

# Prison University Project



photo by Philip Carter

A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

March 2010, Vol. 5, No. 1

## From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

The other day I was talking to a student in the college program about his plans for after leaving prison. He said he was worried about trying to leave his old life behind – especially the drug-dealing and the gang he'd been a part of. He was concerned about becoming a target of violence by “dropping out,” and about jeopardizing the safety of his family.

He was also worried that if unable to find other work, he'd end up going back to the one way of earning money that he'd ever known, which would start the whole cycle over again. Was it even possible to get away from all of that without actually moving to another part of the state? He knew that the terms of his parole would require him to stay in the county, but even if by some long shot a request for a change of county were granted, his girlfriend had a job she was unwilling to leave.

Above all else, he didn't want to abandon his children, and didn't want to come back to prison; the dilemma was that he wasn't sure it would be possible to fulfill one commitment without failing at the other. It wasn't just that he felt he had to choose between changing his own life and caring for his family; he also felt that if he didn't change his life he would eventually end up back in prison, or dead.

This kind of conversation reminds me both of what it means to help improve a person's chances of obtaining a good job when they leave prison, and of the complexity of the challenges that so many of our students will face. It's also the sort of conversation that makes me wish I had a tape recorder with me – or, better yet, that I could, at will, convene a roundtable discussion among our students, and members of the legislature, or the media, or with random people off the street. We would all sit down together and figure out what it would even look like for this person to “do the right thing.”

Neither this man's dilemma nor his desire to do the right thing is unique or even unusual among people in prison — in fact, both are defining features of the lives of thousands of people in California and across the U.S. And yet how sharply this reality contrasts with the images of selfish and willfully destructive *criminals* that we encounter everyday. What would happen if we began to understand the commission of a crime as an act of desperation, or the result of a real or imagined lack of options – rather than as an expression of some innate evil character?

I imagine those brittle, simplistic stereotypes about people in prison like ugly wallpaper that's been pasted over a gigantic window. I am always looking for ways to tear that wallpaper down so that people walking by can finally see what lies beyond it. So far it seems to be the kind of material that tears as you pull on it, rendering the work piecemeal, and painstakingly slow. But we are making progress.

One day a couple of weeks ago, I stopped at the post office on my way to work and discovered a stack of letters from an English class in a high school in Illinois. They had been reading about prisons, and their teacher had assigned some essays from *OpenLine* (our journal of student writing) and other PUP materials. The letters expressed their thoughtful and compassionate responses to the essays they'd read; some expressed appreciation for the affirmation of knowledge they'd already had. I'm pleased to share one such letter with you in the column to the right. It's the passion and intelligence of students like these, and those at San Quentin, that give me hope.

With warm regards, Jody Lewen

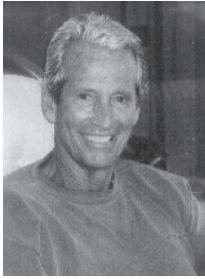
## “I remember the day I figured out that my dad was illiterate”

I want to start off by saying I think the whole education for prisoners is a great idea and I hope that all the prisons around the world will do this. If prisoners can learn when they're in prison it will make them more educated and might not think that the whole time they were in prison was a waste. When they do get out of prison they can start their whole life over and get a job and be educated. I know how it feels to have to help people out. I also want to be a teacher and help out people. My whole life, I have been helping out. My dad is illiterate and for many years I have been helping him read and write. I hate seeing my dad not to be able to get certain jobs just because of his past or I hate seeing my dad struggling with how to spell a word or write something. So I think if there is something that teachers like you and other high influences can do to help people with their education is appreciated by many people. Not only me but they have families that need them they have kids that will need them when they get out and I know how it feels to ask my dad for help on my homework but he can't because he doesn't know what it says. I remember the day I figured out that my dad was illiterate it was when I asked him what a word means and I saw tears come down from his face and asking him what is wrong and him telling me that he can't read or write think what that does to a little kid because they look up to their dads like they're super humans that they can do anything and everything. Ever since that day I told myself that I have to help my dad. So I think it is a very good thing that you're doing and you and your staff should keep the good work up.

