



A Newsletter of the Prison University Project November 2006 Vol 2, No. 2

### **From the Executive Director**

Dear Friends,

Our biggest news at the organizational level is that we have received a major grant from the Sunshine Lady Foundation, whose benefactor, the fabulous Doris Buffett, is single-handedly launching an unprecedented campaign in support of prison higher education. Largely in response to discussions with her, we have finally begun the process of incorporating as a completely independent non-profit organization. We are also setting up our first office outside of the prison, which will allow us to be vastly more efficient and productive.

This newsletter offers only the teeniest glimpse of life inside the College Program at San Quentin. Every day, students amaze their teachers and themselves through the quality of their accomplishments and the intensity of their determination; our brilliant yet humble instructors trudge through puddles, wait through delays with patience and good humor, and tirelessly revise their syllabi to accommodate lockdowns and other disruptions. When a recent “search” of North Block resulted in the destruction of an extraordinary amount of personal property – including textbooks, course notes, and papers – teachers and students broke from their scheduled course plans to vent, reflect, and regroup.

One of the strangest and yet most important aspects of this program is that our students and our teachers essentially live on two completely different planets. As challenging and painful as this often is, there is no question that we all benefit both from the distance traveled and the understanding gained.

This week, another student of ours was accepted to San Francisco State University. Last week, a landlord called to check the references of a wonderful former student. Yet another student got a job with the help of letters of recommendation from his teachers.

All of these examples illustrate the power not just of education, but of building networks of support between individuals and communities. Each of you occupies a vital place in this network – and for this we thank you.

With warm wishes,  
Jody Lewen

#### **Felix Lucero**

English 211: The Personal Essay

Fall Semester 2006

### **“I love you this much”**

A few years before my daughter realized that she, in fact, is the one who knows everything, she still turned to me for all her important questions.

“Daddy,” she would ask, “what’s your favorite candy?” Of course later, like going from addition to calculus, her questions would become much harder to answer. But even when her questions were as abstruse as Socrates’ apology, like “when you coming home Daddy?” I still did not think she was capable of comprehending the complexity of a true response. “When you’re a little bigger, Mija,” I’d say, the doubt in my voice as apparent as the doubt in her eyes. “I can’t wait Daddy,” she’d say, and then she would spread her arms out as far as they could go and declare, “I love you this much Daddy.”

Building a strong bond between a child and a parent can be difficult under any circumstance, but it is especially arduous when they are apart. How many ways can you say I love you? How can you demonstrate that love in such a way that a child can understand it?

One afternoon, at the end of a very good visit, I walked with my daughter, hand in hand, to the spot where we always hug and say our good-byes. When we arrived, to my surprise, she kept tugging at my arm. “Take me over there,” she said, pointing to the yellow line that separates two completely different worlds and where other people were also saying good-bye. Considering the line, which easily could have been a hundred light years away, I realized that it was not the distance that mattered to her, but only the fact that we could walk to the end of my world and the beginning of hers. “I love you this much Daddy.” Contemplating her words and out-stretched arms, I realized that my little girl showed me what I have desperately been trying to show her. How much “this much” actually is.





photos by Heather Rowley

## Thank you, publishers!

The generous support of publishers from all around the country has been critical to the success of the San Quentin College Program since its inception in 1996. In that time we have received well over \$100,000 worth of donated textbooks on topics ranging from Ancient Africa, to Environmental Science, to Indonesian Colonial Literature. Not only are high quality texts a vital component of academic excellence, but the symbolic value of these generous donations has been enormously encouraging to all of us. Our special thanks to the following publishing companies and their affiliates:

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## Screenwriting at San Quentin

As a Native American inmate doing a life term for trespassing [under three strikes], I was interested when Patten College at San Quentin offered a screen-writing class, taught by Eugene Corr. I have always been interested in learning how to write screenplays.

In this class I was taught how to create characters in a play, how to develop these characters, and how to create dialogue between them that is believable and at times humorous. I learned how to set scenes for the characters and to make the dialogue flow freely between them.

