

# PRISON EDUCATION NEWS



Volume 7: Issue 1, Summer 2020, Arizona State University

## NEW PRISON EDUCATION PROGRAMMING DIRECTORS

### CHANGES DUE TO COVID FOR PEP (PRISON EDUCATION PROGRAMMING)

By Naala Brewer, new PEP Director



Naala Brewer, Math faculty,  
speaking at 8th Annual Prison  
Education Conference at ASU

This year of world-wide pandemic due to COVID-19 has seen many changes in education and life in general. These changes have required everyone to think creatively to negotiate a new normal to continue living and moving forward. Arizona State University's Prison Education Programming (PEP) came to halt during the Spring semester of 2020. All in-person volunteer classes and tutoring were canceled by ASU's partner correctional

facilities across the Valley to prevent any possible contractions of COVID-19 among either the incarcerated students or volunteer instructors.

There are two ways to look at this temporary roadblock:

- 1) Everything has come to a halt and there is nothing we can do to change the situation.
- 2) Recreate our program to continue to serve incarcerated students from a distance.

ASU's PEP has decided to take our in-person volunteer classes and create a set of distance-learning courses. This does not negate the work we have done to create an intellectual environment for the incarcerated to educate themselves, a crucial step in reducing recidivism. Rather, distance learning courses will open the door for more volunteers to contribute to Prison Education, and these courses will open the door for more incarcerated students to experience college-level courses. I believe this adds a whole new dimension to PEP, and I am very excited for our new, enhanced future of service.

### FIVE YEARS, FIVE MONTHS, AND FIVE WEEKS

By Tsafrir Mor, new PEP Co-Director

In August 2014 a group of ASU scientists and scholars — a couple of professors, several graduate students, and an undergraduate student, from several disciplines, departments and schools launched a college-level general biology course at Eyman Prison in Florence, Arizona. During our time in the prison classrooms we fed over

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forty men who were malnourished. They were not hungry for food, although from what they told us the food was not much to write home about. They were not deprived of calories, and their sustenance likely met a certain bureaucratic nutritional standard. Rather, they were hungry for knowledge, craving intellectual stimuli, and were chronically academically starved. We strove to fulfill our students' ravenous appetite for the life sciences, while making sure to fan their epicurean desires to learn more outside of the classroom and after the course ended.

We were not easy on our students – we did not spoon-feed them with facts. In fact, our goal was to teach them how to cook – how to choose ingredients, how to dissect them, and combine them into a meaningful whole. And they had exams, and homework, and presentations, and in the last few years also lab



**Tsafir Mor, biology faculty,  
PEP Co-Director, ASU faculty file**

oratory exercises. All through enthusiastic, meticulous planning by the teacher volunteers.

Five years, five months and five weeks came to a screeching halt when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Arizona. Of course, someone from outside needs to bring the disease in – staff (including teachers), family members and other visitors, or a newly arrived incarcerated individual. But once the contagion is in, the close quarters, absence of ventilation, dormitory setting, difficulty to maintain hygiene combined from even scarcer diagnostic and clinical resources all combine to make incarceration facilities hotbeds of infectious diseases. This has been historically the case, described succinctly by Albert Camus more than seventy years ago in his novel *The Plague* through his protagonist and narrator, Dr. Bernard Rieux:

Despite the isolation of some prisoners, a prison is a community, as evidenced by what happened in our city jail: the same proportion of guards as prisoners succumbed to the plague. Under the exalted judgment of the plague, everyone from the warden down to the lowliest inmate was condemned. Perhaps for the first time, perfect justice reigned in the jail. (*The Plague*, 1947).

This whole novel reads like it could have been taken from the daily COVID-19 reportage in any newspaper, including the rats. Arizona prisons are not an exception.

Understandably, we could not hold in person classes. We are currently working together with volunteers in our younger sister program, Astronomy and Geology (run by dedicated SESE students), to create remote learning versions of our courses.

