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VOL.1 Issue 1

FPEP POST



VOL.1 ISSUE 1



CAPTIVATING POEMS

Soulful Expressions of
Sorrow and Joy



EYE-OPENING ARTICLES

Exploring the Affects of
Mass Incarceration



BREATHTAKING ART

Intimate Introspections
Behind Bars



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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We would like to thank Dr. Keri Watson, Diamond Williams, Mirett Saad, Rocky Slusher, Mary Samuels, Babylon, Neil Gallagher, Jason Fronczek, Ream Al-Ghandi, Aiya Messina and Owen Ware for their valuable contributions to the first-ever issue of the FPEP magazine. Thank you also for the hard work and devotion of all our volunteers, teachers, and staff. This endeavor would not be possible without you all supporting our work and mission.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Words bring change. Words change lives. Words save lives. The purpose of this magazine is not only to change lives, but to save lives. In this magazine, we highlight the work of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students while discussing the horrific impacts of mass incarceration. This magazine is not meant to inspire feelings of defeat, but feelings of hope. This torch of hope is lit by the astounding effort incarcerated students put in to change their own lives, receive higher education, and therefore make our communities safer and more productive.

When higher education is brought to prisons, the rates of recidivism are dramatically reduced. The chains of injustice are broken. When someone who is incarcerated receives a college degree and finishes serving their time, their ability to obtain a high-paying job increases greatly, reducing the potential of resorting to crime to make ends meet.

This magazine could not have been put together without the work of the amazing Knights taking UCF classes while confined behind bars.

On behalf of everyone on the FPEP team, we hope this magazine inspires feelings of hope within you, and gets you involved in the fight to end mass incarceration.

Solidarity Forever,
Michael Kostis
FPEP Volunteer Coordinator



**FLORIDA PRISON
EDUCATION PROJECT**

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INTO THE VOID

Neil Gallagher

I never imagined myself arrested, let alone on a bus heading to prison. I had done everything society had told me to do: I had finished school, gone to college, bought a home, and had a good job, but I quickly learned how quickly an accident could change everything. I took full responsibility for this accident, and as a result, I would spend the next 20 months in Florida State Prison.

I didn't know what to expect in prison, as I had never been in serious trouble before. I remember researching as much as possible about what these next few months would entail. I looked up what to expect, what to say and do, and who to avoid. That all went out the window the second we stepped off the bus at the Reception Center. I remember sitting in a cell as they processed us into the system. I realized out of the almost 60 inmates, I was the only one to have a college degree, one of maybe ten that finished high school, the rest having educations that ranged from G.E.D.s to leaving school somewhere around the 4th grade. I remember naively thinking that maybe prison would offer some of these inmates a chance to further their education, but I quickly learned that was not the case.

The staff often mentioned the facility's rehabilitation objectives, but I found these goals often went unfulfilled. I recall asking to be signed up for educational programs at my first facility. I received a response that informed me I was recommended for the G.E.D Program, not as an instructor, but as a student. Just three months prior, I had been applying for master's programs. I remember responding to the instructor, mentioning my education and experience, and offering to assist the program as a teacher. I hoped maybe I could help those around me better themselves, but this fell on deaf ears. I received a response a few weeks later asking me to confirm that I did not want to earn my G.E.D. as they had to record my response in my file.

I spent time in five facilities during my seventeen months; only in one did I see college courses offered, with a seat limit of roughly 15 students out of 1,500. This would not have been a reality if Polk State had not offered these classes through their staff. The G.E.D. programs I saw were understaffed and under-equipped, budgets having been cut to all-time lows in the years preceding my incarceration. The libraries often relied on discarded books from outside institutions, and as we were felons, many of the occupational books available showcased jobs that would remain unavailable to us.

While conducting the research before my incarceration, I saw numerous opportunities advertised online for inmates to better themselves. I saw opportunities listed to learn trade skills and even attend college courses. I had come to prison determined to make the most out of the time I had to serve. I hoped to learn a trade or take courses, as did many of the inmates I crossed paths with.

Like many, I thought offenders refused to change their ways due to stubbornness, but now that I've been in their shoes, I realize it's not always the case. I have learned firsthand that for every opportunity available for justice-impacted persons, there seem to be twice as many barriers. I realized that many of the programs that were started to benefit those returning to society were written by those who had once been in their shoes. Now that I had been in those same shoes, I knew it was my turn to make a change. I began using my previous experience to teach financial literacy courses to the inmates housed with me and was amazed by how fast they mastered these very difficult topics. The engagement I received from the inmates in these courses cemented my belief that many do, in fact, want to better themselves, but often they are never given that chance.