Sincerely,

Steven W., Class of 2010

Reavis High School, Burbank, Illinois



## In Celebration of Dr. John Irwin *May 21, 1929 - January 3, 2010*

If you wanted to set your watch at San Quentin's North Block, all you had to do was look up and see John Irwin walking up to the entrance, and you'd know it was 3:00 p.m. In his constant search for the latest news on lifers, and sharing with the men in blue the news

of the outside world, John brought those of us who were honored to know him reassurances that someone was trying to right the sinking ship of the lifer population. With his own carnal knowledge of incarceration, coupled with his remarkable academic success thereafter, John was truly a man of his convictions! His warm smile and friendly curiosity leave an unforgettable intimate legacy, while his string of books over the years dealing with the failed philosophy of modern incarceration in the U.S. leaves a permanent benchmark for legislative leaders to heed. His last book, *Lifers*, is particularly meaningful because it describes the

very personal struggle many of us have shared. Thank you, John, for your love and your service to the free and the incarcerated communities over so many years!

—John Dannenberg

*San Francisco State University has established the John Irwin Memorial Scholarship for students participating in Project Rebound, which John founded over 40 years ago to support ex-convicts enrolled at SF State.*

*Donations to the scholarship fund can be made as checks to: University Corporation, SF State, with the memo "John Irwin Memorial Scholarship." Mailing address is: San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Ave RM 153, San Francisco, CA 94132-1722, Attn: Andrea Rouah.*

*Online giving is also possible by accessing: <https://www.applyweb.com/public/contribute?s=sfubehve> Under "About Your Gift" select "Other" and type in "John Irwin Memorial Scholarship."*

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## EMERITI NEWS

*Since 1996, when the College Program at San Quentin was first started, well over 500 people have volunteered with the program as teachers, TA's, tutors, and guest lecturers. Many of those individuals have since moved away from the Bay Area; below are some updates...*

**Olga R. Rodriguez** (Spanish): After getting graduate degrees in Journalism and Latin American Studies from UC Berkeley, I took a job with The Associated Press in Mexico in 2003. I first covered the Mexico-U.S. border and was based in northern Mexico. I'm now one of four correspondents in Mexico City in charge of covering Mexico and Central America.

**Amy E. Lerman** (English and political science): In the fall of 2008, I joined the faculty of Princeton University in the Department of Politics and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. Saying goodbye to PUP was one of the hardest things about leaving the Bay Area. Teaching at San Quentin has had a profound influence on my personal and professional life in ways I never could have predicted. I can honestly say it was a defining experience for me as a teacher, a researcher and a human being.

**Adam Booth** (math): I began formation to become a Catholic priest with a religious order called the Congregation of Holy Cross in August 2008, after two years teaching at San Quentin. Right now I'm on my novitiate year in Cascade, CO, a year away from studies to pray, reflect and get more work experience before I return to the University of Notre Dame in August to continue my studies. In my time at San Quentin, I was privileged to work with so many students with such a spirit of conversion that was contagious enough to challenge me to really consider what I needed to do with my life. I wouldn't be where I am today without them.

**Josh Page** (sociology): I am now an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. I volunteered in the college program during my first couple years as a graduate student in sociology at Berkeley. It was through participating in the program that I became interested in studying issues related to imprisonment. My first published article analyzed Congress's decision to eliminate Pell Grants for prisoners in 1994. My first book, *The Toughest Beat: Politics, Punishment, and the Prison Officers Union in California*, is scheduled for release in December 2010. My wife Letta, our two dogs, and I have a wonderful life here in the frigid Midwest.

**Susan Amrose Addy** (math and physics): I'm working as a postdoc in Civil and Environmental Engineering. I'm doing great, and am married to another former volunteer [Nathan Addy]! Did SQ change my life? In every way. It was teaching at SQ that gave me the courage to leave the graduate program I wasn't passionate about and go into a field with more direct impact on people in the real world. It was teaching at SQ that taught me to teach. And it was interacting with so many inspirational SQ students that taught me there is no excuse not to go after your dreams, and there is no situation where giving up is the only option.

