

prison english news

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The United States has 4.4% of the world's population and 22% of its inmates, more inmates than any nation in the world, regardless of that nation's size. This is more than 2.2 million individuals, nearly 1 in 100 adults. If all the men and women behind bars in America were sent to one state, and everyone else there moved away, it would be the 36th most populated state in our nation.

Why should we educate inmates? For one thing, lack of education is often why people are incarcerated to begin with. Approximately 2/3 of America's inmates did not complete high school. The average inmate reading level is that of a 6th grader. For many it is much lower.

A second reason is that more than 90% of inmates are at some time released back into our communities to become our neighbors and co-workers. Up to 70% of these fellow-citizens commit new crimes and are re-incarcerated within three years of their release. Education, more reliably than any other input, breaks this cycle of criminality and recidivism (re-incarceration).

A third reason to educate inmates is that education is cheaper than incarceration: Americans spend nearly five times as much per year to incarcerate each inmate as we spend to educate each K-12 student. And so the incarceration cycle continues generationally.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to educate inmates—taking precedence over the practical benefits of the first three reasons—is that inmates are human beings, human beings whose nature is life-long learning, from infancy to death or dementia. This is as true for the small percentage who will never be released from prison as it is for the more than 90% who will be released. To deny educational opportunities to these already restricted individuals can be viewed from a humanitarian perspective as cruel and unusual punishment. Though I have long believed in the practical reasons for educating inmates, let me share how I to came see this more transcendental reason.

While I read to know the world, I typically watch movies to escape it. When Shavawn Berry, my English 484 Pen Project colleague, suggested we add the documentary *Serving Life* to our course materials, her rave reviews convinced me. The documentary, narrated by Forest Whitaker, is a look inside a hospice program at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola,

the largest maximum security prison in the nation.

The film follows a forward-thinking warden, who hires select inmates as hospice caregivers for other inmates. The film shares these caregivers' experiences, as well as stories of the men they so intimately care for, including bathing, diapering, and attending to other humbling physical and emotional details of old age and sickness. Caregivers and patients alike speak of



Cornelia "Corri" Wells

love and compassion. One dying man, tears spilling down his cheeks, urges his brother—an inmate in the same prison continuing a life of crime on the inside with no chance of parole—to desist from his decadent lifestyle and change his life right where he is. Some caregivers share important life lessons learned from their patients. Others weep with gratitude as they speak of the fulfillment caregiving brings. One man tells how proud his parents are of his hospice work, while another basks in the positive example his compassionate labor sets for his children.

What I learned, through my own unexpected tears, is that anyone—even someone sentenced to die in prison for heinous acts like rape and murder, as well as someone convicted of much lesser, so-called "victimless" crimes like drug possession—is capable of life-altering growth and transformation ... to their last breath. Growth and transformation are equally available to caregiver and cared-for. What happens behind bars matters in the human scheme of life on earth. The tools of change are empathy and our lifelong capacity to learn.

It is with these beliefs—or rather, these convictions—that I approach my responsibilities as director of this important humanitarian work that Joe Lockard began with the Prison English program, with the support of then chair of English Maureen Goggin. Joe was aptly honored by ASU in 2012 with the Founder's Day Faculty Achievement Service Award. What he started five years ago has not only continued, but begun to burgeon, thanks to ASU's many volunteers and the receptive and thoughtful administration at the Arizona Department of Corrections. Moving forward, I am heartened by the support and vision of current chair of English Mark Lussier and of volunteer faculty and student teachers across campus as Prison English continues its multi-departmental evolution into the Prison Education Program (PEP).

—CORNELIA "CORRI" WELLS

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IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Prison Educators Reflect

On Refusing to Look Away from Prisons

Leadership Transitions

In early May I sat in the visitation room at Eyman State Prison's Cook Unit watching a performance of *Casino Bardo*. The play was a mash-up of Allen Ginsburg's *Howl*, Ionesco absurdism, the prisoners' own writings and solo performances, and games with the audience. Hearing the familiar lines of *Howl*—"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness"—had an oddly appropriate resonance in this setting.