Education, scholarship, science and art are the vital sustenance for human lives since our Homo erectus forebearers engraved abstract crisscrosses on shells to our Zoom college classes and online concerts. Allowing America's incarcerated to enjoy this intellectual nourishment is our mission and we are committed to fulfil it even during a pandemic.

## MAKE IT REAL, MAKE IT MATTER

**By Cornelia “Corri” Wells, PEP Co-Director**



**Cornelia “Corri” Wells, English faculty,  
PEP Co-Director, speaking at 8th Annual  
Prison Education Conference at ASU**

**T**wenty+ years ago, writing my doctoral dissertation, I developed the acute sense that my formal education didn't matter somehow. As I put it to my husband one evening, “This is only what I'm doing; it isn't who I am.” With its third-person, other-quoting rules and

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protocols, the academy largely eschews the person doing the writing. I believe these practices make student writers feel vampiric, looking in the mirror and seeing no one. Why not plagiarize? There is no loss of self in so doing. I eschew plagiarism, so I design writing assignments that give voice to the persons doing them, so they can begin to represent what they know and who they are more authentically to the larger world.

**Ten+ years ago**, I felt a growing desire to extend my university teaching in some tangible way into surrounding, “real life” communities, with no clue this desire would lead to prison teaching. A chance conversation with a colleague led me to Professor Joe Lockard, who had just started the Pen Project, a distance mentoring internship in cooperation with Michelle Ribeiro, an educator with the Penitentiary of New Mexico (PNM) in Santa Fe. In this internship ASU students anonymously critiqued the creative and academic writing of prisoners at PNM. I began teaching the Pen Project in the Fall of 2011, its second year, eventually expanding the project into the Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC). I taught my final Pen Project course in the Spring 2019 semester when both ADC and ASU-Tempe individually shelved the project. ASU interns, both online and on the ground, have frequently touted the Pen Project as the most meaningful course of their academic careers. For prisoners, it has served as both sustenance and beacon of hope. Therefore, it is with great relief to me that I have been able to hand over the Pen Project to Professor Louis Mendoza, Director of the School of Humanities, Arts, and Cultural Studies on the ASU-West Campus, and his colleague Lance Graham. This coming fall semester, they will continue the partnership begun with the Penitentiary of New Mexico in 2010, in both Online and iCourse formats.

**Six+ years ago**, I began directing ASU’s in-person volunteer prison teaching, again taking over from Joe Lockard. Joe began teaching in the prisons in 2010, galvanizing the few individual volunteers, like Regents Professor Ellie van Gelderen, into a program and bringing aboard student interns from ASU. To accommodate and honor our increasing cadre of volunteers from other departments, I changed the name from Prison English to Prison Education Programming (PEP) and facilitated an

increase in PEP course offerings across the curriculum and across the Valley, PEP has grown from the 8 classes in two men’s prisons in Florence that I inherited to 30+ classes per semester in Phoenix, Goodyear, Scottsdale, Buckeye, and Sacaton (including a women’s prison, a youth correctional facility, and two Indian Community correctional facilities). Eventually, PEP and I were blessed with a Co-director, Naala Brewer (math faculty).

**Currently**, I am stepping back a bit to share the growing responsibilities of PEP with two dedicated and creatively forward thinking PEP colleagues. Naala Brewer will now be the official Director of PEP while Tsafrir Mor (biology faculty) and I will serve as Co-Directors. Volunteer teachers, both faculty and students, will continue to be welcomed from any department and any skill set, with approval from corrections administrators.

**For the foreseeable future**, I will continue to serve as a faculty advisor for the Prison Education Awareness Club or PEAC (pronounced the same as peace), helping to plan monthly club meetings/speakers and the 8th Annual Prison Education Conference in the spring.

A founding editor (with ASU alum Natalie Volin) and the Executive Director, I will also continue my extra-curricular involvement with the independent literature and arts publication [Iron City Magazine: Creative Expressions By and For the Incarcerated](#), now in its fifth year. Iron City is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, currently supported by grants from both the Ibis Foundation of Arizona and the Arizona Humanities Council.



