



photo by Phillip Carter

# Prison University Project

A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

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## *From the Executive Director*

Dear Friends,

In late July, the state of California decided to cut \$1.2 billion from the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation budget; in August the Department will decide where those funds will come from. Under consideration is eliminating what little vocational and/or academic programming exists in institutions statewide.

While this is going on, we receive about ten letters every week from people at other prisons around the state who are seeking to transfer to San Quentin in order to participate in the college program. Given that our program only serves students with a high school diploma or GED (who are already in the minority within the system), it's hard to imagine the scope of the need across the state, and what it will be like if the few educational opportunities out there vanish completely.

In recent years, the *idea* of providing educational opportunity in prisons has seemed to gain ground; unfortunately, in the face of economic crisis, that support has proved painfully thin. Being convicted of a crime effectively means that one's needs, by definition, instantly become virtually meaningless, or at the very least, of the lowest possible fiscal priority. We need to challenge both the logic of this devaluation, and the underlying premise that neglecting the basic needs of an individual impacts only that individual.

Through the college program, students' voices are being heard on critical issues such as reducing prison spending, lowering the prison population, preventing crime, and bringing about reform of our sentencing laws. During these extraordinarily trying times, we are excited to continue exploring the potential impact of this work, and we are profoundly grateful for your support, which makes it all possible.

With warm regards,  
Jody Lewen

## **English 102, Introduction to Literature: Gothic Literature and Minorities**

*Instructors: Audrey Wu Clark and Sarah Townsend*

What might compel a group of San Quentin inmates to spend a Thursday evening defending the rights of leprechauns?

The students of English 102 could offer plenty of reasons after their recent in-class debate, where they argued the pros and cons of 19th-century British political cartoons. Students noticed several different racial stereotypes of the Irish in these cartoons: the drunken Paddy, the dangerous ape, and the childlike leprechaun who, as one student noted, was being punished by an unnecessarily stern "Mother" England.

The class debate is just one of many activities through which the students examine the topic of "Gothic Literature and Minorities." We began the semester by reading classic Gothic novels, which feature gloomy castles, ghosts, sinister desires and evil villains. We have gone on to study literary works that borrow from these Gothic conventions to discuss racial, gender, and class difference. Through a diverse set of readings—from the travel narratives of a 12th-century English cleric to contemporary novels by Toni Morrison and Arturo Islas—students investigate the many Gothic tropes used to identify and control minorities, as well as works by minority authors who "write back" to the structures that oppress them.

Students have also been on the lookout for Gothic minority discourse in present-day politics, popular culture, and their own everyday lives. This allows them to connect more fully to the wide range of minorities that English 102 will cover.

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### **The Graduating Class of 2009**

The annual graduation ceremony at San Quentin was held on June 18. Graduates receiving their Associate of Arts degree (pictured in the photo, from left to right) included: Harrison Seuga, Nghiep "Ke" Lam, Jai-Lee Fontenot, Gregory Sanders, Ishmael Turner, Michael Willis, Abraham Glasper, Raphael Calix, Kevin Penn, Joseph Demerson, Felix Lucero, Wilbur Williams, Philip Senegal and David Monroe.

# Building Everlasting Bonds: Graduation 2009

Tiffani Neal, daughter of Leonard Neal (Patten University at San Quentin, class of 2000), gave the keynote address at graduation.

Growing up in a home without a father was a little strange, when you knew both of your parents were married. It seems like yesterday that my siblings and I experienced emotional breakdowns after or during visiting times, when we knew that our father had to stay at San Quentin State Prison, as we departed to a home that he'd never been to. Thanks to our loving mother. She kept our family together being the strong rock that she is. Although my father and I did not share the physical world that I always knew (freedom) and enjoyed, our relationship still had a close bond through letters, prison visits and weekend family visits every once in a while.

Well, because of our close father/



photo by Phillip Carter

Tiffani Neal

daughter relationship, I felt that it would be important to accept the request of being the keynote speaker for the 2009 Prison University Project/Patten University Commencement. To tell the truth, walking into the prison without being

searched or stressing on whether the guards were going to be rude and unpleasant, felt GREAT! Those that have ever had the experience know exactly what I mean.

Looking at all the graduates and hearing the valedictorian speak, brought back the good memories I had watching my own father receive higher education and a diploma from Patten University. It brought

such joy to me to be able to encourage the graduates to continue to strive for academic excellence through my speech. Knowledge is power and can make the transition back into society a little better. Most of all I wanted them to understand how important it is to their children and/or their family. I really hope that the graduates receive my key message: Education builds everlasting relationships and bonds, which can and will improve their lives, their children's lives, and their family as a whole. □



photo by Phillip Carter

Volunteers are recognized at graduation.

