

Post Star - Books behind bars: Great Meadow inmates see school as second chance

By: Justin Trombly

8/21/2016

FORT ANN — The men sat in a loose half-circle, nine of them, each dressed in green pants and tops, standard issue.

To their left, caged windows. Their right, armed guards. And on their minds, a chance to better themselves.

They are inmates at Great Meadow Correctional Facility, a maximum-security state prison in Comstock, and students of Bennington College, a private liberal arts school in Vermont.

It was the latest meeting of a 15-week political theory course, held on a recent Tuesday night as part of the college's Prison Education Initiative. The program began last fall, and there are about 40 Great Meadow inmates enrolled now.

In June, the college and prison were chosen by the U.S. Department of Education for a pilot program that revives Pell grants for inmates. The classes have been funded entirely by the school itself and private donations. But the Pell grants, if and when they make their way to inmates in the Bennington program, will alleviate some of the burden.

Second-chance school

For about two hours that night, as they had once a week for the past nine weeks, the inmates leaned in, listened, scribbled notes and learned.

Crina Archer, a visiting professor at Bennington who teaches the course, lectured in front of the cramped prison classroom, which is in a quiet section of the noisy prison cordoned off for education.

The inmates — all but two of whom agreed to be quoted and photographed by *The Post-Star* — sought to iron out any lingering questions about Rousseau's "Social Contract" before beginning with de Tocqueville's "Democracy in America," classic works of politics.

They listened and spoke, often at length, above the whir of a box fan in the corner of the room and the occasional chatter of correction officers outside its open door. Another fan stood in the back of the room, old and metal and unplugged, a heavy chain and padlock twisted around its base. The open windows did little to mitigate the muggy heat.

"What comes first?" Archer asked, speaking about Rousseau's paradox of founding. "Good laws or good people?"

The question spurred some thought among the students. Archer expounded.

Bernard Prince — who has served 26 years so far for murder, robbery and weapons charges — listened closely, his fist pressed to his mouth, nodding, blinking, letting slip the occasional smirk.

He has been incarcerated since 1990, when he was 22. The only school he knew before prison was the street, but that education ended not with a walk across a stage but with a walk to a cell for a 32-to-life sentence.

He will be eligible for parole in six years.

“If you are for second chances, then you have to give the people like us chances to better ourselves,” he said in an interview after class. “The only way you can do that is through education.”

He wants to move on from his past.

“I see myself now as a better man,” he said. “I see myself as someone who knows how important the law is.”

Mental freedom

Federal funding for inmate higher education has been absent since 1994, when it was banned as part of the Clinton administration’s crime bill.

An oft-cited 2013 study by the RAND Corp. showed that inmates who participated in educational programs are more than 40 percent less likely to end up back behind bars within three years, the time period in which recidivism is most likely.

The same study showed that a \$1 investment in prison education saves taxpayers about \$5 in incarceration costs.

That’s the reason Annabel Davis-Goff, director of the Bennington initiative and a professor of English literature, gives people who might be persuaded by practicality.

But there’s another reason she urges governmental support for programs like Bennington’s.

“It gives you some kind of intellectual inner life that allows you to escape your surroundings in a way that can only be beneficial to you and those around you,” she said in a phone interview.

For inmates, it’s a mental freedom, she said, and one that can be much more valuable to them than to traditional college students.

“Education is a different value if that’s all you have,” she said.

Studying is how Victor Breland, who is serving a 177-to-life sentence for three murders and other charges, has spent his 26 years in the system so far.

“Working out, studying, studying,” he said in an interview after class.

He had already read many of the authors he and his fellow students have tackled in class, but he appreciates the ability now to get feedback on his thoughts.

“We sit down and get outside this environment,” he said, echoing the thoughts of other inmates. “And (class is) a good environment. It’s completely fulfilling.”

In the class that night, the 57-year-old was animated when he spoke, and, like many of his peers, made reference to historical figures and concepts while discussing their current work.

When Archer asked the class to name some characteristics of Rousseau's ideal lawgiver, Breland called out, "Wise as Solon," the Ancient Greek statesman.