Hialeah
ANTHONY CASANOVA



Diamond Williams

Diamond Williams

As a society, our line of thinking regarding the capture and punishment of law-breakers is limited to methodology. It is no question that offenders should be arrested and incarcerated, serving time as a way of retribution for the crime they committed and the citizens whom they affected; rather, it is a question of how. Rarely, however, do conversations focus on what incarcerated individuals should do while they are incarcerated. This is the crux of rehabilitation as a philosophy of punishment, in which incarceration includes opportunities and resources that offenders utilize to improve their chances of not only reintegrating into society but acting as capable and law-abiding members of the broader community (UNESCO, p.1). This philosophy manifests in three core areas: social bonds, educational attainment, and employment.

Reading allows incarcerated individuals to not only maintain social bonds and attain an education but also enables a certain form of escapism. Reading for incarcerated individuals is not all that different from reading for the non-incarcerated population: it allows for research, coursework, skill development, and so much more. Incarcerated individuals, regardless of where they are incarcerated or what they are incarcerated for, are usually met with an extended amount of unstructured free time. These individuals are challenged with filling this time productively and positively (Garner, pg. 1); some choose reading. It is in this way that reading does more than just improve knowledge and 2 abilities: it serves as a means of escapism to preserve the mental health and general well-being of incarcerated individuals.

Reading and the world that it introduces to incarcerated individuals encourages them to engage mentally and avoid regretful thoughts, instead imagining a future version of themselves without any pessimistic boundaries (Wetherall). As stated by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, reading helps them “forget for a time the harsh reality of prison life” and “reflect on their past and current situations and in planning for their future” (p. 1, 2). Reading also serves as an activity that builds social connections and helps one maintain relationships – this fact is possibly no more applicable than within prisons and between incarcerated individuals and the outside world.

BOOKS IN PRISON

Tyler Wetherall, a writer and journalist for The Guardian, The Times, and The Irish Independent, recalls how her relationship with her father improved despite their prison-induced distance thanks to the connection reading the same books provided them: "...but we did share the imaginary landscape offered within its pages, a place we could occupy together from afar."

The stories they read served as a point of connection and a way for her father to reconnect with the world he was expected to one day rejoin. The Florida Prison Education Project (FPEP), founded in 2017, is an initiative of the University of Central Florida (UCF) that seeks to offer a high-quality undergraduate education to people who are incarcerated in Central Florida. FPEP hosts its very own Books Behind Bars program, in which we collect donations of unwanted books, assess their quality, determine if they are suitable through standards set by the Florida Department of Corrections, and then donate them to libraries in Florida prisons ("Get Involved"). Multiple copies of a single title are sometimes used as textbooks for courses offered by FPEP's instructors.

Thus far, the Florida Prison Education Project has collected over 10,000+ books to benefit incarcerated students. The reality of life in prisons is difficult to imagine for the non-incarcerated population; we are increasingly adjusted to the small freedoms in life. One thing that more focus should be devoted to is the means used to achieve rehabilitative ends in our prisons, including the positive impacts reading can have amongst the incarcerated population. Across genres, reading allows incarcerated people to attain education, enhance financial and vocational skills, improve social bonds, and escape from their current circumstances in a positive way.



**FLORIDA PRISON
EDUCATION PROJECT**

FLORIDA PRISON EDUCATION PROJECT

Keri Watson



Mass incarceration is among the most crucial issues of our time. Although the United States comprises only 5% of the world's population, we house more than 20% of its prisoners, and since 1978, the U.S. prison population has increased 408%. Florida's incarcerated population has risen 1000% over the last 40 years, and our state now has the nation's third largest prison system, with 80,000 people behind bars. Nearly 3 million people in Florida have a criminal record, and Orlando has one of the highest incarceration rates in the nation.

Designated UCF's Community Challenge Initiatives, the Florida Prison Education Project supports UCF's Mission by expanding educational access, serving at-risk populations, and offering students the opportunity to participate in internships, which are among the high-impact practices that have been proven to increase retention and degree attainment. The Florida Prison Education Project also provides research, service, and mentoring opportunities to faculty, post-docs, and graduate and undergraduate students.

Each year 33,000 people are released from Florida prisons, and another 80,000 are released from community supervision. Approximately a third of these ex-offenders will be rearrested within three years, but evidence shows that education increases the likelihood of post-release employment by 58%, reduces recidivism by 40%, and saves taxpayers money. Yet, until last year, Florida was one of only 12 states that did not offer any college courses to prisoners.