## On Learning Things You've Known Your Whole Life: Social Psychology at San Quentin

by Jorge Heredia

The word "psychology" used to sound to me as something supernatural, like a tool with which one can penetrate people's mind, particularly when TV propaganda depicted those so-called mind readers with their crystal ball, or the fortune tellers with their tarot cards, promoting their superpowers. Currently, I am taking psychology with Ms. Carly Stair and Ms. Ashley Schappell. Their teaching method makes it easy to understand because they've been using daily life examples that once you hear them, you go ¡Orale! (Okay, I get it!) Thus, everything becomes very clear and you find out that your entire life you've been applying these various methods of psychology (conformity, persuasion, social cognition, self-justification, aggression, prejudice, liking-loving-interpersonal sensitivity, social psychology as a science) in your daily life, but the difference is that we might know them with a different name. For example, "introspection," which is covered in chapter 4, deals with the contemplation of your own thoughts, desires, and conducts, we know it as our conscience, which we use to self-evaluate/control ourselves. I'm not saying that this is an easy class,

careful now, don't you get confused, pal! What I am saying is that the teachers' effectiveness inspires you to focus and to engage in their class discussions, this is why it seems easy to understand social psychology.

I've been able to clarify my old belief about psychology, and in a way penetrate others' mind to understand their behavior, especially in this prison environment. For instance, I can understand and relate in a way to their self-justification, the source of their discomforts, or even their conformity, among other things. Furthermore, this class has helped me to monitor my own behavior, and awakened a clearer awareness of the society in general inside and outside the prison walls.

I used to have the wrong idea about psychology. I thought it was useful only for insane people. I can dare to say that somewhere out there, there are still many people with this same wrong perspective. I recommend this social psychology class to everyone, because once you take it, you'll be able to save yourself countless conflicts in the environment around you, regardless of the place where you might be. This class offers valuable information for our successful development and happiness. □



photo by Jody Lewen

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LECTURE SERIES ON SENTENCING POLICY

More than 100 students attended Kara Dansky's lecture on the history of sentencing in California on April 24.

The Prison University Project has hosted a series of lectures on sentencing policy and reform at San Quentin this past spring and summer. The topics have ranged from sentencing juveniles as adults to strategies for reducing overcrowding in prisons. On June 5th, Elsa Chen gave a fascinating lecture on California's Three Strikes and You're Out Law, an audio recording of which is available on our website, along with recordings of presentations by Kara Dansky, Barry Krisberg, Helene Silverberg, Jonathan Simon, and Franklin Zimring. Just click on Events & Projects, then Guest Lectures & Presentations.

### Thank You, San Quentin Students!

*Elsa Chen, Assistant Professor of American Politics and Public Policy at Santa Clara University*

Before my visit to San Quentin, I mentioned to a few people that I had accepted an invitation to the prison to lecture on my research, and that I'd been told to expect a full classroom of inmate students who were eagerly looking forward to the talk on Three Strikes. My favorite response came from a colleague who was feeling weary from dealing with distracted, exhausted, and frequently absent college students during the last week of a long academic year: "A classroom of students 'eagerly looking forward' to it? Enjoy it while you can!"

The classroom was packed. My talk covered three main topics: how the Three Strikes law was passed; how the law is implemented, including the discretion permitted in its application, and disparities that have emerged; and finally, the law's very limited success at crime reduction.

I was struck by several contrasts between the San Quentin students and the college kids I usually teach. Of course, all of these students were men. Perhaps half of them looked older than me. Instead of T-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops, they all wore blue uniforms. They grouped themselves by race, which appeared to happen out of habit more than animosity. Beyond those superficial observations, however, I noticed more. The students impressed me with their understanding of sentencing policy. Several students shared their personal experiences as third- or second-strikers. They earnestly asked whether and how we could bring about policy changes. They challenged me with insightful questions and made me think hard about the meaning and impacts of my research. I was humbled by the respect with which the students spoke and listened to me and to each other, and invigorated by the positive energy that filled the classroom. I hope they learned some things from me that afternoon; they certainly taught me a lot! □

### A Glimmer of Hope for Inmates

*Jeff Brooks*

I, along with approximately 50 of my fellow inmates were delighted to hear Elsa Y. Chen, PhD, from Santa Clara University chronicle the passage, implementation, and effects of California's draconian Three Strikes Law. Dr. Chen's thorough account of the law gave many inmates a glimmer of hope, hope that through her research, the Three Strikes Law can be revealed to the citizens of California for its cruelty, injustice, and costs.

