong support group. Reestablishing old and creating new relationships. Adjusting to the time difference... in the sense of getting to work inside took about 15 minutes tops – get up, go to chow, return to cell and head to work. Out here about an hour or hour and a half – get up, check email/text/messenger, shower, choose what to eat, cook breakfast, clean up, check email/text/messenger, choose what you want for lunch, make your lunch, choose what to wear, drive to work, and punch in. It took me a minute to get used

to the fact that I could say no to an appointment and that I could call and change or even cancel an appointment.

My greatest joys are the freedom of choice, freedom of movement, to be able to call anyone at any time, to be able to cook my own meals, to drive, to interact with women, to be able to pet and play with animals, to take photographs, to hear the river and feel the river and swim in the river, to be able to go a university campus and take classes, to experience new things that I never even imagined and to feel safe, relaxed, and comfortable.

PUP: Anything you'd like to say to the people at San Quentin?

HF: I would like to say to the people that are reading this, you are not forgotten and you are missed. Do not give up hope, do not give up on yourself, do not believe that you are alone and do not tell yourself that "they" are keeping you in prison. Go to self help groups, go to college, go to vocational classes (even though you have taken thirty), choose to be happy, choose to be content, choose to see the positive things in life, be of service, be honest with yourself and others. Do mock board hearings, get comfortable with speaking about yourself and expressing yourself with people that you do not know, because you don't know the board members. Be willing to answer every question and as many times as they ask it. Don't go in there quoting law, go in there and quote yourself.

My prayers are with you and I pray that every one of you gets to feel the excitement, awkwardness, overwhelmingness, overstimulation, anxiety, happiness, relaxation, thankfulness, and gratitude of freedom. ■



In What Appears to Be the Middle of Nowhere

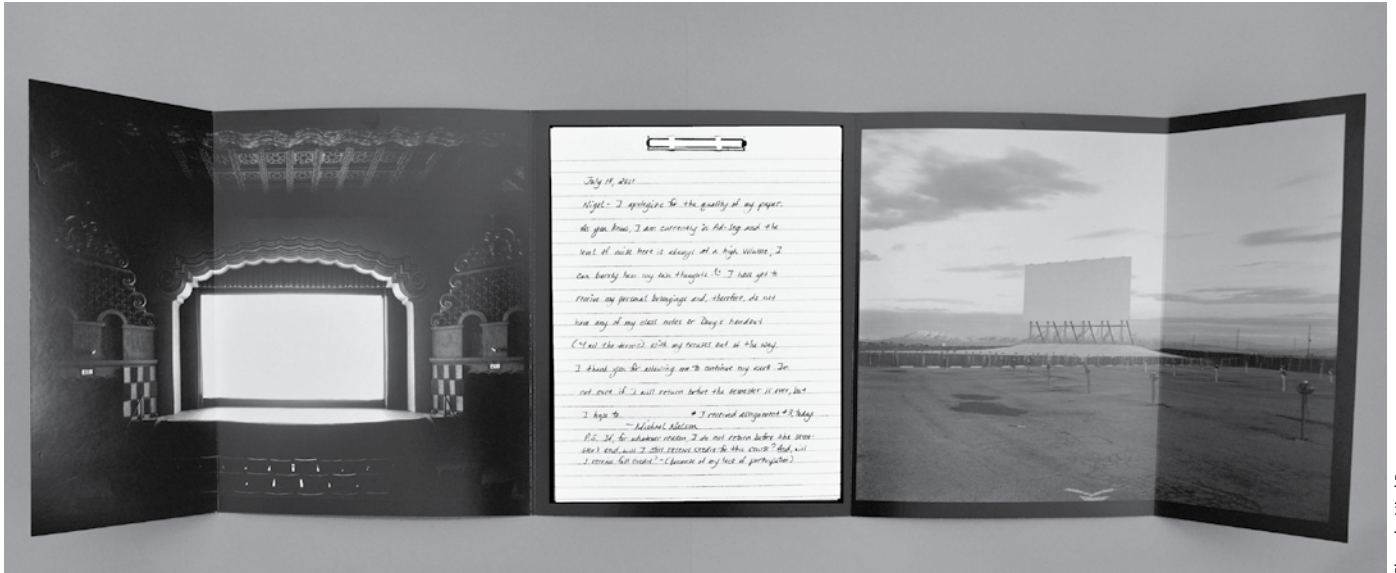


Photo by Nigel Poor

In 2011, student Michael Nelson (Yoshi) wrote an essay contrasting two photographs – Richard Misrach’s “Drive-In Theater, Las Vegas, 1987,” and Hiroshi Sugimoto’s “La Paloma, Encinitas, 1993” – in response to an assignment for History of Photography. Michael’s participation in the class had been interrupted when he was placed in solitary confinement for several months, but he wrote the essay anyway.

Instructors Nigel Poor and Doug Dertinger (both faculty in the Department of Design at Sacramento State University) were so impressed by the essay that they shared it with Richard Misrach, which ultimately resulted in the publication of Michael’s essay as a special folio by TBW Books: “Assignment No. 2: San Quentin Prison.”

Following that publication, Richard Misrach shared the essay with guests at a dinner party at his home. Among those guests was composer Paul Dresher, who was inspired enough to create a new composition, “A Picture Screen Stands in Solitude,” using Michael’s text as the libretto. In December 2014, that piece premiered at the Zellerbach Playhouse at UC Berkeley, performed by the Paul Dresher Ensemble Electro-Acoustic Band with Amy X Neuburg.

For those with Internet access, video of Dresher’s performance can be viewed at: <https://vimeo.com/120843338>. Proceeds from the publication of the folio are being donated to the Prison University Project. ■



The Dresher performance: photo by Mark Palmer



Prison University Project

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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 360 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 rely entirely on donations from individuals and foundations.



Aouie Rubio Photography

Prison University Project alumni at the Volunteer Appreciation Holiday Party, December 2014

Spring Semester 2015 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 102; Geology; U.S. History (*to 1877*); The Art and Science of Communication; History and Archaeology of Ancient Greece; Art in the Western Tradition (*1400-Present*); Math 50A (*Developmental Mathematics*); Math 50B (*Developmental Mathematics*); Elementary Algebra; Intermediate Algebra; Statistics; Stanford Seminar on Inequality (*non-credit*); Math Study Groups; Study Hall (*tutoring in writing and math*)