To address the lack of higher education in Florida prisons, a team of UCF faculty and staff began the Florida Prison Education Project. The Project provides educational opportunities to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people in Florida, researches the benefits of prison education, and integrates the study of justice into the University of Central Florida curriculum.

Prison education is at the forefront of the national conversation about criminal justice reform, and UCF, as a leader in partnerships, can leverage its scale and excellence to make a tremendous impact on our community. Nearly 80,000 people in Florida are behind bars. The Florida Prison Education Program could help halve that number, save millions of dollars, and positively impact the lives of those incarcerated, as well as the lives of their children, families, and the wider community. Already over 50 UCF faculty and staff from across the university have volunteered to participate in the Florida Prison Education Program and we have offered 75 classes to 750 men and women incarcerated at six prisons in Central Florida. Are you interested in learning more about the Florida Prison Education Project? Visit our website www.cah.ucf.edu/fpep/ or contact one of us to learn how you can help.

DO YOU WANT THE GOOD NEWS OR BAD NEWS FIRST?

Mirret Saad

When it comes to mass incarceration in the United States, it can seem like all you ever hear about is the negatives. More people becoming incarcerated due to systemic failures and poor choices and more people being targeted for their skin color and background. Unfortunately, it's not too often that you hear about the progress many organizations like the Equal Justice Initiative and even the Florida Prison Education Project have had related to education and prison initiatives. Well, too much of anything is never a good thing so how about we focus on the good news just for a little bit.

According to Adam Gelb, President and CEO of the Council of Criminal Justice, the news about criminal justice reform and incarceration is not necessarily all bad. Data collected by the Council of Criminal justice helps paint a brighter picture for those of us who still have hope in radically transforming an inequitable and harmful system. For example, incarceration rates have declined, "falling from its peak of more than 1 in every 100 adults in 2008 to 1 in 147 in 2021, a decline of a third. That translates to about a half million fewer people behind bars on any given day". It's clear that mass incarceration is still a huge problem for our country but these numbers indicate progress is being made.

Slow progress is better than no progress at all when our ultimate goal is to have fewer and fewer people incarcerated each day. Now, like I said before, we can't spend our time focusing on one side of any issue. In order to continue to effect true change we still do have to confront the reality of the situation. Although incarceration rates may have decreased nationally, the state of Florida has not followed suit. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, "Florida has an incarceration rate of 795 per 100,000 people (including prisons, jails, immigration detention, and juvenile justice facilities), meaning that it locks up a higher percentage of its people than any democracy on earth." The Sunshine State, with so many of its positive qualities, continues to incarcerate individuals at astonishing rates, which is why organizations dedicated to advocating for marginalized populations are so important. Change cannot only occur on the national level if we want to live in a world where people aren't criminalized every single day. So, you can definitely say there's more work to be done; however, let's hold on to all the good news we can get in the mean-time. A better world is possible when we focus on the good and let it drive the work we do each day.

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**FLORIDA PRISON
EDUCATION PROJECT**

FPEP SPOTLIGHT

Keri Watson

The University of Central Florida and Florida Prison Education Project, in partnership with Seminole County Public Libraries and the Rollins Museum of Art, will offer programming related to Ilya Kaminsky's book of poetry, *Deaf Republic* in Spring 2024 as part of the NEA Big Read. The NEA Big Read, an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with Arts Midwest, broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the power of a shared reading experience.

Programs will include book clubs and discussions at public and university libraries, prisons, churches, and retirement communities, art exhibitions, theatre performances, and a lecture series including author and artist talks. By offering a variety of programs at various locations across Central Florida we will reach a broad and diverse audience.

As the war in Ukraine rages on and political divisiveness marks much contemporary discourse, many are left to consider the fate of autonomous nations, the hegemony of autocracy, and the fate of democracy. A rich allegory about the importance of collective responsibility in the times of oppression, *Deaf Republic* draws connections between global and local political conflicts in its powerful address to our collective conscience. As Kaminsky writes, "The deaf do not believe in silence. Silence is the invention of the hearing."

Programming will kick off on January 20 with book giveaways at the John C. Hitt Library, the Olin Library at Rollins College, and at each of the Seminole County Libraries' five branches. Seminole County Public Libraries will host book discussion groups (daytime and evening) at each of its five branches for a total of ten book clubs during March and April 2024. Additional book clubs will be offered during the same period by the John C. Hitt Library, the Olin Library, Florida Prison Education Project, Global UCF, the UCF Alumni Association, the Rollins Museum of Art, LIFE at UCF, and Legacy Pointe Retirement Community.

