



# Prison University Project

A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

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## *Letter from the Executive Director*

Dear Friends,

It once occurred to me while talking to someone at San Quentin that although we were physically in the same location, we were – by virtue of our radically different positions in relation to the institution – in completely different places. While prisons may complicate the entire notion of “place” in particularly dramatic fashion, I’ve come to realize that the lesson itself extends far beyond prison.

The day after the presidential election in November, I asked a student at San Quentin about his reaction to the results. He shrugged and said, “Don’t really matter. Ain’t none of them ever done anything for me, or my mom, or my grandma.”

My first thought was that he was too far removed from the world of politics to understand the election’s potential implications. But in the weeks that followed, as I heard others inside express similar sentiments, I began to wonder.

My initial reaction to that student’s comment presumed not only that my knowledge about politics was superior, but that I was more closely connected to the “real” political world. In a single powerful statement, he had articulated the political alienation of three entire generations, and my immediate response had been to mentally locate that alienation *outside* the world of politics.

Clearly every one of us has access to different kinds of information that others may lack. But my concern is with how easy it is to completely miss the pressing truth contained in someone else’s account of their own subjective experience, because it doesn’t mesh with how we view the world.

In my imagination, Justice builds steadily, like a wave, and it travels a linear, if halting, path. The further Justice travels in the right direction, the more people will eventually be healthy and safe. Some people have a similar faith in the concept of economic prosperity, or of liberty.

But for some people, what I call justice is more like a lottery ticket, a random explosion, or a train that never stops at their station. Justice is a river that rushes over but never carries them, as if they were stones at the bottom of the riverbed. Spending time inside the prison system continues to teach me that, in a political sense, many of us have been mistaking a single body of rushing water for the entire natural world.

Over the last few months, one striking difference I’ve noticed between San Quentin and the world outside has been the virtual absence of expressions of shock, outrage or disbelief – whether in response to the

election, or to specific political developments. Even among those who track politics closely, no one describes feeling startled or disoriented in the way that so many people on the outside do.

Perhaps this is because no one in prison is experiencing the sudden, unexpected loss of political influence, or the unfamiliar sensation of political powerlessness. Or maybe their cumulative lifetime exposure to callousness and cruelty has rendered them immune to certain types of surprise. To complain inside the prison about the current political climate is to complain about torrential rainfall to fish living 10,000 miles below sea level.

Another even more fundamental difference in how people seem to be processing current events is how much more easily people inside can imagine that otherwise decent human beings might gravitate towards aggression out of fear, anger or desperation. They are much less likely to cling to the notion that destructive behavior is necessarily an expression of a person’s character, desire, or potential.

A common saying at San Quentin is, “Hurt people hurt people.” The most egregious injuries are not simply physical or material; they are symbolic and psychological. Most people in prison can tell you that nothing triggers conflict or harm more quickly than feelings of being unrecognized, disrespected or humiliated. But on the outside, the United States as a whole continues to stumble along without the benefit of such insight, in our own increasingly dangerous political-psychological stone age.

Today more than ever, we must support the civic participation of incarcerated people, as well as of other communities subject to extreme, systematic vulnerability and exclusion. But the reasons extend far beyond the need of every citizen to influence their own government, and shape the society in which they live. The reality is that our society *needs* the voices of incarcerated people – not just for their critical insights about criminal justice, but for their experience, their humanity, and their wisdom about how best to build a more just and prosperous world.

With warm regards,  
Jody Lewen

*Photo above: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Secretary Scott Kernan listens to a question from panel moderator Juan Haines, at a symposium on the implementation of Proposition 57. The event was hosted by the Prison University Project at San Quentin on February 27.*

## From “Civil Death” to Finding our Voices

The Criminal class is one of the most marginalized segments of American society. Once a person is convicted of a felony, he or she experiences what the legal profession calls “civil death”; in other words, people who are convicted of a felony lose their right to vote, operate a business, or earn a livable wage for the entire length of their incarceration. Most of these rights are reinstated once a person is released, but many states continue to deny ex-felons the right to vote.

