

NY Post - Turning convicts into college graduates — the best second chance there is

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‘You’ll have to decide now what kind of person you will be when you leave prison.’ That’s what Wesley Caines recalls one of the older inmates at Eastern Correctional Facility telling him shortly after he arrived in 1994.

Caines, who went on to serve 24 years for second-degree homicide, hadn’t even begun to consider what his life would look like at the other end. Or that he would have one. But thanks to the mentorship of some older prisoners and his bachelor’s degree earned through the Bard Prison Initiative, Caines has turned himself into a productive and reflective member of society.

Monday night, BPI was honored with the Manhattan Institute’s Social Entrepreneurship Award. The initiative has managed, without the aid or direction of government, to transform the lives of thousands of prisoners in New York state, allowing them not only to improve themselves during their time behind bars, but to smooth their transition back into society.

Caines had just entered Eastern when the prison stopped offering college courses through the SUNY system — the result of an end to Pell Grants for prisoners and a cut in tuition assistance from the state.

In the late ’90s, Caines met Max Kenner, an undergraduate at Bard College who was trying to organize tutors to go into the prisons and help inmates get their GEDs. Kenner persuaded both the college and the New York State Department of Correctional Services to start a credit-granting program at Eastern. It began with a pilot of 15 students and now enrolls more than 300 at six different facilities in New York. Other colleges, including Wesleyan, Grinnell and Goucher, have started similar programs. Going in, Kenner didn’t know what to expect. “I didn’t know for certain that incarcerated students would demand to learn German so they could study Hegel in the original. I didn’t know they would go on to graduate school at Yale, Columbia or NYU.” They did all those things. He also didn’t know that BPI students would make headlines this fall by winning a debate against Harvard.

But Kenner did know it wasn’t impossible. There were skeptics who believed that the people who ran prisons didn’t care about the inmates and skeptics who didn’t think the inmates could be taught. Neither, Kenner found, was accurate.

There’s a rigorous admission process for BPI — only about one in 10 who apply actually get in — but Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, a professor at Bard College working on a book

about the program, tells me that a good many more would do well in the program if BPI had the resources to admit more.

Interestingly, though the students tend to be about five to seven years older than traditional undergraduates, Lagemann says they're more likely to ask for help from their professors and tutors. But the material is also more likely to make a deep impact on their outlooks and their temperaments.

Lagemann recalls teaching a course on Pragmatism, reading from William James, among others. "A student stopped me in hall and he said, 'I was locked up when I was 17. And now I'm 30.'" Before he took her course, he said, "I never knew how the world was meant to work."

Caines majored in history and describes how the curriculum affected him. "Most folks look at history as something that's past, something that's static. But a liberal-arts curriculum forces you to see yourself in history at that moment." The liberal-arts curriculum, says Caines, is a "training of the mind." It "allows you to look at what you may have done and understand that you are more than that particular moment, but you have a responsibility to that moment, to yourself and to your family and your community."

There are those who believe that prisoners need nothing more than a good vocational education so they can find some means of employment afterward. While Kenner and his colleagues argue that vocational education should be available in prison, they believe that the liberal arts can offer something else — the ability to think through problems, to adapt to new circumstances, to fight with words.

As a re-entry coordinator for Brooklyn Defender Services, Caines helps other men find a life after prison. "The majority of people who come in contact with the criminal-justice system will eventually return to the community.

And if you want those people not to recycle back into the same situation, then we have to have a conversation about what prison affords someone who has transgressed. Should they be punished in perpetuity? Should one error made five or 20 or 40 years ago preclude that individual from entering back in to contribute to society?" We often talk about giving prisoners a second chance. But, says Caines, "that only works if you offer them the opportunity for transformation."