UCF's School of Performing Arts will perform a devised theatre piece at UCF Celebrates the Arts, a two-week festival at Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts, on April 5 and 6, 2024. We will host two art exhibitions: "Faces of Russian Resistance" in the UCF Visual Arts Building and "Silent Protest: Perspectives on War and Disability" at the Rollins Museum of Art. Ilya Kaminsky, author of *Deaf Republic*, and Burhan Sönmez, a Kurdish novelist who has written five books (including *Istanbul*, *Istanbul*, *Labyrinth*, and *Stone and Shadow*), and Güneş Murat Tezcür, Director of the School of Politics and Global Studies at the Arizona State University, will offer public talks related to the themes of the book.

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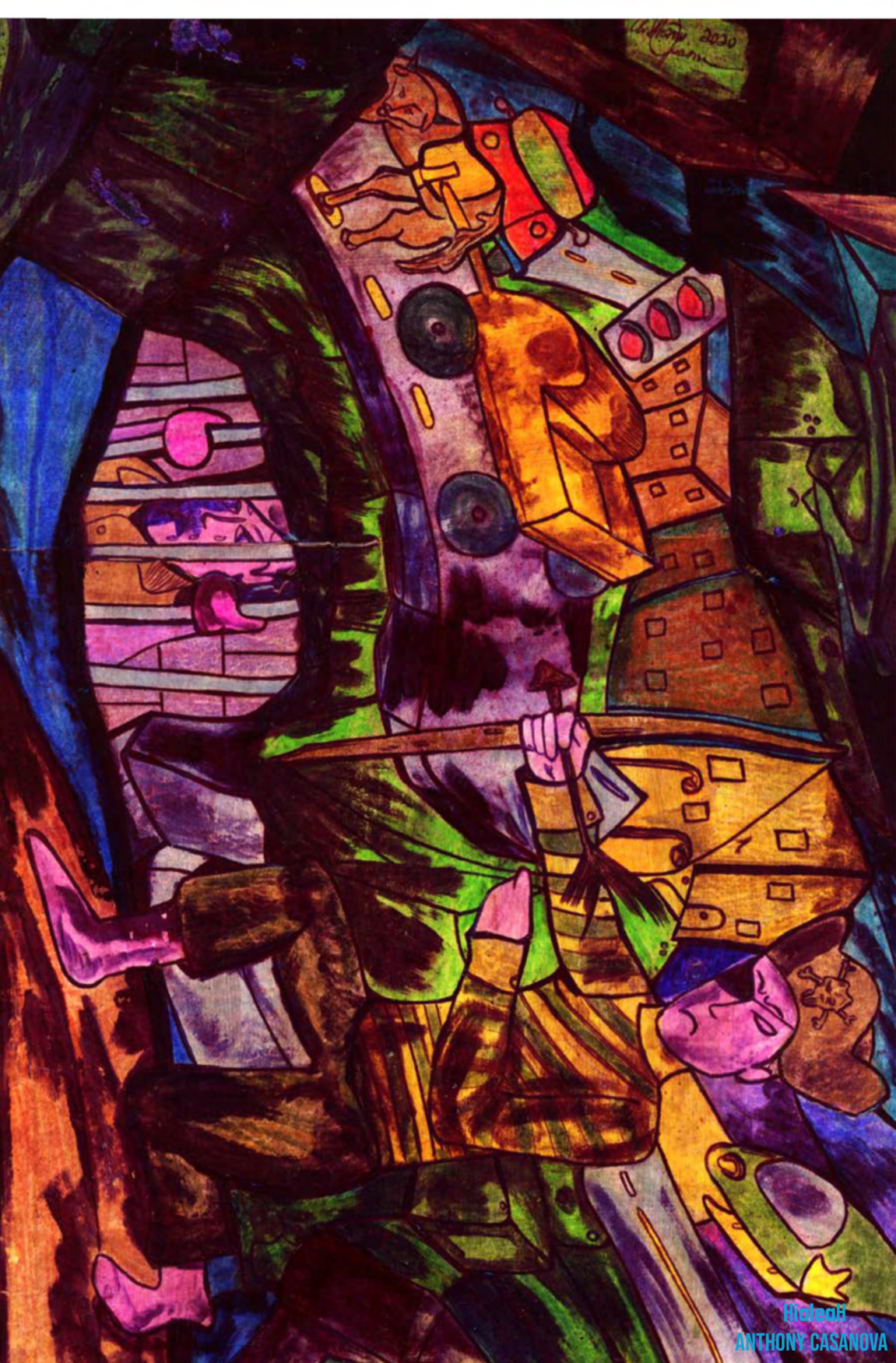
Chris Below