That’s why participating in the Prop 57 Symposium at San Quentin was so empowering. Imagine the eye-opening experience of incarcerated students, who have been denied the right to vote, using skills and talents nurtured by the College Program, exercising their voices in an effort to influence Prop 57’s implementation as the Secretary of the CDCR, the Warden, and our extraordinary volunteers listened attentively. Our students decided not to participate in their own disenfranchisement, but instead expressed a

clear and articulate vision about laws that would explicitly affect them. There is a good chance that the short-term benefits of the symposium will be limited – after all, we students are just finding our voices – but the long-term benefits cannot be overestimated. As a student body, we learned that it’s OK to speak our truth.

The Symposium was student-led, and student-organized. In practical terms, this means that the student body created a survey to gauge interest in the symposium and determine who had ideas about how Prop 57 should be implemented. After collecting the surveys, we called in students to participate in focus groups. In the focus groups, students determined which topics would be best to raise at the symposium, and they also voted for speakers. The students who were selected then wrote speeches. Then the students used peer editing to revise their speeches. Then we practiced, practiced, practiced!

— James King



All event photos by Brian Asey and Sam Hearnnes

From left to right: Student Zakee Hutchison; PUP instructor and Board member Sia Henry; student presenter Rahsaan Thomas, associate editor of *San Quentin News*; PUP Executive Director, Jody Lewen; presenter Mike Romano, director of the Stanford Justice Advocacy Project.

## An Update from Academic Program Director Amy Jamgochian

We began the spring semester this January with about 300 enrolled students, 20 courses, 47 volunteer instructors and teaching assistants, 33 tutors, eight study group leaders, and four research assistants. With a program team of five (since On-Site Coordinator Jesse Rothman had been out since October, recovering from a serious bike accident), we’ve all been incredibly busy, but seeing the semester off to a successful start is an enormous reward. And Jesse has recently returned, so we’re back up to a full team!

An especially exciting new initiative that we are rolling out this semester is our Student Teaching Assistant Program, a TA apprenticeship program for graduates and other advanced students. We currently have eight student TAs working in college preparatory English and math courses. They attend class weekly to support the instructor and help students, and receive on-going training in lesson planning, discussion facilitation, and tutoring. By the end of the term they’ll be leading class discussions independently.

This year we also plan to introduce a series of events designed

to provide students – and the larger San Quentin community – with opportunities for civic engagement. The volunteers, students, and staff play a central role in a critical part of PUP’s mission, which is to humanize prisoners in the public eye, and to carry their voices to the outside world. This may well be one of the most crucial functions our organization has, both during times of political turmoil and of relative peace.

The first of these events was a symposium on Proposition 57, a measure that passed in 2016 that will create opportunities for early release for inmates convicted of nonviolent offenses and award others opportunities to earn time off sentences. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation is currently working to draft the specific regulations through which the measure will be implemented, so the symposium provided students with a critical and timely opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns to a broader audience. College Program clerks, James King and Phil Melendez, played a central role in conceiving of this event, and in pushing it forward. ■

# An Interview with Aly Tamboura

## How are you, and how has the transition been?

I, like most formerly incarcerated people, built a complex and sometimes unrealistic narrative while inside of what my life would be after being released. While some of my plans (i.e., eat a good meal, sleep in a comfortable bed, and spend time with friends and family) occurred just as I had envisioned, other aspects have not turned out as expected – the biggest being my expectations with parole.

Fortunately, learning to write computer code while in San Quentin [through [thelastmile.org](http://thelastmile.org)] opened up an entire new world of technology and made it possible for me to walk out of San Quentin into the workforce. The writing and communication skills I learned at PUP have greatly assisted my transition into my community. Currently I am in an immersive computer coding boot camp in San Francisco.

## What do you think people coming out of prison need most?

When I go to the parole office and see all the men and women in the waiting room who are jobless and homeless I understand that the most important thing a paroled person needs is employment and housing.

## What if anything do you miss about San Quentin?

I miss the community, specifically the men who are agents of change and healing. I honestly believe the most empathetic people in this country are incarcerated.