Rose  
William Wang, California (ICM 5)  
Acrylic on Canvas, 2018

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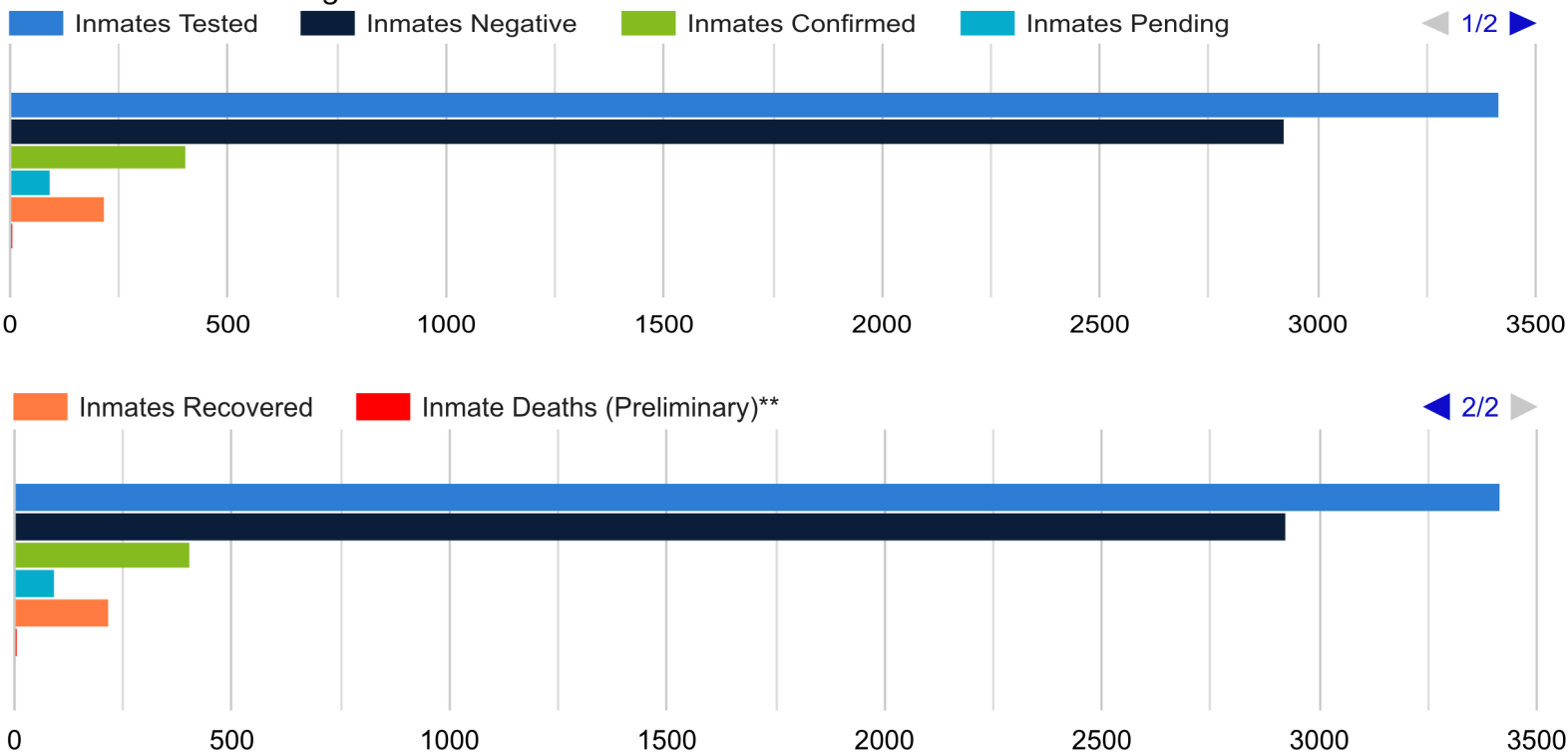
Together We Teach; Together We Learn

Data from Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC) is current as of June 30, 2020.