The seven players spent the past semester preparing this performance in Rivka Rocchio's drama workshop. It was an excellent performance, filled with energy, verve, body language, and humor. A couple actors had real talent. In the audience discussion afterwards a repeated theme was that for the duration of the play the prison environment disappeared. A play is a small vehicle for making time disappear.

The Cook Unit is a medium-security facility for sex offenders, for whom heavy sentences mean that most of the players and audience will be inside for decades or life. I was familiar with one leading actor from a past visit. He is serving a life sentence for rape-murder committed when he was nineteen years old. A couple actors were serving long terms for rape, and one child molester has an 80-year sentence.

“ We should not look away from or ignore what our students have done. . . . [But] education is a human right. . . . Education is not only for those who ‘deserve.’ . . . Humanity itself is sufficient qualification for entitlement and no human lacks entitlement to education. ”

We should not look away from or ignore what our students have done. These are crimes that have destroyed or severely damaged other lives, and that have left survivors and families weeping. How then as a university should we undertake to provide such criminals

with drama workshops, language classes, and philosophy seminars?

There are several excellent answers but for me as a



Joe Lockard

teacher the central one is this: education is a human right, one recognized under international human rights conventions. That same right exists inside prison walls. In a social environment that defines post-secondary higher education as a commodity for purchase, it is crucial that we remember this fundamental

value of education as a right that extends to all humanity. Education is not only for those who can pay. Education is not only for those who “deserve.” No one can be deemed undeserving. Humanity itself is sufficient qualification for entitlement and no human lacks entitlement to education.

The crimes these actors committed are the proper domain of courts and their judicial decisions. We are teachers and we teach wherever there are students. Others have passed sentence and that is not our work. Our work is to engage in the irreplaceable project of education and human change. There is no contradiction between a clear-eyed understanding of how and why men came to be dressed in orange and sitting in prison, and an equally clear-eyed understanding of education for prisoners as just as necessary as shelter, good food, and proper health care. Slow though it may be, education is the most powerful force for change in human culture.

I began teaching by myself in Fall 2009 at Florence State Prison, joined by Dr. Sherry Rankins-Robertson who took the lead for our just-developing Pen Project with the Penitentiary of New Mexico. None of us realized that we were about to begin building ASU's Prison English

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program and ASU's now rapidly-expanding prison education work. It just grew. In Fall 2015 there will be some 55 ASU students, faculty and staff involved in educational programming at Florence State Prison, Eyman State Prison, and the Penitentiary of New Mexico.

We have been successful in convincing other ASU departments and schools to join our efforts. The range of

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We are teachers and we teach wherever there are students. Others have passed sentence and that is not our work. Our work is to engage in the irreplaceable project of education and human change.

classes offered now includes creative writing, drama, biology, psychology, Chinese, art, and more. We have seen wonderful new offshoots such as the Prison Drawing Project, supervised by Prof. Janice Pittsley, and a community-based youth theater project for the children of incarcerated parents, supervised by Prof. Stephani Woodson in cooperation with the Arizona Collegiate High School in Phoenix. The Prison Biology project, supervised by Prof. Tsafir Mor, has completed a brilliant first year of work in the super-max Browning Unit at Eyman State Prison. They are beginning their second year with a teaching group of 13 graduate students. The School of Mathematics and Statistics is assembling a group of 10-12 graduate students and faculty to launch two much-desired math labs that can support inmates studying for their GED exams.

Sometimes I get asked, “I understand English or math classes in prisons, but why Chinese?” Last September when I introduced their *jiàoshī* (teacher) to a waiting class of 25 orange-clad prisoners, I mentioned this question and explained my answer. “Many of you are serving long sentences and will not be visiting China anytime soon, if ever. But everyone here needs to keep their heads busy learning. And if you can learn Chinese—I’m trying too—then you can learn anything.” I watched heads nodding in agreement.

ASU's prison education efforts are blooming. Now is a good time for me to depart my role. I am not someone who enjoys administration. I believe in organizing, not directing. Fortunately, the English department administration has provided a faculty colleague, Dr. Cornelia “Corri” Wells, to handle this growing

administrative role. This is becoming a shared and institutional endeavor rather than the responsibility of one faculty member. That represents a very good development because it anchors this programming as a recognized and collective engagement with our community. I wish Dr. Wells all the best as she takes up her new role.