## Tell us about the community of people working in the field of tech in the Bay Area who did time at San Quentin.

At least 20 men who I met in San Quentin are out here in the workforce thriving, and many of them are in the tech space. Kenyatta Leal and Vin Nguyen work at Rocket Space. Darnell Hill is working at Grove Collaborative. Both Kenyatta and Darnell have hired returned citizens from San Quentin.

## What impact do you think their presence is having on the tech community?

Though it is not an end-all fix to the low representation of minorities in tech, San Quentin alumni are making a small dent in the statistics. I think the College Program along with the technical training available at San Quentin is a genius combination in preparing men for the challenges of reentry. These programs foster work ethic, collaboration and critical thinking—elements that are crucial to success.



Prison University Project alumni Aly Tamboura, Vinny Nguyen and Heracio Harts together in San Francisco. Heracio recently founded **Healthy Hearts Institute** ([healthyhearts.co](http://healthyhearts.co)), which is currently working to build a community garden in the El Pueblo Housing Development in Pittsburg, CA.

## What are your personal long and short-term goals?

My short-term goals are to continue with my education while building a solid foundation for my new life of freedom. In the long term I want to purchase a home and work with assisting additional returned citizens break into the tech space.

## Is there anything in particular you'd like to see that community of formerly incarcerated people who are now working in the tech world accomplish?

My dream is to create a tech startup with fellow returned

citizens – a company that leverages technology for social benefit. I know in my heart that this is going to come to fruition.

## Why would someone who wants to work in the field of tech pursue a liberal arts education?

The college program and the men and women who teach in it truly changed my life. I have a new paradigm through which I see the world: I am more informed, more critical, and I'm addicted to learning. Critical thinking skills are arguably the biggest component of software development and being employable in tech.

*"I honestly believe that the most empathetic people in this country are incarcerated."*

## What advice do you have for people inside?

It is very important to make plans and set goals for reentry. These plans will work as a guide to get you through the maze of dysfunction in our society. But don't be disappointed when some of your plans don't pan out. It only means you have to pivot and work a little harder.

The work you complete inside will pay dividends on the outside. Get off the dominos table, pick up a book and learn all you can. Also, do groups. People out here have no idea what it means to be a good communicator. Groups and programs will be immensely valuable in your future interpersonal relationships.

## What message would you have for folks who want to support people who are coming out?

Companies need to assist their communities by offering returned citizens a job. In my experience, not one company that has hired an ex-offender has had any regrets. By offering opportunities they are not only being good shepherds, but they are lowering California's dismal recidivism rate, while making communities safer. ■



# 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 at San Quentin State Prison; to support increased access to higher education for incarcerated people; and to stimulate public awareness about higher education access and criminal justice.

We provide approximately 20 courses each semester leading to an Associate of Arts degree in liberal arts, as well as college preparatory courses in math and English, to over 300 students. All instructors work as volunteers; most are faculty or graduate students from UC Berkeley, Stanford, San Francisco State University, the 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. The program is an extension site of Patten University in Oakland, CA.

### PRISON UNIVERSITY PROJECT BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Student audience members Stephen Pascasio, Dwight Kennedy, Curtis Roberts, and Darell Flowers at the Proposition 57 Symposium.

## An Update on Technical Assistance

As California Community Colleges around the state launch or expand existing programs in various CDCR institutions, the Prison University Project continues to provide whatever support it can. We are currently working to help recruit much-needed faculty, particularly for programs in southern California and the Central Valley. Especially needed are qualified instructors for developmental math and English courses. **Prospective faculty are encouraged to reach out for more information: [newprograms@prisonuniversityproject.org](mailto:newprograms@prisonuniversityproject.org).**

### SPRING SEMESTER 2017 COURSE OFFERINGS

English 101A: Reading and Composition	English 204: Critical Reading, Writing and Research	Sociology	Reading Strategies (Pre- College)
English 101B: Critical Reading, Writing and Thinking	American Government	Spanish 101	Math 50A
English 102: Introduction to Literature	Cultural Anthropology	English 99A: Pre-College English, Part I (2 sections)	Math 50B
	Journalism	English 99B: Pre-College English, Part II (2 sections)	Elementary Algebra
	Neuroscience		Intermediate Algebra
			Precalculus I