## ADCRR COVID-19 Dashboard

Inmates Tested	Inmates Negative	Inmates Confirmed
3419	2923	402
Inmates Pending	Inmates Recovered	Daily Total Population
94	217	40217
Inmate Deaths (Confirmed)***		Inmate Deaths (Preliminary)**
4	5	
		Percentage of Positive COVID Population****
		1.00%

### COVID-19 Total Testing





## COVID-19 IN ARIZONA PRISONS

By Madi Margolis, English MA

For a newsletter coming out in June 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, it would be remiss not to address the impact of the novel coronavirus on prison life. Incarcerated people living in prisons are particularly vulnerable to any virus, restricted as they are to close quarters. In Arizona, 90% of inmates live in dormitory-style settings instead of individual cells. For a virus that spreads with people's proximity to each other, such a set-up is less than ideal. Incarcerated people face distinct challenges associated with Covid-19. Despite their high risk for an outbreak, people in prison must contend with a lack of novel coronavirus testing. According to the Arizona Department of Corrections' Covid-19 Dashboard, only 2,125 out of 40,632 inmates have been tested as of June 12, 2020. The lack of knowledge surrounding inmates' exposure to the novel coronavirus leads to uncertainty and fear. These fears are justified, given inmates' status as a high-risk population. The Arizona Department of Corrections' health care provider estimates that 6,600 incarcerated people are particularly vulnerable to novel coronavirus because of their age and poor health.

Given the contagious nature of the virus and the

potential for an outbreak in prison, some people, like retired United States Magistrate Judge Charles Pyle, are calling for the early release of non-violent prisoners. Though prisons around the country have authorized thousands of early releases, Arizona prisons have not sanctioned those actions. Instead of releasing incarcerated individuals, Arizona prisons have taken other precautions. The Arizona Department of Corrections, for example, has agreed to issue regular reports on novel coronavirus testing results. Additionally, soap is now free in the prisons, and the \$4 cost of flu and cold treatments has been waived. In an effort to reduce exposure to the virus, incarcerated people get two free 15-minute phone calls per week in lieu of visits. Accordingly, Arizona prisons have been able to keep down their number of positive cases. Other prisons around the country, including Troupdale in Tennessee, have not been as lucky, facing massive outbreaks with 70% of inmates testing positive for the virus. Activists hope to use the pandemic as a chance to urge for prison healthcare reform, beyond these temporary changes. They hope to improve prison sanitation and decrease prison overcrowding, a way of achieving prison reform progress even in the most perilous of times.