I will return to prison teaching. I run a weekly poetry workshop at the East Unit of Florence State Prison. It takes place in an old Quonset hut at the far end of a bleak prison yard in the Sonoran desert. Just the place for poetry. Sometimes there is scant attendance, but what is important is ensuring that there is continuing opportunity.

The teaching work we do has been enabled and supported by the Arizona Department of Corrections. Too often I have encountered campus attitudes and politics that involve disdain or antagonism towards prison staff. The Arizona and New Mexico prison staff people with whom we work have become our friends and supporters. One of them, Michelle Ribeiro, was instrumental in establishing the Pen Project in the Penitentiary of New Mexico. Cooperation, respect, and friendship with prison education teachers and departments of correction have been hallmarks of our program.

Finally, I wish to thank all those who over the years have taught with or supported prison education work at Arizona State University. *Hazak ve'emetz*—in Hebrew, strength and courage as we go forward.

—JOE LOCKARD

Prison Teachers and Courses 2014 – 2015

Adam Betts
Carson Calloway
Corey Campbell
Reese Conner
Dana Diehl
Anika Larson + Interns
(with Tsafir Mor)

Joe Lockard
Janice Pittsley + Interns
Rivka Rocchio
Wan-yin Tsai
Elly van Gelderen
Corri Wells + Interns
Greg Yanke

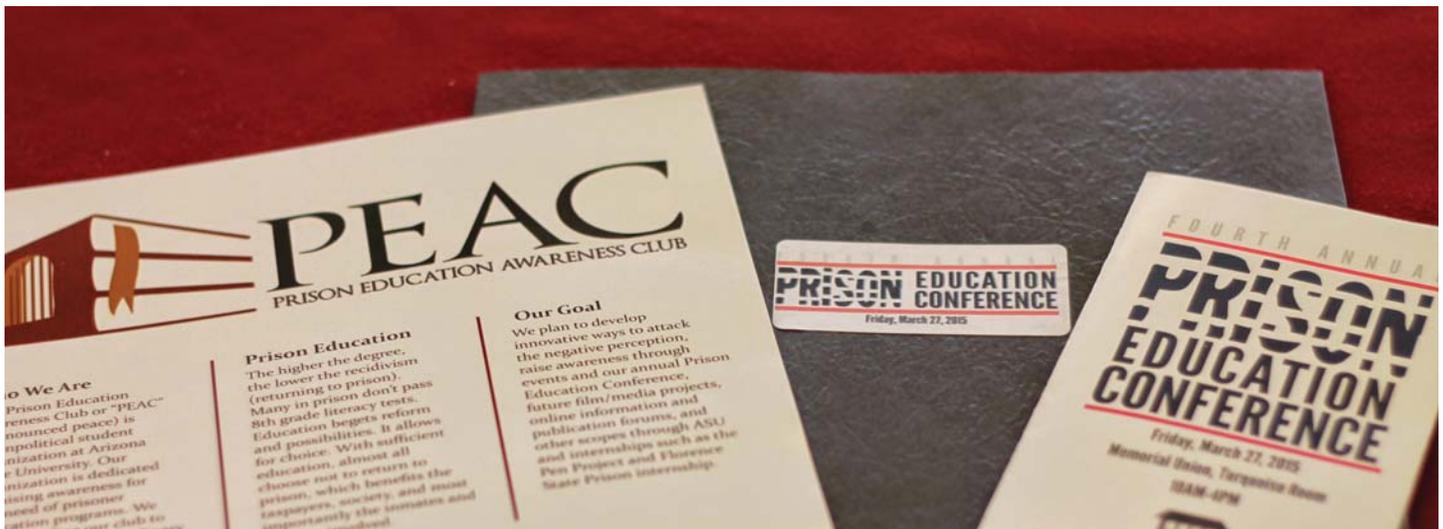
Philosophy
Philosophy
Creative Writing
Creative Writing
Creative Writing
Biology

Poetry
Drawing
Drama
Chinese
Linguistics
Writing
Philosophy

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Prison Educators Reflect

ASU's 4th Annual Prison Education Conference: *Rethinking Prison Education*



“**D**uring my first visit to the Maximum Security unit at the Eyman State Prison in Arizona, I came away with the impression that all the corrections officers had guns on their belts. This made sense according to my expectations. Only later did I realize the C.O.s [correctional officers] were not carrying guns. Rather, they were ‘armed’ with communications radios and capsicum spray. I had let my expectation determine my experience.”