**Vanessa Agard-Jones** (literature): I taught at SQ while also serving as the coordinator of the Prison Activist Resource Center, then went on to join Teach for America and worked for a number of years in Atlanta, and am now plugging away on a PhD at New York University – a joint degree in Anthropology and Francophone Studies, doing research on politics in the French Caribbean. Teaching at SQ was the very first impetus for me to move from the nonprofit world to the classroom, and for my students then and for that experience I will forever be grateful.

## Teaching and Learning Spanish Language at San Quentin

Virtually all college program classes run in the evenings at San Quentin. However, this semester, for the first time in its history, the program has been granted permission to run a class from 3-5pm. This is during "count time," when students ordinarily must return to their housing unit. "Out-counting" now allows us to run an intensive Spanish language class five days a week, without sacrificing precious evening classroom space or creating scheduling conflicts for students who want to take multiple classes. Not only can students use the class to fulfill elective requirements, but a full year of a foreign language is a requirement for transfer eligibility to many four year universities, and so is of critical importance for students who intend to pursue a B.A. degree. We are deeply grateful to the San Quentin administrators and staff who have made this possible.

The Introductory College Spanish class has been enthusiastically embraced by the students, teachers, and administrators alike. There are 25 students enrolled in the class, which meets five days a week for a total of eleven hours. It is worth three transferable units and taught by a team of experienced teachers. It is an intensive course that provides a challenging experience for students with little or no previous experience in the language, as well as for those who wish to review some basics while concentrating on their Spanish conversation skills. The benefits are not only academic but also personally enriching for all of those involved.

Students have expressed many reasons as to why they want to learn the language, from their interest in learning another language, to a desire to learn Spanish in particular in order to communicate with others within their surroundings. Some also want to prepare themselves for employment by knowing more than one language.

Regardless of why students are taking the class, the academic caliber of those students is impressive, as is their dedication. We are positively challenged in every class, and this helps with our directional focus. We work together to form and modify the content as we prioritize practical learning for communication. Memorization of content is an important base, but it is secondary to the collective goal of language usage.

— Carlos Cevallos (with Daniel Bao, Krista Brune, Seth Kimmel, Tom McEnaney, Sharon Moy, Lindsey Newbold, and Kara Urion)

**Spring Semester 2010** we're offering the following classes: English 99A, English 99B, English 101, Critical Thinking, Cultural Anthropology, Biology, Introduction to LitHop (Music Appreciation), Philosophy, Spanish 101, Math 50, Algebra, Statistics, as well as small group tutorials on Geometry and Calculus. Nearly 300 students are currently enrolled in the College Program.

## Flirting with the Mind of God: On the Power of Cultural Anthropology

**A Student's Perspective:** Learning to think critically, analytically, reflectively, and comparatively in this cultural anthropology course is like flirting with the mind of God. The teachers in this course (Jason, Joshua, Jean-Michel and Ugo) have opened up new vistas of thought that have enabled me to go beneath the surface of things and grasp the core principles, concepts and ideals pertaining to how different cultures develop, function and evolve. It is fascinating how you can take something which is relatively simple like the layout of someone's house and see the nexus between the structure of the house and the elements of human relationships. The manner in which these teachers engage the students is conducive to self-discovery. I am truly grateful and appreciate to the utmost this privilege and honor to have access to this information.

—Robert Butler

**A teacher's perspective:** We decided to introduce the students to the main themes of the discipline through a series of case-studies: from table manners in Oxford to the exchange of cattle in Sudan; from American football to gifts in Polynesia. Before the first class, I had attempted to quell my fears by preparing for every possible question, and designing what I thought was an iron-clad lesson plan. Within minutes of entering that class, my fears had disappeared. Shortly after we began, I was thrown into a fascinating debate on the meaning of American hygiene (one of the subjects of the essay we were reading.) No one was scared to speak, and everyone was eager to learn. I have to say, however, my iron-clad lesson plan came to naught. The "complicated" contradictions of the text, which I thought we would talk about at the end of class, were already grasped and discussed in the first few minutes. I left the room elated, and in need of a new lesson plan.

