



Innovations

What it's like when a prison debate team matches wits with preppy college kids



By **Matt McFarland** October 17 [Follow @mattmcfarland](#)

The United States imprisons more people per capita than any country. Why not educate them? Above, Max Kenner receives an award for his work in prisoner education. (Matt McFarland/The Washington Post)

Max Kenner, founder of the [Bard Prison Initiative](#), was honored for his work in education Thursday night at Smithsonian Magazine's American Ingenuity Awards. The initiative offers the chance for inmates at six New York state prisons to take classes and earn degrees from Bard College. Kenner gave a moving acceptance speech about the largely untapped potential of prison inmates. I've excerpted a portion of it below.



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Kenner dove into the speech with a great anecdote about his prison program's debate team:

A few weeks ago the debate team from the University of Vermont walks into the auditorium at Eastern Correctional Facility in upstate New York. Three of them, preppy, young.

Our guys are all in their 30s. Rodney came to prison as a 20-year-old doing 20 to life. Paul is not an obvious candidate for debate; he rarely speaks, but he's thriving in calculus. And Daryl is getting set to complete his associate's degree. However electric the room, they all seem remarkably calm.

I'm not.

Resolve: NATO should be immediately abolished. Our guys are arguing the negatives. They haven't had access to the Internet for research or e-mail for professional advice, no debate camps. UVM's team is ranked 14th in the world. After 45 minutes of arguing, it's over. UVM, one of the top programs on the planet. Our guys did their best.

And after some discussion, the judges reach a decision. The incarcerated Bard students had won.

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Afterwards everyone shakes hands. When our students are alone they take stock. In the end the UVM team missed their golden opportunity.

“What about Latvia?” Rodney says. I mean *how* could they not mention Latvia.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about. But there’s no time for him to explain. The guards return to take them back to their other lives and their 8-by-11 cells.

Kenner later broadened his speech to the case for educating inmates:

For all our disagreements about how you can train young people and provide education in this country, there’s one thing I’ve learned doing this work for sure. As long as we consider education reform an effort to engage other people’s children, we’ll fail. The Bard Prison Initiative succeeds because we do the opposite. We provide the same education that anyone in this room would want for their own children, to the people America is most certain can’t succeed at anything. They do succeed; it’s inexpensive; it’s replicable; and we can repeat it.

Throughout American history, this isn’t new. Throughout American history there have always been groups of people who excelled in

ways we never expected, who really took advantage of educational opportunities. So this is the United States, so there have always been immigrants. And while we don't honor them the way we used to, throughout the 20th century, veterans fell in this category, for 80 years.

And back in the 1930s the best colleges, the best learning colleges in America, were community colleges in Brooklyn and Queens because they were filled with striving young people who were barred because of their ethnicity from attending the Ivy Leagues or more prestigious institutions.

And most profound, though we never talk about it — never discuss it — there's no group of people in American history who accomplished so much in education than the generation of women and men who 150 years ago freed themselves from slavery. I'm here to suggest that Americans in prison today are analogous to those groups of people. As much as we count them out, given the chance, they'll succeed. These Bard students you saw, they learned German because they're inspired to read Hegel in the original. Frederick Douglass, DuBois the same. They go from algebraic literacy to third-term calculus and beyond. They manage businesses. They're artists. They're irreplaceable assets of the community-

based organizations after release in the most impoverished communities we have in this country, after they return home from prison.

And they're also enrolled right now at graduate schools, CUNY and NYU and Columbia and Yale. They don't return to prison, but they do pay taxes, they do support their children. And it's only our cynicism that makes this seem impossible.

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Matt McFarland is the editor of Innovations. He's always looking for the next big thing. You can find him on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).