These remarks by Dr. Cornelia “Corri” Wells began the 4th Annual Prison Education Conference at ASU, hosted by the Prison Education Awareness Club (PEAC), of which Dr. Wells is the faculty advisor. “Tens of thousands of teachers are assaulted every year in American high schools,” she continued, “while virtually none are assaulted in the prisons.” She urged conference participants to “be open to having your expectations about prison education changed.”

The opening keynote speaker, Keyes Stevens of the Alabama Prison Arts and Education Project (APAEP) at Auburn University, credited her love for poetry for her desire to teach in prisons. “Poetry saved my life,” she said. Stevens was offered a grant to teach poetry at Talladega Prison, and was immediately hooked by the experience. “They were not just a superficial class [of students],” Stevens said. Learning “was a need.” Stevens discussed the importance of letting any student take APAEP classes, no matter their level of education. Her presentation highlighted the accomplishments of the students in the Alabama program with slides of their artwork as well excerpts from anthologies

of their writing. “This gives them something to be proud of, something they can share with their kids,” she said. “Some of them have never experienced their children being proud of them before.”

Next, Dr. Jo Jorgenson, Dean of Instruction and Community Development at Rio Salado Community College, discussed Rio Salado’s program to educate incarcerated men and women to help them effectively re-enter society after their release. Lisa Preston, Program Director of Workforce Development at Rio Salado, noted, “The number of literacy and job skills certificates completed by incarcerated students has more than doubled since 2010.”

The conference continued with a discussion by the members of the Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC): Tim Lawrence, the Northern Region Education Director; Patricia Weaver, the Correctional Education Program Supervisor at Eyman State Prison in Florence, Arizona; and Roberta Norales, a maximum security Correctional Education Program Teacher at Eyman. The three outlined the challenges of teaching inside a prison, but also the rewards of seeing the inmates eager to participate and learn. The ADC panel highlighted the fully-accredited high school programs in Arizona prisons, as well as the fifteen on-site volunteers from Arizona State University at the prison and twenty-five volunteers who work off-site via a distance learning program. (In the fall, 55 volunteers are expected.)

Following the ADC group, a panel of student and faculty

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volunteers from ASU spoke of their involvement in prison education. Shavawn Berry, an English Instructor and one of the coordinators of ASU's Pen Project internship, stressed how important it is for "everyone to know they are not expendable. We, as a people, cannot afford to throw these people away just because they are in prison. We cannot write them off."

The speakers emphasized repeatedly that education gives inmates hope, which, in turn, feeds their deeper hunger for learning and knowledge. Hector Cedillos, a former inmate, noted that no matter how much is being done to assist inmates, there is still room for improvement. He pointed out that despite the available courses, training, and possible degree programs, there are still severe restrictions for former inmates in terms of employment options upon release. This brought up difficult questions regarding re-entry: "Where do inmates go from here?"

Graduating senior Eric Verska, also a former inmate, underscored this challenge with his experience: "I was initially an accounting major who jumped over to finance. I went to my advisor and explained my history. With a felony background, specifically fraud and forgery, I knew getting a job in finance was unlikely. She told me, 'You should consider pursuing a degree in entrepreneurship.'" Verska switched majors to Entrepreneurship. Cedillos suggested that a new re-entry mindset, where employers are more open to accepting former inmates as applicants, would be ideal. His words rang in the air as the panel closed its remarks. During the Q & A, Wells, speaking from the audience, shared a quote from Father Greg Boyle, aka G-Dog, founder of Homeboy Industries: "Nothing stops a bullet like a job."