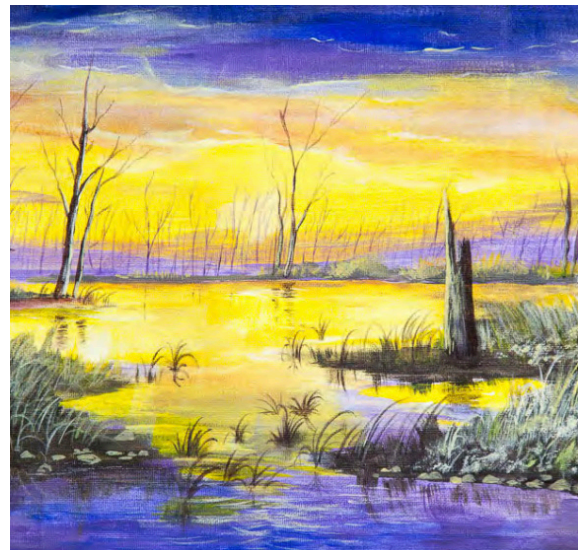
*Surrealist Dream Part I*

Russell Pence, CA

Watercolor Pencil on Paper, 2017

Project PAINT Participant

*Iron City Magazine Issue 4*



*Untitled*

Anh Ben Nguyen, CA

Acrylic on Paper, 2014

Project PAINT Participant

*Iron City Magazine Issue 4*

## AN INSIDE LOOK: THE INSIDE-OUT PRISON EXCHANGE PROGRAM

By Madi Margolis, MA English

For ten ASU students in August 2018, the first day of class looked a little different than usual. Rather than walking down Palm Walk, they drove sixty-five miles into the desert, where they were admitted into East Unit, a medium-custody yard of the Arizona Florence State Prison. One student, Madison Sutton, remembers pulling up to the prison for the first time, looking into a sea of orange instead of maroon and gold. As participants in ASU's Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, these students would be paired with ten "inside" students—incarcerated men—in a collaborative, discussion-based class. Together, all twenty students would investigate the theoretical and experiential discourses of criminal justice as they read books, wrote papers, and built relationships that extended from the inside out. Around the country,

nearly every U.S. state. In 2016, Arizona State University held its first Inside-Out class, taught by Dr. Kevin Wright, associate professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice and director of the Center for Correctional Solutions. Now the class is a staple of the school, recurring each semester with a competitive application process. The program and its participants have no shortage of achievements.

The impact of this class is astonishing, reaching well beyond the physical constraints of the prison walls. For inside students, the class provides an opportunity for growth and self-awareness. One incarcerated man, in a cynical turn-of-phrase, claimed that the Department of Corrections would be more aptly named the "Department of Correct Yourself," where prisoners are expected to turn their lives around on their own. According to Sutton, this class changed his perspective. No longer was "correcting yourself" a negative directive. Instead, it implied that change was attainable, in one's own hands. Only after starting within yourself can you extend your new perspective to those around you. Along with giving students space to construct a new mental framework, this class also allowed inside students to address their grievances with the prison system. As the people most exposed and attuned to the shortcomings of the prison system, incarcerated individuals have particular insight into prison conditions. This class, and others like it, give prisoners a voice to report the problems they deem most pressing.

The class also provides an opportunity for students to challenge themselves academically. Some inside students expressed anxiety over the fear that, after spending so long in prison, they would not be able to hold a "normal" conversation anymore. For students whose recent memory consisted only of time in prison, or others who had spent more of their life in prison than out, this class was proof—they could still interact with outside people and engage in "normal" conversations. In fact, the conversations these students had were anything but normal. They were detailed, deep, and philosophical. These students were more than capable of holding conversation. For those that will reenter society (more than 95% of all prisoners are released at some point), this class gives them reassurance that they will transition successfully and that they will still know how to connect with other people. For those with life in prison, this class is a reminder that, although prison



Sutton is pursuing a master's degree in Criminal Justice and Criminology at ASU

other students were experiencing first days just like theirs. The Inside-Out Program began at Pennsylvania's Temple University in 1997, founded by Criminal Justice faculty Lori Pompa. Since then, the program has spread to



may have changed them a little or a lot, it had not changed them completely. This class, then, is not just an academic challenge but an emotional and mental outlet, restoring in incarcerated individuals a sense of normalcy.

The class, of course, is just as meaningful for the outside students as the inside. By encouraging a collaborative and open environment, the class allows inside students to share not only their struggles but also their identities and personalities. Sutton explains that, rather than being scared inside the prison classroom, she felt “very safe in that space,” admitting that was “not something she expected to feel.” Outside students get the chance to challenge their own preconceptions and grow their empathy as they reevaluate what it means to be incarcerated. “They’re just people,” Sutton states. “That’s what they wanted to show us.” As outside students take their experiences back to the outside world, they create

“They’re just people...  
That’s what they wanted  
to show us.”

a ripple effect. By reminding others of the incarcerated individuals’ humanity, they destigmatize the felon label and decrease the antagonism attached to it. After all, anyone is more complex than their worst decisions.

