

Ghana Web - From inmate to graduate: getting a liberal arts degree in jail (Byron Ortiz.93A3174.Woodburne)

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What happens when violent convicts are taught liberal arts? According to hundreds of US felons who have gained degrees in philosophy and literature, higher education is transformative for both the student and society. And yet, it's almost unheard of.

Byron Ortiz has been in prison since 1992, when he was convicted of homicide at 19. Having spent most of his life in Guatemala, Ortiz barely spoke English when he began his 30-year sentence. Today, he holds a master's degree in Literature and Language at a prestigious US university.

Ortiz, 44, is one of hundreds of convicts in the US Northeast who have graduated from New York's 150-year-old Bard College, a liberal arts university which has been privately educating prisoners since 2001.

"Education gives you hope, it makes you not want to get into trouble," Ortiz told FRANCE 24 during a visit to the Woodbourne Correctional Facility in upstate New York. "I messed up big time.

But that doesn't mean I'm not deserving of a chance. Humanity is not completely lost when somebody commits a crime."

Ortiz was the first person in his family to go to prison, and initially found himself cut off from his relatives. Today, he's also the first person to have gone to university.

"I'm in a position of privilege now," he said. "So it's my duty to give back. It's my debt to society. And that debt starts within the family."

Some graduates from the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) have gone on to study at Columbia, Harvard and NYU, others have taken jobs at billion-dollar international companies, but most of them return to the same neighbourhood they left behind decades ago, working in public health, counselling and mentoring roles, many of them drawn, unsurprisingly, to helping youths at risk.

Serving out the last few years of his term, Ortiz is considered by many at Woodbourne as a mentor already.

One of his protégés is 27-year-old Jonathan Alvarez from Yonkers, New York, who, like

Ortiz, was sentenced to 30 years in prison as a teenager. Before he applied for BPI, Alvarez spent his time lifting weights and watching telenovelas.

“I was just building myself up physically, not mentally,” he told FRANCE 24. Today, he’s a poster child for BPI -- endearingly enthusiastic about his studies, he describes himself as someone who “eats, lives and breathes” education.

“The average prisoner doesn’t want to talk about capitalism, democracy,” he said, blushing. “But me, my head’s in a book all day. I didn’t even know what political science was when I came in here. Now I’m passionate about it.”

Accomplishing ‘the impossible’

When Ortiz and Alvarez are released in a few years (Alvarez has had his sentence halved since starting his studies and Ortiz's has been reduced), they will be more than 20 times less likely to reoffend than those who haven’t been provided with higher education.

Less than two percent of BPI graduates return to prison; the national average for reincarceration within three years is 40 percent.

However, BPI is an incredibly rare opportunity. The US Congress cut higher education funding for prisoners in 1994. Even for those fortunate enough to have the chance to apply to BPI, it's difficult to get in -- for every available place there are 10 applications.

The scheme's founder, Max Kenner, says the personal essays written as part of the application to BPI are “depressing reads,” and often very poorly written. That doesn’t deter him. On the contrary -- Kenner considers the scheme a social experiment rather than a solution to mass incarceration, and his message is clear.

“Every idiot has an idea about what's the best thing to be done with criminals,” he told FRANCE 24. “Vocational education, drug treatment, God... What happens when we provide them with education, that, in American life, is only affordable to the rich?”

Kenner’s point couldn't have been better illustrated than when a group of BPI students challenged Harvard's world-ranking team to a debate on illegal immigrants and education in October last year, and won.

“What we accomplish, according to the experts, is impossible,” Kenner said. “But our students -- who society would dismiss as violent predators -- are proof that we can

overcome social problems that seem impossible, if we treat people with unexpected amounts of expectation and dignity.”

As Kenner frequently points out, a year of incarceration costs the same, if not more, than a year of tuition fees at Harvard or Yale -- \$50,000 -- and often causes damage “equal or greater than the crime and the social problems it was designed to stem”.

Meanwhile, the cost of providing education to inmates is very low. Funded by private donors, the entire BPI project costs roughly \$2.5 million per year. And for every \$1 spent on educating prisoners, the taxpayer saves 4 to 5 dollars on reincarceration costs.

"It costs less than anything else we do in the prison system, and instead of reincarnating criminals, it produces employed, tax-paying people who live fulfilling lives," Kenner said.

Desperate for reform

Criminal justice is one area both Democrats and Republicans acknowledge is in desperate need of reform. Democrats are keen to finally revise a system that has long been known for its glaring racial bias; a gargantuan remnant of the country's catastrophic “war on drugs”.

Republicans are equally keen to curb the most expensive criminal justice system in the world. Americans make up five percent of the world population but they spend \$50 billion a year on maintaining 25 percent of the world's prisoners, or 1.6 million people.

“Criminal justice is an issue in American life that is essentially unique in this otherwise really very depressing moment,” Kenner says. “There really is some bipartisan consensus that we have to do things differently.”

Signalling that shift, the Obama administration said in July last year it would begin experimenting with funding for higher education. On Sunday, Democratic New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced a plan to provide 1,000 prisoners with a state college education over the next five years.

"It can't be that every door is closed except the revolving one back into prison," Cuomo said. "We must break this vicious cycle for the betterment and safety of our communities and countless families across the state."

Ortiz agrees that crime and prison can prove a vicious cycle. “It's easy to end up going around in circles,” he said. “It's only when you somehow step out, you see it for what it

is.”

Ortiz is determined to have been the first and last of his family members to go to jail. Despite being in jail, Ortiz married a woman from his neighbourhood in Queens and helped raise his stepdaughter from behind bars. “I’ve learnt how to truly listen in here,” he said, turning his star-engraved wedding band. “That’s often all someone needs: to be heard, and to be able to express themselves.”

Discovering Plato

Children who have a parent in jail are seven times more likely to be incarcerated at some point in their life.

Alvarez is one of them: his father was jailed on drug trafficking charges when he was 10 years old. “I never even saw my parents sit down to eat together,” he said.

Another young student, 30-year-old Lionel Johnson from Harlem, has been in jail for the past decade, also for homicide.

“My mom was a single mother with six kids and at 20, I was still a boy,” he told FRANCE 24. “She tried to instil values, but they disappeared when I walked out the door.”

At BPI, Johnson discovered Plato. He likens jail without education to Socrates’ allegory of being inside a cave and seeing only the shadows of people, rather than actual reality. “I want to show others, that some things are just shadows, that there is another reality out there,” he said.

Adrian Greaves, a 40-year-old BPI student from Brooklyn who has been in jail for 21 years, also grew up with no father.

“The best experience for me is that my little brother has become more like a son to me,” he told FRANCE 24. “He was so happy when I got into BPI. Today, he’s a professor.”

Greaves says that college grounded him, taught him to respond positively to pressure and to think critically.

“I was confused at first,” he said. “They teach you how to think. When I read a newspaper now, I read every sentence differently.”

Alvarez and Johnson chime in at this point: "Movies, books, conversations -- you see everything differently!"

"You digest it, Alvarez says. "That's the power of education."