The conference ended with a keynote address by Judith Tannenbaum, a former poetry teacher at San Quentin Prison in California. Tannenbaum found her students had a "capacity for depth that was comforting." The inmates proved to be



Dr. Jo Jorgensen, Dean of Instruction and Community Development, oversees the Incarcerated Re-Entry Program at Rio Salado Community College. She provided statistics on the increase in number of incarcerated persons in Arizona, 2009 to 2014.

more than the label society gave them. They wrote beautiful poems. They expressed their thoughts. They understood nobody knew what it was like to be behind those walls. In 2010, Tannenbaum wrote a two-person memoir, *By Heart: Poetry, Prison, and Two Lives*, with one of her students at San Quentin, Spoon Jackson, detailing the hardships of prison life from both sides of the walls. From inside the prison, Jackson wrote, "All rehabilitation is self-rehabilitation." Access to education may give inmates a reason to rehabilitate, but they do the work. Rehabilitation is always an inside job.

Our society has the largest prison population of any developed nation in the world, both by raw number and per capita. Each year in America, on average, we spend nearly five times as much per inmate on incarceration as we do per student in our public schools. If we consider this not only in terms of cost but of lost human potential, the price is staggering. Educating the American public regarding the conditions in our prisons and advocating for educational opportunities for inmates is PEAC's number one priority in the coming year. The vast majority of these men and women will, in time, be our neighbors, our coworkers, our colleagues. According to ASU Panel member Michelle Ribeiro, former Education Director at the New Mexico Department of Corrections, "Over 90% of the inmates in this country will be released back into their communities." Their education is an investment in the future that our society must make. More information about the state of education in our prisons and the activities of the PEAC Club at ASU are available on their Facebook page.

Next year's conference will be held on March 19.

—KRICHIA HOWE, HANNAH GOOD,
SHAVAWN BERRY, and CORNELIA WELLS

Photos by MICHELLE MCKAY



At the conference, a panel of Arizona prison volunteers discussed their work. From left to right: Michelle Ribeiro, Hector Cedillos, and Janice Pittsley (four other panelists are not pictured).

FROM THE CONFERENCE

Speaker Highlights

Judith Tannenbaum on *Art, Love, and Chance*

In the days following the Prison Education Conference, Elizabeth Sheets conducted a brief email interview with the keynote speaker Judith Tannenbaum, writer and teaching artist. Her responses reveal her dedication to the human spirit.

Elizabeth Sheets: Your work within the prison education program is inspirational. You've also worked extensively with gifted teens, and developed programs for schools. What in your personal history compels you to work in these areas? It takes compassion to invest yourself this way.

Judith Tannenbaum: I came to my work—sharing poetry in so many different settings—by chance in a way, starting as a volunteer in my daughter's kindergarten class in the mid-1970s. I've been lucky, able to share what I love, poems, with such a variety of people (little kids, older kids, people in prison, kids with lots of opportunities in life, kids with fewer opportunities). Thanks for seeing compassion there, but from my perspective, as I say, I've been lucky to make a work life based on what I love: people and poems and potential.

Sheets: Art creates a positive ripple effect within the prison walls, and without. In what ways have your experiences with inmates expanded your own mind and spirit?

Tannenbaum: This is a big question, and really I've needed the length of *Disguised as a Poem* and *By Heart* to respond. It's hard to reduce those book-length answers to a couple sentences, but I suppose the main answer is in your word "expand." My mind and spirit have had to get bigger to hold the beauty and pain, the full range of what it is to be a human being and the tiny range of so many of our institutions.

Sheets: The prison education movement is much larger than I realized prior to my exposure to the Pen Project. What role do you see yourself continuing to play in prison education? What do you think the next steps are for the advocates out there?

Tannenbaum: I see my work in the realm of the arts, though that world is certainly part of education. The decades of my work life have included my own work as a teaching artist in schools, prisons, and special programs; many years as



Judith Tannenbaum speaks at ASU's 2015 Prison Education Conference. Photo by Michelle McKay

training coordinator with San Francisco WritersCorps (a program where teaching artists share writing with youth in SF); my writing (*Disguised, By Heart*), poetry books on teaching for classroom teachers, lots of essays, etc.); and the information I've assembled on my website responding to inquiries from people who've read my books or who've heard me speak or visited my website.

