

PRISON LITERACY PROGRAM INSTILLS “HOPE FOR THE FUTURE”

Literacy Volunteers of Essex and Franklin Counties is proud to highlight its Prison Literacy Program available at Moriah Shock Correctional Facility in Mineville, Bare Hill Correctional Facility in Malone and Adirondack Correctional Facility in Ray Brook. This article, by Jim Davis, is the first in a three-part series revealing extraordinary experiences and rewards shared by our LV tutors.

Moriah Shock Correctional Facility



*Once 8 men have their trays and are assembled at a table, they give each other the signal to be seated.
(NCPA photo—Natasha Haverty)*

The new student sitting in front of me is downcast – literally. He refers to himself as “this inmate” and won’t call me anything but “Sir.” Those are the rules here. But this isn’t a prison as such – the sign on the wall reads, “A bad day at Moriah Shock is a lot better than any good day in prison.”

I’ve been teaching math here for a year. The inmates know this is their last chance to stay out of prison and this has got to be the best teaching job in the country. Where else do you have a teacher-student ratio of 1:1 and a student who knows, if he screws up, he’ll go to real jail in a matter of twenty-four hours. I never ask what landed them here, but sometimes they tell me – larceny, drug-dealing, and chronic alcohol abuse.

There is a two-tiered screening process before I get to work. First, a judge has given the inmate this opportunity and, second, a full-time instructor’s test revealed an adult performing below his capability, typically between fourth and fifth grade math levels. Moriah Shock has two objectives: (1) “graduate” them with a GED and (2) give them the rules to live by and, even more importantly, the self-esteem to stay out of jail. I can take a man with the right motivation from boning up on his multiplication tables to quadratic equations and Pythagorean’s theorem in something less than six months. Whenever that happens, I remind the man, “Don’t tell me you’re stupid. You are a VERY SMART GUY!” I have never enjoyed mathematics as much as I do now.

The Right Track

I attend every “graduation” ceremony where the Drill Instructor (“DI” in prison jargon) first puts the platoon of 50-60 men through a Marine Corps caliber drill on the parade ground. We then retreat to the gymnasium and sit in one of four groups: family and friends, graduating platoon, staff (including Literacy Volunteers) and, finally, the incoming inmates. These are the men who just got off the bus.

The Superintendent, who seems to know each man by name, has never let me down with his or her speech. “We’ve shown these men what they are capable of, and the rules to stay out of trouble. Now it is YOUR turn to keep them in line. There will be a celebration when you get home, but remember... when that phone call comes in at 2 AM from old buddies on the street corner or in the local tavern, tell them to get lost!” They’ll also remind everyone this is Thursday and, statistically, three of these men will be back in jail by Sunday. But then comes the good news, almost ALL the rest will stay out of jail.

The awards and an inmate’s “commencement address” follows. He takes the lectern, pulls a single sheet of paper out of his pocket and reads a short statement. It always begins, “I’d like to thank our Superintendent...” and ends “...now to the incoming squad. Make up your minds right away to take full advantage of all the things Moriah Shock both offers and requires. Don’t mess up this last, best chance to put your lives in order.”

I am proud to help put a man on the right track in six months time and reminded of just why I do this work.