From *Don't Be Afraid To Stand By My Side*

I live and die every night

I cry I come alive when I think about you and me not being the father that I'm supposed to be

Don't ever think it was about you your daddy just wasn't the man he was supposed to be. I see the tears fill your eyes every time you think about me and it makes me cry when you think it was me No, baby it was all me I was supposed to be all the man I could be but the drugs and a life that wasn't mine had a real hold on me. But supposedly God was molding me into the man I was always supposed to be everything you wanted me to be you will always be a part of me no matter how many supposed





PLAYING

Aidan Skye

When I was a kid, I dreamed of finishing high school, attending a great college, and establishing a career where I could help others. I had good grades and was liked by my teachers. From the outside looking in, it seemed like I had a perfect childhood. However, my family had many secrets. We moved around a lot, and nobody got to know me too well. Not well enough to see the abuse, trauma, and struggles I was hiding at home.

Eventually, these secrets led to an addiction to opioids that controlled the pain but also controlled me. I became a totally different person who would do anything to get high. I dropped out of high school, got my G.E.D., and enrolled into college. I could not get through a day of class without leaving to get high. I dropped out to go to rehab, left rehab and got high the next day. One month after turning 18, I was arrested for the first time. This led to a long string of arrests which led to an eventual sentence of one year in the county jail. Instead of doing the things any normal 18 year old would do, like going to bonfires on the beach or hanging out with friends—experiencing the freedom of adulthood, I was sitting in the overcrowded and grossly unsanitary county jail. I suffered the whole time and wondered what it would be like to be a felon when I was released. However, the year in jail did serve one purpose that ultimately benefitted me—I became clean and sober.

CATCHUP

My eventual release was a harsh reality check. I struggled to find employment and housing. Education was the farthest thing from my mind. Though I remained clean, I returned to crime as a way to make ends meet. I ended up with 4.5 years of probation, 18 months of it being house arrest. With one month left, I violated on a technical and was arrested again, this time serving a nine-month sentence in the county jail. The only thing I did to pass the time was read. I read and read. Books became my best company. Other than the books, there was not much else offered to us. County jails aren't meant for long-term stays; however, there are the unlucky few who end up there for months or even years.

Despite agonizing bouts of hopelessness, I was determined to change things for myself. At times, the only thing that kept me sane was thinking of my future upon release. I swore I would not make the same mistakes again. It has now been about five years and I have kept that promise to myself. I can honestly say I am proud of myself and the person I have become. It has not been an easy road. I struggled to find employment and housing, which led to a deep depression. I wondered if I would ever be able to have a good, normal life with 13 felony convictions. My incarcerations and the obstacles I faced upon release had a devastating effect on my mental health.

After hard work, therapy, and support from family, I eventually decided it was time to go back to college. This was the best decision I ever made. I am now 28 years old, ten years clean from pain pills, and I will graduate with my bachelor's degree next fall. My education is a priority and I have managed to maintain a 4.0 GPA as a testament to my dedication. I have regained purpose as well as a sense of worth and accomplishment. I no longer feel hopeless, and I really have changed things for myself.

My goal is to spread awareness and help change things for others. Still, I often feel discouraged, as though I am getting a late start on my dreams. I sometimes wonder what I could have accomplished during those long periods of incarceration. One thing I did learn is that there's a tremendous lack of resources for education and mental health offered to both inmates and returning citizens. My dedication to change that is a driving force in my life, but I can't do it alone. While I play catch-up with my education and career goals, we need to play catch-up as a society and rethink how inmates spend their incarceration.

FPEP SPOTLIGHT

Dr. Elio Alfonso has taught two classes of Financial Accounting at Polk Correctional this past year. He says of the course, "Accounting is a very valuable skill to have in any career that my students at Polk ultimately choose. Whether they choose the entrepreneurship path and decide to start their own business. Or whether they use the knowledge to improve their personal finances such as budgeting, tax planning, or managing their spending. Accounting is the language of business. So whatever business they work in, knowing accounting can help them communicate effectively, make meaningful insights, and stand out among the crowd." Dr. Alfonso has been very impressed with the effort that each student makes during the course. He says, "Every student here did a remarkable job and put in many hours of hard work to learn and master the basics of financial accounting. They came to class prepared with their homework completed and ready to learn. They also eagerly and actively participated in every class and asked excellent, well-thought-out questions."