Since completing the course I have written three 1 ½ hour movies, and one 30 minute, image maker-type short film. One is a comedy about three Native kids who go on an elk hunt, only to find vampires; another, a drama, is centrally based on a modern day Native who undergoes a vision quest; another is centrally based on a character that I created, who after forty years of being incarcerated is released from prison and adjusts to life as a free person. Another screenplay that I am in the process of writing is based on the children of comic book super heroes; it will be a comedy. Another that I am working on right now which is almost finished, is an action movie whose plot is based on terrorists taking over the Vatican and holding the Pope hostage.

I have copyrighted my screenplays and am in the process of getting a screenwriter's guild card, in order to sell my movies. The process is fun and very liberating to me. When I am writing a screenplay, I am away from this setting, and I am wherever the scene is set. I guess that it helps that I have had many life experiences, I have traveled much, and I talked to thousands of people while I was a free person. This has helped me to create characters and situations that make for a good movie concept. Some but not all of my characters are based on real people, but the screenplays are all strictly a product of my imagination.

— Daniel Trevino J-93154

## Prison Statistics

This semester Patten University at San Quentin has added Statistics to its mathematics curriculum. Considered the mathematics of skepticism, curiosity and debate, statistics is a procedure for critical thinking in a mathematical language. The best part of taking these courses is that I find myself having conversations about concepts and ideas instead of about politics, sports, administrative abuses, etc. So far this semester I've learned how to calculate standard deviations, evaluate studies, collect and organize data, calculate linear regressions, and much more. As a graduate of the College Program (Class of '03), this course offers me an opportunity to prepare for a higher degree while simultaneously improving my understanding of the world. Along with the many other courses I have taken, statistics is both extremely challenging yet remarkably rewarding.

—Paul Jordan

## Inside Support

*While assigned to the education department during the last few years, I have observed firsthand how the courses offered by the College Program have improved the attitudes and outlook of the inmate students. For many inmates, this is their first serious attempt at education. The results have been impressive. With volunteer teachers, the cost to the public is negligible. I view this as a true win-win situation for all involved – including the public – especially once these students return to society.*

D. Humphreys, Correctional Officer



photo by Heather Rowley

**For the past four years, Nicole Lindahl** has worked as program administrator and as an English teacher for the San Quentin College Program and the Prison University Project. Earlier this year, she decided to transition out of her position in order to pursue a career in criminal justice policy. On November 6th, she started a new job as assistant director of the Prisoner Reentry Institute at John Jay College of Criminal Justice (see [www.jjay.cuny.edu/centersinstitutes/pri/pri.asp](http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/centersinstitutes/pri/pri.asp) for more info). Following is the letter she sent to the San Quentin College Program student body informing them of her decision to accept the position in New York.

*Dear students,*

It is with profoundly mixed emotions that I write to tell you that I have accepted a job in New York City working at the Prisoner Reentry Institute at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. I have chosen to accept this job because it is a natural next step for me given my experience working in prison higher education and my desire to work towards sensible and responsible reform of the prison system. In New York there already exists an infrastructure of organizations, foundations, and legislators who are interested in taking innovative approaches to tackle the obstacles facing prisoners and former prisoners, and I look forward to learning from them and contributing to their work. Eventually, I hope to be able to apply the experience I gain in New York to the endeavor of rethinking and reforming the prison system here in California.

While I am really excited about this opportunity, I am also incredibly saddened by the idea of being so far from the college program. It is difficult to convey how deeply both my professional and personal life have been impacted by my work here and my relationships with you, the students. While this is not a goodbye—I will continue to visit the program, keep you guys updated on what I'm doing, and collaborate with Jody and Jennifer—I want to take advantage of this moment in order to express some of the raw sentiments that so often get buried in the daily grind of dealing with logistics and bureaucracy.

I want you to know that I am inspired and humbled by your ability to live with dignity while surrounded by depravity and indifference, and by the intensity and discipline that you bring to the task. I genuinely feel that at San Quentin I have witnessed the incredible potential of human beings to seek out the good in themselves and the world. I will never forget it.

