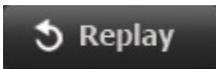


Sing Sing inmates find future lies in schooling

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Sean Pica, right, executive director of Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, speaks during a panel discussion on reducing recidivism through education during a talk in the presidential offices of Nyack College's Rockland campus, Tuesday, Sept. 25, 2012. Pica first became involved with Hudson Link as a student while he served 16 years behind bars in Sing Sing. In 2001 he received his B.S. in organizational management along with 19 other inmates. (Melissa Elian / The Journal News)



Inmate Mark Dixon during Thursday's debate at Sing Sing Correctional Facility.

Zoom

Inmate Mark Dixon during Thursday's debate at Sing Sing Correctional Facility.

Sean
Pica

understands that it takes courage to invite three or four ex-cons into a school or church.

But if given the chance, he assured, they will be asked back.

As the executive director of the Ossining-based Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, Pica has been making the rounds at several local colleges, houses of worship and learning facilities, holding screenings and discussions on "Zero Percent," an award-winning documentary about the college program offered at four correctional facilities in the state: Sing Sing, Taconic, Fishkill and Sullivan.

"When I go into high schools and colleges it's not about fundraising. It's about giving these students a glimpse into a world they never knew," said Pica of White Plains. "And to those who never thought about college ... to say, 'Yeah, education is cool.' "

Pica knows all too well what he preaches.

As a former inmate who served 16 years for killing his friend's father, he found getting a college degree behind bars reformed him. Pica was a member of Hudson Link's first graduating class at Sing Sing in 2001, receiving his bachelor's in organizational management from Nyack College. He has since received two master's degrees and is studying for his master's in business administration.

"I went in at 16 and thought my life was over," said Pica, 43, whose parents were both New York City police officers. "The only thing I could give my parents was to stay positive in prison."

Hudson Link was formed in 1998 after state and federal funding for college education was cut in the mid-1990s. When Pica was asked to head the agency in 2007, the program was only offered at Sing Sing, had 60 students and a budget of \$278,000, he said.

Today, Hudson Link is in four prisons with an enrollment of 269 students, a two-year waiting list and a \$790,000 budget. Hudson Link partners with four colleges, Nyack, Mercy, Vassar and SUNY Sullivan, and sponsors pre-college, associate and bachelor's degree programs.

The agency continues to be run solely through private donations, from the likes of Warren Buffett, Steve Forbes and Charles Grodin.

“When I was asked by the board to become the executive director, I told them, ‘Do not hire me if you don’t expect me to grow this thing out of Sing Sing,’ ” Pica said.

It was in 2010 that Moxie Pictures approached Hudson Link on filming a documentary about the program. The film, which has won 11 awards at film festivals, takes viewers inside Sing Sing’s college program with interviews from several inmates, including rapper Chi-Ali, and supporters such as actors Harry Belafonte, Tim Robbins and philanthropist Doris Buffett.

HBO is expected to air it early next year, Pica said.

The film’s title, “Zero Percent,” refers to the fact that none of Hudson Link’s graduates has returned to prison after being released. The national recidivism rate is 43 percent, according to a 2011 Pew Center on the States study that examined prisoners who were released in 2004 and re-incarcerated within three years.

Hudson Link has had 260 graduates, 81 of whom have been sent home, Pica said.

“Zero percent. This is truly miraculous,” said Vilma Balmaceda, director of Nyack College’s Center for Scholarship and Global Engagement.

A screening was held recently at Nyack College.

“Once you get educated, it makes you look beyond your date of release (from prison)” said John Conyers, a panelist who was featured in the film and a member of Hudson Link’s first graduating class at Sing Sing.

Nyack College senior Jackie Zapata said the documentary was “really great.”

“The criminal-justice system is all about retribution and punishment,” said Zapata, 21, a criminal-justice major. “This shows that punishment alone isn’t the way to restore lives.”

While the successes of the film have been a blessing, Pica continues his mission of bringing redemption through education. His immediate goals, he said, are to expand Hudson Link to another correctional facility and to offer graduate degree programs.

“I have an amazing job, because I know that what we are doing is not just changing lives but saving lives,” he said.