At the end of the semester, Inside-Out students celebrate their accomplishments at their own graduation. Their classmates nominate one inside student and one outside student to give graduation speeches. Sutton, the outside student selected for her cohort, shared how this class is one that changes lives. A global studies and psychological sciences major, Sutton had never formally engaged with theories of criminal justice before taking this class. Now, a year later, she is pursuing a master’s in criminal justice and criminology at ASU. She credits this class as redirecting the course of her life. Likewise, one skeptical inside student, a man in his late fifties, insisted that he had no reason for committing the crimes he did; he had always been this way, he guaranteed, and he was never going to change. By the end of the class, however, Sutton believed his perspective had shifted. For the first time, he expressed his hope that things could be different

and that, next time, he might not come back to prison. This class has a lasting impact, reaching even the students most unaccustomed to prison life or those least willing to change.

Looking back, Sutton decides that the hardest part of the program was saying goodbye. After participating in intense conversations with her fellow students and being intentional about getting to know each other, it felt surreal to see the inside students walk behind the bars for as the last class ended. In such a rewarding, challenging class, it is easy to forget that it is different from any other ASU class—until you remember there are no hugs, no last names, and, after the last day, no further contact. The class is bittersweet, limited to the length of a semester and the confines of the prison, but it is worthwhile. This is what the outside students remind themselves of as they drive the sixty-five miles back to Phoenix.

If you are interested in applying for the Spring 2021 class, contact Danielle Haverkate ([dhaverka@asu.edu](mailto:dhaverka@asu.edu)) or Caitlin Matekel ([cmatekel@asu.edu](mailto:cmatekel@asu.edu)). If you have general questions about Inside-Out at ASU, contact Dr. Kevin Wright ([kevinwright@asu.edu](mailto:kevinwright@asu.edu)).



Sutton was the “outside” student chosen to give a speech at Inside-Out graduation

## EDUCATION IN PRISON IS ESSENTIAL



By Audrey Spivey  
PhD Candidate in Philosophy

Volunteer of the Year Award,  
Arizona Department of Corrections,  
Arizona State Prison Complex-Florence, 2019

Since 2017, I've had the opportunity to teach a number of philosophy courses at the Arizona State Prison for men in Florence. One of the most important takeaways from my experience is the importance of education and skill development for everyone.

Education has both extrinsic and intrinsic value. It enables us to pursue our goals and ends, and also promotes self-esteem, confidence, and independence, which are important for reentry.

In times of economic uncertainty, there is a temptation to cut or reallocate funds for educational programs and services in favor of more "essential" services. This is a mistake.

My students at Florence are not so different from any other students at the universities and colleges I've taught at. They all hope to improve their future by taking classes and learning new skills. They improve their self-confidence and self-esteem by learning new things, including that it's ok to not get it right the first time.

To reduce access to such programs is to impede successful reentry. Ninety-five percent of all prisoners will return to society and, when they do, they deserve a fighting chance, which education can provide.

Education helps us understand ourselves and the world better, which, in turn, promotes civil and social engagement. Education is essential no matter what side of a fence a person lives on.

## MAKING A FASHION STATEMENT IN PRISON



By Anna Espinoza  
BA Candidate in Philosophy

This semester, when I offered suggestions for classes I might teach at the Arizona State Prison for women in Goodyear, I didn't expect to hear that out of the few subjects on my list, the administrators thought fashion would be the best choice.

It certainly didn't make sense to the correctional officers when I arrived for class. Which class was I there for? Fashion? Just when they thought they had seen it all. I started lecture that day explaining to my students why it's incorrect to discount (pun intended) fashion as a legitimate topic when it comes to discussions about art, culture, politics, and business. Why do people do this, I asked, and can we blame the fashion industry's human rights violations (think sweat shops and child laborers) and the harm it's done to the environment on the exclusion of fashion from academic discussions?