*Thank you for being who you are and doing what you do.  
Much love, Nicole*

**Tina Smilkstein** [Algebra and Math 50]: I'm a professor now at the University of Missouri, Columbia (Electrical and Computer Engineering). While I was teaching at SQ, I was also teaching at SF State. People often ask why I taught at SQ. One of the stories I tell them is one about a day where I'd just finished a lecture at SFSU and had had 3 or 4 of the students come up to me and ask if they could still get 'A' grades if they didn't turn in a report, or didn't turn in a homework, or if they didn't do a lab... Then I headed to SQ and the first student I talked to said "I parole in a few weeks and don't want to miss any of the topics. Can you give me extra work?" Then I ask whoever I've just told the story to "Where would you rather teach?" They get my point. I miss teaching at SQ. Keep working hard. I was there because any effort I made came back double in effort from the students. That's what made it worthwhile.

**Sven Ouzman** [Ancient African History, 2005]: I am now a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. Thanks to the experience of teaching at San Quentin, I have instituted a mandatory student outreach programme in Archaeology to non-standard teaching environments such as prisons, old age homes, squatter camps and so forth. All teachers and students are welcome to visit or give advice ever they find themselves in South Africa - perhaps the warden can agree to SQ History students coming here on a field trip?

**Kelli Lydon** [Communications and History TA, 2001]: After a short time teaching fifth grade in Salinas, California, I decided to go to law school. At the University of San Diego School of Law I interned with the San Diego County Public Defender's Juvenile Delinquency and Dependency departments. I am currently an attorney in one of California's largest education law firms. Of all the things I have accomplished these past few years, being a part of the SQ college program is the one of which I am most proud. There is no better cause, no better use of one's time, than helping another human being obtain skills that will benefit every aspect of his life. When faced with statistics suggesting that 70% of inmates have not finished high school (ACLU), there is little doubt the role education plays in determining who will be incarcerated. There is also little doubt that empowering men and giving them skills to become productive members of society not only benefits the inmates themselves, but society as a whole. I am a big fan of this program and wish there were more like it. Keep up the good work.

**Loraine Lundquist and Matt D'Alessio** [Math 50, Geology, Astronomy]: Greetings from Tokyo where Loraine is working with JAXA (the Japanese equivalent of NASA) as a research scientist and Matt is a visiting professor

at the University of Tokyo. We have so many things to say about teaching at San Quentin. Not only was it a rewarding experience while we were doing it, but it had a long term impact on our career choices and teaching styles. The enthusiastic, curious, and motivated students at San Quentin showed us how satisfying it is to teach, and we've now made it a part of our career goals. We have found that some teaching-focused institutions are hesitant to hire a Berkeley Ph.D. because the University has a reputation for excellent research and somewhat less excellent teaching. Having San Quentin on our resumes, however, has opened up doors. Search committees at three different jobs told us that our experience at San Quentin was a major factor in selecting us for an interview. We think they made the right choice, because the unique teaching environment inside the prison taught us to be more innovative teachers.



Rick Carpenter at work on a project.

## Matthew Solomon

Since I left San Quentin, I was transferred to two other prisons before being released. Once I got out I had a hard time finding somewhere to live because being on parole you have to live in the county where you committed your offense. I also had a hard time finding a job because I had a felony and little work experience. So I enrolled in S.F. City College and attended there for a year and was able to get a job working retail. I was seeing my 3 year old son and trying to get back in his life. Now I have a little bit better job, but I work full time so I had to stop going to school and I just recently had a new baby. All I do is work and take care of my two sons.

My plans for the future are to go back to school and get a degree to get a better job, get off parole and expunge my record, eventually save up enough money to buy a car, get my own place, and live and take care of my family. My love for making music is still my passion.

What I want to share with the volunteers of the program is to first thank you for caring and taking out the time to believe in us and teach us. To the students I want to thank you for participating and maintaining a positive attitude and proving we're not just convicts or prisoners, and people deserve second chances from their mistakes.



Matthew (r) and his good friend Ben Freeman

photo by Nicole Lindahl

## Javier Andrade

*What have you been up to since you left San Quentin?* Shortly after leaving San Quentin, I was hospitalized for a month on life-support after contracting a severe combination of pneumonia, staph infection and the flu. After twelve months of intensive recovery, I was able to return to part-time work. Now, I am working full-time doing air conditioning for a major union company in the North Bay. I attend a union apprenticeship program twice a week to further myself in my field of work. I also volunteer my time in speaking with troubled youth from a group out of Santa Rosa that I found through the S.Q.U.I.R.E.S program at San Quentin. Though my schedule is busy, I try to spend as much time with my children as possible. I have a daughter that is ten years old and a son that is four years old.