One of Dr. Alfonso's students, Antwan Thompson, developed a project called "Developing General Business & Accounting Concepts" through taking the Financial Accounting class. Antwan was given approval by Polk Correctional to offer this class on Saturdays to other students at Polk. He describes it as "a 12-week course designed to transform a vague business idea into a sound, viable concept using proven business strategies. The course addresses required business skills like accounting, marketing, and also foundational skills like math, reading, and communication." He also said "The true accomplishments and successes of the project are not mine to claim. I am only an instrument, whose purpose is to give back that which was given to me. It is truly an honor for me to be on the front line in the war of combating recidivism. And it is my belief that education brings forth liberation!" Antwan thanks Dr. Alfonso and the Florida Prison Education Project for the opportunity and their efforts which are truly appreciated.



HOPE

Marco A. Williams

From Don't Be Afraid To Stand By My Side

Hope is the day I want to look upon my freedom and feel how it will be without restraint. As of next year. I will have spent one half of my life in prison. I truly have forgotten the smell of my mother, the laughter of my children.

Hope is the taste of a fried porkchop bacon sandwich.

Hope is the life I wanted was not the one I chose, yet I carry the scent of a prisoner.
But one day I will be deprived of this scent and will enjoy the smell and feel of freedom.

Hope is not just a thing.
It is the essence permeating my very Soul



**FLORIDA PRISON
EDUCATION PROJECT**

Are Colleges and Universities Delivering on Their Educational Promise?

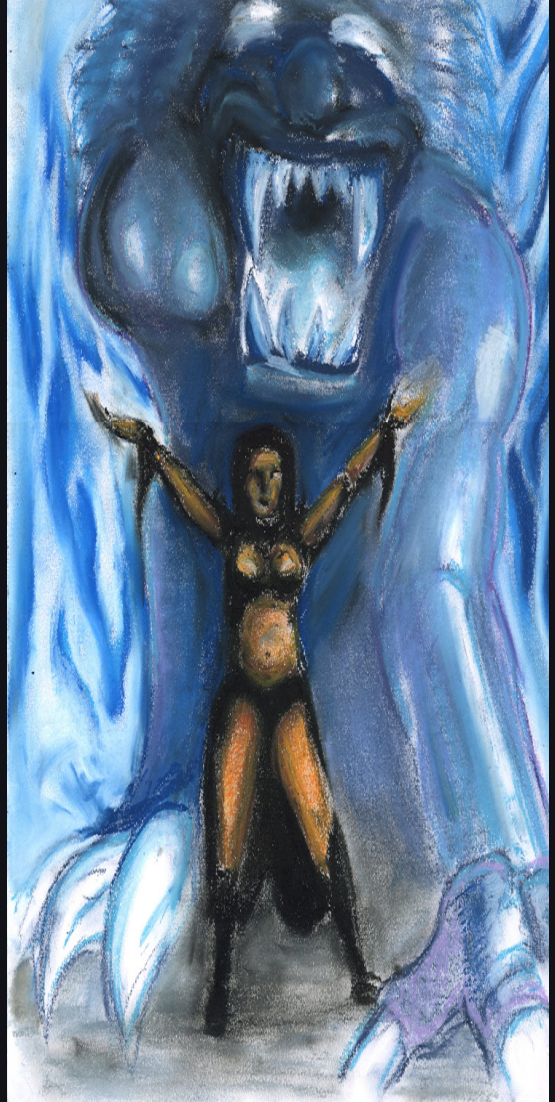
Michelle Harris

Universities are facing unprecedented declines in enrollment that show no sign of stopping. Between the years 2010 and 2021, the percentage of 18 to 24-year-olds enrolled in college fell from 41% to 38% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2023). These numbers may not surprise anyone working in or attending a college or university, what should be of concern is the continued push of educational institutions to continue the tired, outdated recruiting protocols to recruit new students. By continuously failing to explore new options to increase enrollment, are higher education institutions living up to the promise of bettering the lives of their students or are they simply conducting business as usual?

Colleges and Universities across the country are leaning into targeting game demographics with incentives of free tuition programs can matriculate and graduate) with negative retention and graduation results. New college readiness programs spread throughout high schools targeting the same students that are continuing to defer higher education so as not to incur massive student loan debt. This new generation of young adults is opting first to find out who they are and what they want to do with their lives before undertaking large scale financial and time-consuming investments.

