

# Tiburon's Jody Lewen Is Involved in A San Quentin University Project

BY ANN MIZEL

Jody Lewen was bursting with pride during the June 24 graduation ceremony — at San Quentin Prison.

Lewen, of Tiburon, Executive Director of the non-profit Prison University Project, was thrilled watching students receive their Associate of Arts (AA) degrees or pass their General Education Development Tests (GED)s. Family members were in attendance, and speeches were given by valedictorians.

"Our project is dedicated to promoting prison higher education in California, creating a replicable model for such programs, and stimulating public awareness of criminal justice issues," Lewen told *The Ark*.

The program at San Quentin is an extension site of Oakland's Patten University, an accredited independent university. "All of our faculty work as volunteers; most are graduate students or professors from U.C. Berkeley, San Francisco State, Stanford and Sonoma State."

Lewen said classes, averaging 25 students, are held

in three small, separate buildings at San Quentin, with no guards present, and run at least two nights a week with most students (1,800 are eligible out of a total of 5,500 inmates) taking two classes per semester. Approximately 12 courses are offered, as well as intensive college prep courses in math and English.

Since the program was instituted in 1996, 68 men have earned their AAs at San Quentin — a medium security prison — and many more are continuing their studies on the outside.

"There are about ten former inmates who are now pursuing a B.A. degree at San Francisco State, and one man who served 21 years is about to begin studies for his B.A. at the University of San Francisco," said Lewen, who dreams of one day raising enough money to build a separate building at San Quentin so a bachelor's degree program could be included in the Prison University Project.

"The social aspect of a college program is terribly

important," Lewen pointed out. "The prison culture is transformed. There is less violence, less racial strife, etc. And the more education prisoners have, the less chance they have for re-offending; post-prison, there are options — to get more education, to get better jobs, to become leaders and examples in their communities. And the increased level of self-confidence greatly influences a former inmate's parenting, so another generation has a better chance of *not* ending up in prison. Children of prisoners now have a 50 percent chance of ending up in prison themselves. We just have to break the chain," said Lewen.

"We must get people to recognize the worthiness of prison education programs like ours, and to realize that many criminals are not psychopaths, but have committed a crime resulting from a single, extreme reaction to an extreme event," Lewen explained. "Our project aims to challenge popular myths and stereo-

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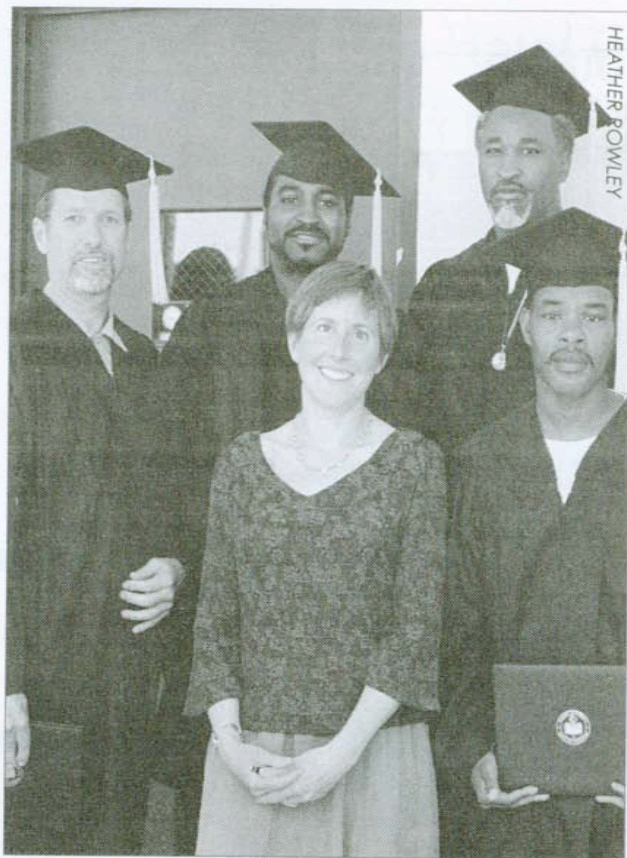
types about people in prison.”

In California, which has the largest prison population in the nation, there are 170,000 incarcerated, at a cost of \$47,000 per inmate per year.

Lewen came to her work — she is also Extension Site Director of Patten University’s San Quentin campus — completely by chance. A native of New York City, Lewen, who did her graduate work in Berlin and U.C. Berkeley, holds master’s degrees in comparative literature and philosophy and a PhD in rhetoric, and she planned a university teaching career. “But at a conference I happened to sit next to Naomi Janowitz, an educator, who started the Prison University Project at San Quentin. She explained the program and inspired me to become a volunteer,” said Lewen.

One thing led to another, and Lewen stayed on. “I find my work very exciting — I guess you could say I’m faith-driven,” she said, smiling, and admitted she sometimes can be found at her desk in her office as late as 11 p.m. Lewen, in her 40s and single, can be found swimming or hiking in her off-hours.

For more information about the San Quentin education project, contact [jlewen@prisonuniversityproject.org](mailto:jlewen@prisonuniversityproject.org) or [www.prisonuniversityproject.org](http://www.prisonuniversityproject.org). 



Jody Lewen with San Quentin College Program graduates Steven Higuere, Darnell Hill, Jerry Elster, and Olish Tunstall.