

# THE EVANGELIST

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GREENE CORRECTIONAL

## Siena partnership educates inmates

*When I  
was in  
prison...*





Greene inmates participate in a public policy class. (Photos by Angela Cave)

### Why teachers volunteer in prisons

Angela Aubin is a sixth-year political science doctoral student at The University of Virginia and a Siena alumnus. This summer, she's teaching the public policy course at **Greene Correctional Facility**. She taught at Mt. McGregor last fall. She said she never felt threatened and that students have always been respectful and studious.

"As a first-generation college student, so I know the value that can have, and I know not everyone has the opportunity to go," Ms. Aubin said. "They definitely understand the value of it. It kind of keeps them out of trouble. They're way more engaged than university students. They come prepared. They ask questions."

David Shirey, a retired professor who taught economics at Siena for 30 years, has also volunteered with Siena's prison program since its inception. "The guys are attentive right from the beginning to the last minute" of each three-hour session, Shirey said. "The only comparison I have is when I taught with the Peace Corps in the Philippines, because the students [there also] realized the privilege of being in the class."

Shirey also volunteered at Attica **Correctional Facility** in Western New York in the 1970s, just months after a deadly four-day riot there that captured national attention.

"Before, the first semester was a complete education," said the professor. "It's a miracle course to actually get in and start teaching. Once you do, you stop thinking that these guys are inmates in a prison. You start seeing the humanity in them."

y were very kind to me," he added, "and that's been the case every time I  
in a prison."

Shirey's wife, Eileen, also taught at Attica and now teaches basic math at  
ne. The couple attend St. Vincent de Paul parish in Albany; Mr. Shirey  
participates in Residents Encounter Christ prison retreats, too.

Catholicism has always been one that says your actions speak louder than  
s," he said. "It's important to give your talents, your time. I think of it as giv  
le the dignity to which they're entitled. That's really at the core of social  
ing."

Shirey often finds himself dispelling misconceptions about prison and  
tment about educational assistance with the public - and even with  
ctions officers.

ard to overcome the idea that this group is getting special treatment," he  
can think of is I'm trying to meet a need. It's going to mean something bet  
eir families and communities when they get out of prison, because they're  
g to be more focused on not getting into trouble. Getting into a college cou  
aking it seriously is a way for them to free themselves from a lot of the  
ness that they would normally have to deal with.

r do volunteers do anything that is attempting to make the world a better p  
?" Mr. Shirey continued. "It's part of building the kingdom. The more I give  
ore I seem to get back. It's very self-fulfilling for me." (AC)

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BY ANGELA CAVE  
STAFF WRITER

Giovanni Rogonia, who turns 23 next month, is about a year  
away from finishing a prison sentence for committing first-  
degree robbery when was 19.

He's also on his ninth college course at medium-security  
**Greene Correctional Facility** in Coxsackie.

"I feel like I've really changed the trajectory of my life since  
I've been incarcerated," he told The Evangelist. "It was a  
blessing in disguise. I really grew up."

Mr. Rogonia has taken courses through Marist College in  
Poughkeepsie and **Siena College** in Loudonville while in  
prison, including abnormal psychology, writing, finite math  
and the history of economic thought. He also answers  
phones for the Department of Motor Vehicles 40 hours a  
week.

A Catholic, Mr. Rogonia had dropped out of high school and  
said he felt directionless until he enrolled in the programs.  
Now, "what I really want to do is get a business degree," he

said. "The college classes are great. It gives me meaning, something to look forward to, an escape. I realize it's not easy out there, [and] I'm more prepared now."

He said he wants to be a tax-paying citizen and is looking into a college program Siena professors have recommended, as well as working for his uncle's construction company. He's also researching the requirements of owner occupancy loans so he can become a landlord.

### **'A lot of ideas'**

"I have a lot of ideas. I'm really proud of my accomplishments," he said. The Siena program is "really a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I couldn't be more thankful for it."

Education programs in prisons were widely available until 1994, when Congress denied federal Pell grants to incarcerated people. Private groups have since filled the gaps. Before Marist College helped out at **Greene Correctional**, the prison only offered correspondence courses, and inmates could only study in their cells.

The late Rev. Matthew Conlin, OFM, former president and English professor at Siena, began that college's prison education program at Mt. McGregor **Correctional Facility** in Wilton - which is closing this summer - in 2010. There was no funding, but a few professors volunteered to teach courses and even pooled their own money for textbooks.

In 2012, an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer who was placed at Siena to facilitate the college's prison program found that it was not sustainable.

"It's rare to find somebody who will teach for free every single semester," explained the volunteer, Emily Patka.

Ms. Patka immersed herself in connecting with prison advocacy organizations and learning to write grants, ultimately networking with Hudson Link, an Ossining-based non-profit that runs higher education programs in prisons throughout New York State.

### **Linked up**

As Mt. McGregor inmates were being relocated, Ms. Patka

discovered that **Greene Correctional** was seeking another college program. She was hired by Hudson Link and helped **Greene** become the first upstate **facility** in its network.

Siena professors now receive a small stipend for volunteering, using Hudson Link funds and two \$60,000 grants Ms. Patka won from two Catholic foundations. The grants also cover books and other materials. She hopes to eventually offer instructors an adjunct rate.

It made perfect sense to her to approach Catholic organizations for funding.

"The reason why Siena started this in the first place was the Franciscan mission of service," she said. "This program is a really excellent way of living that out."

Ms. Patka holds information sessions at **Greene** for interested inmates, who then apply to pre-college and college programs, completing essays and interviews. The prison requires a clean disciplinary record; being no less than one year away from parole board appearance, work release board appearance or conditional release date; and a high school diploma or the equivalent.

There are separate programs at the prison for high school equivalency, as well as vocational, substance abuse and anger management programs. There are also transitional services for those being released from prison.

### **Positive effect**

When inmates apply to take college courses, Hudson Link does not screen them according to the nature of their crimes. Corrections officers are always nearby when classes are in session, but they allow instructors privacy with their students.

The Siena/Hudson Link/Greene partnership currently has 13 students in the pre-college program and 27 in the college program. About 80 percent of Hudson Link's alumni are employed within six months of release; their recidivism rate is less than one percent, compared with a 40 percent overall national recidivism rate.

The organization says this saves taxpayers more than \$10 million a year.

"They're going to be our neighbors," Ms. Patka said of the inmates. "I would rather have someone come out prepared and ready to take on the world than somebody re-offending."

Students visit the Hudson Link office after they're released and receive a laptop and business clothes. The organization also hosts alumni networking events: "We really try to build community."

