

## **WPIX - Prison debate team's win over Harvard underscores the effectiveness of an unorthodox education program**

by James Ford

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NEW YORK — They've been highly awarded as the world's best, sharpest and most skilled minds at analyzing and presenting important societal concepts. So how did the Harvard College debate team lose to some maximum security prison inmates? The answer speaks volumes about how some people that society seems to have given up on have far more to give back than may be assumed.

The debate team is part of a larger, unorthodox education program for prison inmates called the Bard Prison Initiative, or BPI. It's administered by Bard College, a selective liberal arts college of about 2,000 students in Annandale-on Hudson, a two hours' drive north of New York City. The program brings Bard faculty to six different upstate New York prisons to provide liberal arts instruction to nearly 300 incarcerated students.

Many of those inmate students end up earning bachelor's or associate's degrees from the prestigious college through BPI, even though some of the students are incarcerated with no possibility of parole.

The BPI debaters are an even more highly motivated group than BPI students in general, who are obviously focused and striving. Those qualities are encouraged by the Bard faculty who work with them.

"There's something about him and the way he talks about debate that made me want to do it," said former Fishkill prison inmate and BPI participant Greg Doughty about Bard professor David Register.

He teaches a debate and public speaking course at a variety of BPI prison locations, but a group of about 20 students at the Eastern Correctional Facility in Napanoch, New York created their own debate team. Members of the group invited the Harvard Debate Union to a debate at Eastern Correctional.

"Our students are accomplishing extraordinary things," said Max Kenner in an interview with PIX11 News. Kenner is the BPI executive director and founder. He established the Bard Prison Initiative when he was a Bard College undergraduate in the 1990s.

Soon after, the program was able to grant full bachelor's- or associate's degrees from the prestigious college.

"We try to replicate the college experience as much as we can in those difficult circumstances," said Kenner. "One of them is debate."

Bard behind bars is at least as rigorous as a regular education at Bard, which has a solid debate team at its leafy upstate campus that's famous for its high concept architecture.

As good as the regular college debate team may be, the Bard Prison Initiative team's accepted invite to Harvard has gained the BPI debaters more recognition than their conventional college counterparts.

A simple comparison between the two debate rivals, Harvard and BPI is a sobering reminder of just how unique the Bard prison program is. With 380 years of educating scholars, Harvard College is the country's oldest institution of higher learning, as well as one of the most competitive. Only six percent of applicants actually get in.

BPI is similarly competitive. Founded in 1999, only 10 percent of inmates who apply get in to this intense program.

Possibly most eye opening is cost. Harvard costs \$64,000 per year. Housing a New York inmate costs almost as much, \$60,000, the bill for which is footed by taxpayers. The Bard Prison Initiative costs taxpayers nothing, since it's privately funded.

As for its effectiveness, it's worth pointing out that its students -- including debate team members -- are subject to what the state department of corrections calls "media monitoring." It's a euphemism for having no access to the Internet.

They also have only a one-room library in which to study, in contrast to Harvard, which has the largest academic library system in the world. Also, Harvard was the world debate champion in 2014 and national champion last year, months before it took on the Bard College inmates.

After the two teams finished debating the topic of public schools having the ability to deny enrollment to undocumented students, an independent panel of college debate judges awarded the win to the Bard Prison Initiative.

"When you defeat a university with the reputation, the prestige, the brand like Harvard University," said Kenner, "everybody knows automatically [that BPI] isn't just a handout, and nobody's dumbing anything down."

Not in the debate hall, or anywhere else, as Doughty, the former BPI participant, said in an interview. "I read 174 books in two years [I was in the program], on all kinds of topics. I still go to the library. It awakened that love of reading, it awakened a love of studying."

In fact, Doughty recovered from open heart surgery and crack addiction while behind bars, and credits the Bard program for his fortitude. He describes it as a gift from God.

He has been out of prison for five months, he's sober, volunteering, and just nine credits shy of earning an associate's degree.

"Bard, they tell me all the time I don't owe them anything," Doughty said. "But I feel like I owe them my life in a great sense, so I do what I do now to repay that debt."