For advocates, I recommend the Prison Arts Coalition website. For those doing this work, and wanting to keep doing this work, I have more encouragement and gratitude than I do advice. I guess the main advice is to keep paying attention: to your students, to the systems you work in, to your own values and teaching approaches, to your allies, to the world we're all part of.

—ELIZABETH SHEETS

FROM THE CONFERENCE

Speaker Highlights

Kyes Stevens [Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project]:

'Poetry Saved My Life'

In a shady spot at Postino's Wine Café patio near Arizona State University's Tempe Campus, we met up with Kyes Stevens for a candid conversation regarding her work with APAEP, the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project. Over appetizers and wine, we unpacked the day's events at the fourth annual Prison Education Conference, hosted by PEAC, the Prison Education Awareness Club at ASU. Stevens is tall and unassuming. Her voice's soft cadence reflects her Alabama roots, where she spends her days managing APAEP classes in ten prisons across the state. She makes you feel a sisterly bond, even just upon meeting her. What stood out in all our encounters was her openhearted kindness. She walks her talk. Her level of involvement and commitment is encouraging and inspirational.

"I believe in investing in people—because people have invested in me, even when it is complicated. Poetry saved my life; I assume it has done that for others. I absolutely love my job," she said, responding to our question about prison education as an 'underground movement' in the academic

world.

We commented, "Education is an evolving process. What do you feel is the next right step?"

"Prison education needs to move along a path that keeps students' needs at its center. We need to create more educational opportunities of all kinds and quit trying to fit everyone in the same blasted box!"

APAEP, which includes the sciences, drawing, sculpture, painting, creative writing, literature, and other subjects, began a decade ago at Auburn University with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. In addition to administering and expanding the program across the state, Stevens has become a *de facto* full-time grant writer. "I will continue my work in Alabama as long as I can, and happily support others as my time allows."

Information regarding supporting, volunteering, donating, or purchasing one of APAEP's anthologies is available on its website.

—ELIZABETH SHEETS, SHAWAWN BERRY,
and CORNELIA WELLS



Kyles Stevens speaks at ASU's 2015 Prison Education Conference. Photo by Michelle McKay



Prison English *Alumni*

Pictured is a sampling of our hard-working prison educators.
From top: Tina Cai, Corey Campbell, Reese Conner,
Dana Diehl, Julie Rada, and Sherry Rankins-Robertson.

Over the five years this program has existed we have worked with excellent teachers. Many continue to work in education, and a few work in prison education. If you have news of program alumni not mentioned here, let us know for future newsletters.

Abigail Amabisca (2011-2012) is an MFA student at Oregon State University. She teaches creative writing, business writing, and composition.

Ben Ambler (2011-2012, 2015) is a PhD candidate in English at ASU and has been working with a new theatre program for children of incarcerated parents.

Tina Cai (2012-2014) taught English in China and begins an MA in international relations at Columbia University in Fall 2015.

Corey Campbell (2011-2015) begins a PhD in creative writing at University of Houston in Fall 2015.

Amy Cheung (2010-2011) is the ASU Writing Center coordinator and is studying for an MEd in educational leadership.

Reese Conner (2014), **Dana Diehl** (2013-2014), and **Rachel Goldman** (2013-2014) graduated ASU with MFAs in creative writing in May 2015.

Sarah Glady (2012) has left her position as a college sales representative at W.W. Norton Co. because she misses teaching. She is applying for teaching positions in the Phoenix area.

Christine Holm (2013-2014) teaches online at Southern New Hampshire University and lives in Wisconsin.

Kathy Larrimore (2014-2015) completed her PhD. She plans to hold a postdoctoral position in Singapore studying cellular biology before returning to the US to pursue a tenure-track faculty position at a research university.

Anika Larson (2013-2015) was named a Dean's Medalist and begins the Master of Public Health program at University of Washington in Fall 2015.

Julie Rada (2014-2015) holds a two-year graduate fellowship at University of Utah's College of Fine Arts, where she will teach a course in Prison-based Theatre in Fall 2015. She is teaching a theatre workshop at Draper State Prison.

Sherry Rankins-Robertson (2009-2012) is Assistant Professor of English and Associate Vice Chancellor of Student Success and Online Education at University of Arkansas-Little Rock.