Dr. Chen displayed statistical information showing California's overuse of the Three Strikes Law in comparison to 24 other states, as well as the federal government. According to Chen, as of 2005 more than 87,500 individuals had been sentenced under the second- and third-strike provisions of the law; Washington State, with the next most, had only sentenced approximately 350 individuals. She said that currently, 55% of more than 7,500 offenders who received a sentence of 25 years to life in prison for a third strike are incarcerated for nonviolent felonies. Chen said the Legislative Analyst Office, a nonpartisan governmental agency, estimates that the state's Three Strike policy currently costs approximately \$500 million per year to implement, and, she said, the costs were expected to escalate. With the high human costs to individuals and communities, along with the budget cuts in health, education, welfare, and other social services facing California, according to Chen, the law needs to be changed.

Inmates have known for years the injustice of the law; now, with Dr. Chen's research, we are optimistic that once the public becomes aware of the facts they will amend California's Three Strikes Law to apply to only violent felonies. Thank you, Dr. Chen. □

## ALUMNI NEWS

### The First Ninety Days

*A Letter From Chuck Hopple*

When I paroled from San Quentin, after serving about seven years, I was not going to make the same mistakes others had before me, who attempted to transfer their parole out of state through the Interstate Compact Commission. No, I paid off my restitution early. I did not submit my application late, but early. I performed my research, obtained a copy of the Interstate rules, and submitted a “great” application. Although I couldn’t get any definitive information about my transfer to Oregon, while in prison, I was confident that “all was well.”

Consequently, I arranged for my sister from Oregon to pick me up at the gate. We were simply going to report in at the San Jose parole office on Monday morning, and then continue on to Oregon. Well, it didn’t quite work out that way. When I got to the parole office, they had nothing on my parole transfer. Apparently, because my counselor accepted and processed my application earlier than the “120 days to the house” rule, the Interstate Compact Commission threw out my application without any notification to my counselor or San Quentin.

“Veteran” convicts had often told me that after serving such a lengthy sentence that the parole agent will likely give me a 30-day pass to visit family. I therefore asked for a 30-day pass. This was denied. I then asked the agent to process my application for a parole transfer. This too was denied. The agent said that I would have to give him 90 days before he considers either.

Fortunately, I have been financially able to fend for myself, while I pass these 90 days. My parole transfer is in process, and supposedly is informally approved. I am currently attending a mad-paced summer semester at Evergreen Valley College in San Jose, ending late July.

So, as you can see, I didn’t make the same mistakes as others before me. I made different mistakes.

Best wishes, Chuck Hopple



### Free at last

*Lemonta Renna McBroom*

Emancipation has been almost two months now. A thought came across my mind the first day I was out: leave all that SQ stuff behind. You know, the anger, the defenses, posturing, the looking over your shoulder every three to five steps.

Don’t get me wrong, caution is required out here as well, but it seems a different alertness than that experienced in the land of the lost (SQ).

For me, the nectar of the gods, my first drink, was a big cup of hot tea with real lemon and sugar. Eleven o’clock pm, I went for a long walk (2 miles) and every other day I walk about the same distance. No fences, no walls for miles.

My universe has clearly changed, and as a result so have my habits. In my new cosmos, washing dishes, mopping floors and fixing every broken thing around the house is fun. Cooking on a real stove, and washing and drying garments are joys. In the pit (SQ), on rare occasions you would find me in church. Since I have been out, every Sunday I am in church.

I have not started to work, because I did not have to, but there are jobs out here if you are willing to work. I am taking my time and getting some training. In this county it is mandatory that you attend an orientation at Employment Development Department for job placement, housing, medical services, drug treatment, and the like. I just completed my Bay Area Training Corporation training last week, about to take an OSHA training (10 hour course) and a 40 hour Hazardous Materials course. OSHA and HM are free at the EDD.

The college program has given me some great study habits. These training programs seem elementary comparatively and having my AA certainly has not hurt. What I really want to tell you is, it is no where near as hopeless as the parole violators make it appear. Do not get me wrong, I know I am blessed. I have a wife and home to come to, food on the table, clothing, and a means of getting around, but even in the absence of all these, I know that I would make it and therefore you will make it. You just have to be willing to take advantage of the programs available to you.

I imagine, after thirty-three years, prison will always be a part of me. I think however, the trick is not to become a part of the prison. I need to keep my experiences and use them to my advantage, and become a better me.



### 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 over 250 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.

### SUMMER SEMESTER COURSE OFFERINGS

This semester we’re offering the following classes at San Quentin: English 101 (Intro to Composition), English 102 (Intro to Literature), Critical Thinking, Physics, Art History, Psychology, Philosophy, Math 50 (developmental math), Algebra, Geometry, Statistics, Pre-Calculus, Calculus, English 99A (two sections!), and English 99B (these last two are college preparatory English classes.)