*What are your plans for the future?* I'm hoping to win the lottery in the next ninety days, but back to reality... I want to finish my union apprenticeship program, continue talking with troubled youth and raise my children as best as I can.

*Is there anything in particular you want to share with the volunteers and/or students of the program?* I would like the members of the education program and volunteers to know that the time that they devoted to me is greatly appreciated. Without their help, I would not have been able to make a successful transition from the inside of San Quentin to life on the outside as a productive member of the community.

To the students of the program, I strongly encourage them to take advantage of the education that is being offered to them. The advantages of a good education can open the doors to many opportunities in their future.



Javier with Ilianna and Mario

photo by Nicole Lindahl

# Who We Are and What We Do Prison University Project

### The San Quentin College Program

The College Program at San Quentin is an extension site of Patten University, a small independent university in Oakland, California. It is supported by the Prison University Project, a non-profit organization fiscally sponsored by the Tides Center of San Francisco.

### The Mission of the Prison University Project

The mission of the Prison University Project is to provide free, high-quality higher education programs for people incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison and throughout the California State Prison system; to create a national model for the replication of such programs; and to generate public support for prison education, training, and recovery programs.

### Program Description

The San Quentin College Program is the only on-site, degree-granting higher education program in all of California's 32 state prisons. It has three components: the College Preparatory Program, the Associate of Arts Degree Program in liberal arts, and the Pre-Release Academic Advising Program. Approximately 200 students currently participate in the College Program. Since the Program's beginning in 1996, 61 students have completed their Associate of Arts degrees.

### Students

All general population inmates who hold either a GED or high school diploma are eligible to enroll. Students range in age from 22 to 72; the average age is 36. As of 2004-2005, 37% were black, 32% were white, 18% were Hispanic, 7% were Asian, and 6% identified themselves as "other." San Quentin's entire prison population is male.

### Faculty and Staff

The San Quentin College Program and the Prison University Project are coordinated by two full-time, paid staff people: the Executive Director, and the Program Administrator. All instructors, teaching assistants, tutors, and advisors are volunteers; most are professors and graduate students from the University of California at Berkeley, San Francisco State University, and other Bay Area colleges and universities. The program also relies on volunteer interns for clerical and other support services.

### The College Preparatory Program

Virtually all new students begin in the College Preparatory program. These courses in developmental mathematics and English provide the basic skills needed for college-level work. Most students remain in this program for at least two semesters before beginning credit classes.

### The Associate of Arts Degree Program

The program offers 12 – 15 courses each semester, three semesters per year, in the humanities, social sciences, math, and science, as well as independent study classes. Average class size is 20 students. In addition, we offer courses in more advanced math, science and foreign language to allow students to complete transfer-eligibility requirements for four-year colleges and universities.

### Pre-Release Academic Advising

Pre-Release Academic Advising is provided at San Quentin by the California Reentry Program (Allyson West, Director). In addition to providing individualized assistance developing educational plans (and supplying college catalogues, application forms, and financial aid information), CRP offers extensive one-on-one advising for developing post-parole plans, and provides resources related to housing, employment, and drug treatment.

### Special Events

PUP regularly sponsors special events, including poetry slams, guest lectures, and an annual graduation ceremony in June. The program also regularly hosts visits and meetings between students and journalists, legislators, private citizens, and other members of the outside community.

The **Prison University Project** relies entirely on contributions from supporters like you. Donations from individuals and foundations are our sole source of financial support, and fund all of the work that we do. We receive no funding from state or federal government. All donations to the Prison University Project are tax deductible.

Send your DONATIONS to: Prison University Project  
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**Former San Quentin students:** please stay in touch with us! Make sure we've got your current mailing address, phone number, and, if you've got one, your email address. We'd also be glad to hear about what you're up to, what your plans are, any challenges you may be dealing with, and what if anything we might be able to do to help.