While these enrollment woes continue to dominate dialogue within higher education institutions, they distinctly ignore the desperate pleas of a large population of potential students begging for a for educational opportunity and a deep desire to improve their lives; incarcerated persons and those re-entering into their communities from incarceration. In a 2017 study conducted at Emory University, findings indicated that education reduces recidivism rates significantly:

- Ex-offenders who complete some high school courses have recidivism rates of around 55%
- Vocational training cut recidivism to approximately 30%





- An associate degree drops the rate to 13.7%
- A bachelor's degree reduces it to 5.6 %
- A master's degree brings recidivism to 0% (Zoukis, 2023)

With over 10 million people (about half the population of New York) being released from jails and prisons each year currently (Prison Policy Initiative, 2023), and enrollment rates of those coming out of high schools continuing to drop drastically each year, it is time colleges and universities to realign the goals of higher education. By doing so, these institutions could create enrollment programs that would serve non-traditional populations, such as those affected by incarceration.

Some universities are creating programs aimed at helping those experiencing incarceration to create more productive and community centered careers and lives for themselves and their families. Programs like PSU Rebound at Portland State University and the Florida Prison Education Program out of the University of Central Florida are giving hope to those who are seeking it the most.

As educators the words of Bell Hooks should ring in the minds of college and University recruiters, "To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn." Using this idea, hopefully more Universities will join these programs and create new opportunities for these eager populations.

This Black Bird

Omari Booker

From *Don't Be Afraid To Stand By My Side*

This black bird lands on my window
The same bird every morning

I guess it's the same
All I've seen is its shadow
But it says hello every day, every morning

I fly away with my little black friend
Every day, every morning

My mind on its back
Free on its wings
Though I only see it through bars
We meet at the screen

It visits me ever morning, every day
It brings me hope
It feeds my dreams

They're only bars, they're only screens
It's only tears, it's only screams And to be born, we need these things

So for now, I guess I'm free
My little black friend
It visits me
Every morning, every day



**FLORIDA PRISON
EDUCATION PROJECT**

FROM EDUCATION TO RENEWAL: *PERSPECTIVE FROM A FORMERLY INCARCERATED GRADUATE*

Stacy Lyn Burnet

Education for people who are incarcerated transcends the traditional academic experience. As someone who navigated the challenging transition from incarceration to achieving a graduate degree, I understand the power of accessing higher education in jails and prisons. Engaging in learning while incarcerated reclaims agency and reshapes the future beyond confinement. It is not solely about absorbing information; it's about igniting a passion for knowledge and self-understanding. In my own experience, each academic milestone was not just an achievement but a step towards reconstructing my identity and future.

The resilience required to pursue education in a correctional facility is immense. Incarcerated students often study in environments that are not conducive to learning, making their commitment to education all the more commendable. This resilience is a key aspect of the learning process in such settings, fostering determination and self-efficacy.

Overcoming these challenges is not just academic success; it's a demonstration of inner strength and potential. These skills are crucial for navigating prison life with dignity, and reimagining success post-release. Discovery and learning in this context extend well beyond the academic curriculum.

Education instills confidence and empowers us to challenge the assumptions embedded in our understanding of ourselves, the systems we interact with, and their influence on our circumstances. The ideas we encounter in college and the knowledge we glean from coursework encourages us to reimagine opportunities post-release. For people with conviction histories, the world can feel less welcoming. The scarlet I of incarceration is a brand that can feel limiting.

Education smooths over the contours of the scars, and becomes a canvas of its own. We can graft anything we want onto that canvas, and eventually, the brand loses its visibility - and relevance to the path we chart for ourselves. Continuing education post-release, as I did, serves as a testament to the enduring nature of hope and desire to change - and evoke change. Achieving a graduate degree in this context is not merely a personal triumph; it symbolizes the potential of all of us who find our way in a prison classroom.

Getting an education was the most radical response to my confinement. The frameworks I learned in school shifted my understanding and my own canvas is full of rewritten narratives, renewed hope, and continuously reshaping the future. The pursuit of learning in prison is a powerful affirmation of the human spirit's capacity to overcome adversity and aspire to a life defined not by past mistakes but by future possibilities and achievements. Summary: Stacy Lyn Burnett was incarcerated for 7.5 years from 2008-2019, and was released from New York State prisons three times. She took her first college class with Bard Prison Initiative during her last confinement, and earned an MBA in Sustainability in 2023. She works for JSTOR, where she ensures students in jails and prisons have access to an academic library on four continents. Education is not just about enhancing career prospects; it is about a holistic change in life trajectory and the reclamation of that potential.