"Some of them, it's the first time they picked up a book," Breland said in the interview. "They have to know there is another world."

He added: "I'm sure a lot of us wouldn't be here if we had a real chance at a real education."

A layered process

Applying inmates are given two written excerpts and tasked with writing an essay on one of them. So Bennington can gauge a potential student's creativity and logic, little guidance is given. The prisoners explain in a separate piece of writing why they'd like to join the program, and also provide some background information on their prior education.

The applications are reviewed first by Great Meadow, which weeds out inmates with disciplinary issues, and then by Bennington staff, who later interview the most promising applicants and, lastly, enroll the finalists.

There are three terms in the program: fall, spring and summer. There are classes in literature, American history and politics, and plans for a computer science class in the future.

Davis-Goff said the college covers most of the overhead for the program, and that two family foundations pay for books, instructor transportation and some of the instructors' salaries.

The Pell pilot program circumvents the 1994 ban on prisoner Pell grants through the Department of Education's "experimental sites" authority, which lets it waive certain federal rules.

In a press conference earlier this year, Secretary of Education John King Jr. said the grants will not affect traditional recipients and are less than a percent of all Pell spending. Fifty-six Pell-eligible inmates at Great Meadow will be reached in 2016-17, according to a department publication. There are about 1,500 inmates at the prison.

The grants are targeted at inmates likely to be released within five years.

Through their coursework, Great Meadow inmates can earn college credits to put toward degrees. Bennington's program, still in its early stages, does not have a degree component, but inmates can transfer to prisons that do. The Bard Prison Initiative — the initiative's model and a program that offers full degrees in six state prisons — was mentioned by both inmates and Bennington faculty.

'It changes them'

Christopher Shapard, an inmate in the program, has been incarcerated since 1992, when he was 18.

In New York, he is serving 15-to-life for robbery, burglary, firearms and kidnapping charges. He originally had been charged with murder in Connecticut, but he escaped with another inmate, fled to New York and then took a person hostage. If he is released in New York, he will have time to serve in Connecticut.

Because he was still in high school when he entered prison, Shapard worked to earn a GED almost immediately. And while at Auburn Correctional Facility, he earned an associate degree in liberal arts and humanities through the Cornell Prison Education Program. He transferred to Great Meadow in 2013 and will be eligible for parole in 2022.

“Getting into college has really helped me learn how to interact with people, especially other inmates,” many of whom come from different backgrounds and cultures than his, Shapard said in an after-class interview.

He recalled a genetics course in which some of his peers took issue, on religious grounds, with the teaching of Darwinism.

“Having that discussion helped me understand where they’re coming from,” he said. It also gave him a better understanding of his own positions, which he had to defend.

Shapard said he has racked up more than 100 college credits. He hopes to make his way to a Bard prison to earn a bachelor’s degree, likely in a social science.

“One thing you don’t give up on is hope,” he said. “I feel that by staying hopeful, I change myself into a better person. This is one of the many ways of doing it.”

“People don’t believe that they have hope,” Shapard continued. “They don’t believe that they have these options.”

But hope and enthusiasm brought into Great Meadow by the instructors is spreading, he said.

“People in here catch that and they start to believe it themselves, and they start to believe in themselves.”

In class, he was a vocal participant, engaging Archer and his peers at length — about Machiavelli, rationality, morality.

“Education is absolutely necessary for someone to be able to go out there and realize how they’re living their life is not the only way,” Shapard said in the interview. “It changes them.”

Prince, who sat next to Shapard and lives on an honor block with him, agreed.

If he gets out, he hopes his in-prison education will help him land a job as a counselor for troubled youths, the kind of help he could have used as a young man in Brooklyn before he turned to crime.

“I might be able to give them some insight on what this is about and how I changed,” Prince said.

“I think that’s the key,” he said, pausing. “They don’t wanna look at the idea that people can change.”

He has two daughters, one in college, one taking classes online.

“(They said), ‘Daddy, it’s there, do it,’” Prince said, thinking back to when he told his daughters about the program. “You’re smart. You can learn. Do something different.”