By now, the only thing I know in advance about the discussion in class is that I don't know what will be brought up; I have been constantly confronted with new, fascinating perspectives on texts which I thought were staid classics. Teaching these texts has also reawakened in me a revived belief in the power of anthropology.

After a certain number of years spent thinking about how different groups around the world name birds, I was beginning to question its relevance. In the classroom at San Quentin, suddenly this seemingly arcane subject was debated passionately, and, even more rewardingly, was being taken up as a way to reflect on life in contemporary America. In discussions that have ranged from arguments about the nature of kinship to the question of whether there is a universal concept of time, all the students have been open-minded, and dedicated to succeeding.

— Joshua Craze  
(with Ugo Edu, Jason Price & Jean-Michel Landry)

## ALUMNI NEWS

**Mike Gallardo:** I'm finally home. I got in last night (03/06/10) at almost midnight Manila time. So far I've slept for about 3 hours for the last 36 hours.

A lot of things have happened since January 4th. I spent 2 days at an I.C.E. detention in Sacramento. Then they released me after verifying my status. Then when I was about to get on the plane to San Diego, I.C.E. picked me up and took me to Tacoma WA. I was detained and denied bail because they classified me as a flight risk. From there I gave up my status, which they claimed was improperly processed through the Navy anyway. So I volunteered to be removed on February 11th. The morning of March 5th, I.C.E. Officers drove me to Seattle Airport and gave me travel papers to fly back to the Philippines on my own. After an 11-hour flight to Narita Japan, a 2-hour layover, a 4 1/2-hour flight to Manila, and 3 hours sleep in a quiet hotel room, I am trying to enjoy a breakfast of tropical fruits and real strong Filipino coffee. I'm moving in to the apartment the family is leasing for the next year on Monday.

So after 7 or so years in prison, I'll be living on my own in a place where I was raised and yet I feel lost. I have a lot of thinking and figuring out to do from today. And I think I'll slowly achieve this by sitting on the beach for a week or two. I have a lot of things I want to put in writing and I'll be needing your help.

Please give my regards to the journal crew (Stone, Felix and J-Dub) and to all my fellow inmates and students at San Quentin.

**Ronnie Richardson** (Paroled 11/04/2009): I am currently enrolled at San Francisco City College, where I take 4 classes: Chemistry, Engineering Technical Drawing, Introduction to Engineering and Technical Mathematics. I also take 6 additional units at San Francisco State University so as you see I am very busy at school. I am attempting 18 units in all. To all the guys who are attending Patten University and want to better their lives I send my best wishes and the advice I have for them all is to work hard at Patten and working hard in school out here becomes second nature.



In January, ***This American Life***, which is broadcast around the country on NPR, featured an outstanding 27 minute segment by Nancy Mullane entitled "Long Shot," about the case of former college program student Don Cronk, and the situation of other lifers in the CA prison system. The link can be found on the PUP website or at: [http://www.thisamericanlife.org/Radio\\_Episode.aspx?sched=1334](http://www.thisamericanlife.org/Radio_Episode.aspx?sched=1334).



Steve at the ocean with his kids.

**Steven Hayes:** Since leaving San Quentin State Prison on June 19, 2008 I have completed parole and graduated from College! After being released I continued going to school and continued staying focused! Life seemed to go in the right direction once I put forth the effort. A week after graduating and four interviews I landed an entry-level position in the I.T. field. The pay is good and there is room for advancement. If you are thinking of changing your life, EDUCATION is the way to start. All the college credits I completed at Patten University transferred to the college outside. Remember you are in charge of your own Life and what you do impacts not only you, but your loved ones and the society in which we live! Life is Good!

### 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.