SHAKESPEARE BEHIND BARS

Owen Ware

William Shakespeare once said, “Men at some time are masters of their fates.” Irregardless of who someone is and where they’ve been, mankind ultimately possesses the innate ability to control their destiny and choose their fate. While there are some situations that may appear impossible to control, it is the way we react and choose to move on from them that truly matters. Whether it be choosing to wither and drown in the sufferings of the outcome or taking what’s been handed and growing for the better from it. This can be noted quite prominently in prisons and the multitudes of programs designed to offer both the currently and formerly incarcerated more opportunities to grow as individuals and learn how to move on towards a brighter future for themselves.

One such program being Shakespeare Behind Bars. Since being founded in 1995, Shakespeare Behind Bars has been credited as one of the longest running and continuously operating art, theatre, Shakespeare, and original writing prison programs in the United States. Their mission? To offer theatrical encounters in regards to personal and social issues impacting the currently incarcerated, the formerly incarcerated, at risk, and marginalized communities in efforts to help them develop life skills that will support their reintegration into society.

With various programs scattered across the United States in Kentucky, Michigan, and Illinois, Shakespeare Behind Bars has affected people from all backgrounds of its juvenile, adult prison, and beyond bars programs. Since its debut in 1995, the programs offered have put on multitudes of productions in both of its Kentucky and Michigan locations including but not limited to “Twelfth Night”, “The Life and Death of Julius Caesar”, “The Comedy of Errors”, “Macbeth”, and “The Tempest” which is a production featurely presented within the documentary film of Shakespeare Behind Bars which was released in the year 2005.

Inspired by the belief that all human beings are born inherently good, Shakespeare Behind Bars attempts to bring about this goodness by immersing its participants in an activity known as a “Circle of Truth”. By having the participants engage in this activity, they walk out having opportunities such as: finding a new lifelong passion for learning, developing literacy skills, gaining new problem solving and decision making skills, developing senses of empathy, trust, and compassion, nurturing a desire to help one another, increasing self esteem and gaining a positive self image, taking responsibility for the crime/s they committed, becoming a responsible member of a community, developing tolerance and skills to peacefully resolve conflicts, relating the themes of Shakespeare’s works to their own past, present, and future life experiences, developing trust and courage to act in spite of all the fears and odds stacked against them and inspiring a belief in hope, transformation, redemption, forgiveness, and possibility of re-emerging into society as a contributing member.

Incorporating all of these elements it is easy to see how programs such as Shakespeare Behind Bars can have a positive impact on all of its members of society. Each and every person holds the ability to control their destiny and choose their own fate, and with the help of Shakespeare Behind Bars those that society may have left abandoned in its wake can harness that very hope and belief to take back control of their lives and push towards a new tomorrow. Becoming the best version of themselves that they can be and ready to reintegrate into society stronger than before, fully transitioning into a person that without Shakespeare Behind Bars, they never would’ve thought possible. To quote The Bard himself, “We know what we are, but know not what we may be.”

HOW TO GET INVOLVED.

Vera Institute of Justice: WWW.VERA.ORG

The Marshall Project: WWW.THEMARSHALLPROJECT.ORG

The Sentencing Project: WWW.SENTENCINGPROJECT.ORG

Equal Justice Initiative: EJI.ORG

Prison Policy Initiative: WWW.PRISONPOLICY.ORG

For Freedoms: FORFREEDOMS.ORG

Incarceration Nations Network: WWW.INCARCERATIONNATIONSNETWORK.COM

FamiliesAgainstMandatory Minimums: FAMM.ORG

The Innocence Project: WWW.INNOCENCEPROJECT.ORG

American Civil Liberties Union: WWW.ACLU.ORG

Southern Poverty Law Center: WWW.SPLCENTER.ORG

Florida Rights Restoration Coalition: FLORIDARRC.COM

Florida Coalition for Criminal Justice Reform: WWW.BETTERJUSTICEFL.COM

No Place for a Child: WWW.NOPLACEFORACHILD.COM

Community Outreach Enterprise: COMMUNITYOUTREACHENTERPRISE.YOLASITE.COM

Florida Prison Education Project: CAH.UCF.EDU/FPEP

Community Education Project: WWW.STETSON.EDU/OTHER/CEP

Exchange for Change: WWW.EXCHANGE-FOR-CHANGE.ORG

Institute for Educational Empowerment: WWW.MDC.EDU/EDUCATIONAL-EMPOWERMENT

We Got the Vote: WEGOTTHEVOTE.ORG

Art Equity: WWW.ARTEQUITY.ORG



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