From there we delved into an extensive quiz on fashion terminology (I remember fielding precocious questions about the physics of textiles) and a discussion on fashion's cyclical trends. I wanted to know their definitions of fashion, based on the role that fashion had played in their lives. We soon entered into a rapid fire exchange about moon boots and mothers' sewing machines, each student making observations about how they had used fashion to fit in, stand out, or feel better.

I had planned to move on to the basics of fashion history, design theory, fashion law and ethics, product development, marketing, and merchandising, but COVID-19 interrupted. I can't wait to get back to teaching when it's possible to do so. It's the best part of my week.



## REVIVING THE PEN PROJECT



By Louis Mendoza  
*New Director of the PEN Project*

I began working at ASU in the Summer of 2014. I was hired to be Director of the School of Humanities, Arts, and Cultural Studies in the New College of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences on the West campus. As school Director I often assign myself lower division classes such as Introduction to American Studies or Ethnic and Indigenous Lives. One of my favorite classes I've taught since being here was 20th Century Prison Literature in the United States.

I have colleagues at ASU who have been steadfast contributors to prisoner education both while they are incarcerated and also once they leave prison. I have long been interested in prisoner empowerment through education, and the Prison Industrial Complex and Prison Literature are key areas of my scholarship. I had the great fortune to be close friends with a former prisoner who was committed to advancing prisoner rights and education and raising public awareness of the devastating impact and injustice of the Prison Industrial Complex on our society. I have delivered guest lectures and organized a year-long seminar at the Minnesota State Penitentiary- Stillwater and arranged readings and workshops for colleagues in Texas and California. In Fall 2019 a former student of mine who is also invested in prisoner education and who teaches for us at the West Campus, Lance Graham, brought to my attention that the Pen Project was seeking a new academic home. I jumped at the opportunity because I believe this is precisely the kind of opportunity our students need to develop a critical eye towards an important, if not also highly problematic, social institution. I am excited that the most recent overseer of the program, Professor Cornelia Wells, has entrusted the

project to us and has worked to make this a relatively seamless transition.

The Pen Project was organized in a very thoughtful and careful manner in partnership with the Penitentiary of New Mexico and is a great way for students to gain entry into prisoner education even if they do not have a personal stake or previous experience. Initially, I will maintain the same approach and examine all aspects of the program delivery for ways in which it might be improved. I have no initial criticisms or concerns with its organization. It has been a highly successful program. I do hope that as our predecessors were able to do, we will be able to get students involved in the next stage of writing with prisoners and further support their interests in publishing, for the prisoners who so desire. I would love to eventually expand this program to develop a writing-reading support network for ex-prisoners. I also hope that after spending time getting a better understanding of Arizona's Department of Corrections I can initiate a process of earning trust and convincing them to invest in our partnership so we can re-establish the Pen Project in Arizona Prisons. This is a key mid-range goal.

**"I DO HOPE THAT AS OUR PREDECESSORS WERE ABLE TO DO, WE WILL BE ABLE TO GET STUDENTS INVOLVED IN THE NEXT STAGE OF WRITING WITH PRISONERS AND FURTHER SUPPORT THEIR INTERESTS IN PUBLISHING..."**

We already have 20 students registered for the class - from a variety of disciplines (English, Social Justice and Human Rights, and Ethnic and Indigenous Studies), both graduate and undergraduate students, and Ground Immersion and Digital Immersion students. I am eager to get to know them, eager to be engaged with writers who are hungry for feedback on their creative work, and eager to embrace the process of creative collaboration that I hope will be mutually beneficial for all involved.

## MORE THAN AN HONORS THESIS: SUBSTANCE ABUSE EDUCATION

By Madi Margolis, MA English

**B**rianna Johnson, an ASU student, was indecisive about choosing a major—she changed it five times—but she never wavered in what she wanted to do for her Barrett undergraduate honors thesis. She wanted to create something meaningful. So, when senior year came around, she set out to tackle one of the most pressing problems in the prison system: substance



Brianna Johnson,  
BS Criminal Justice  
BS Psychology

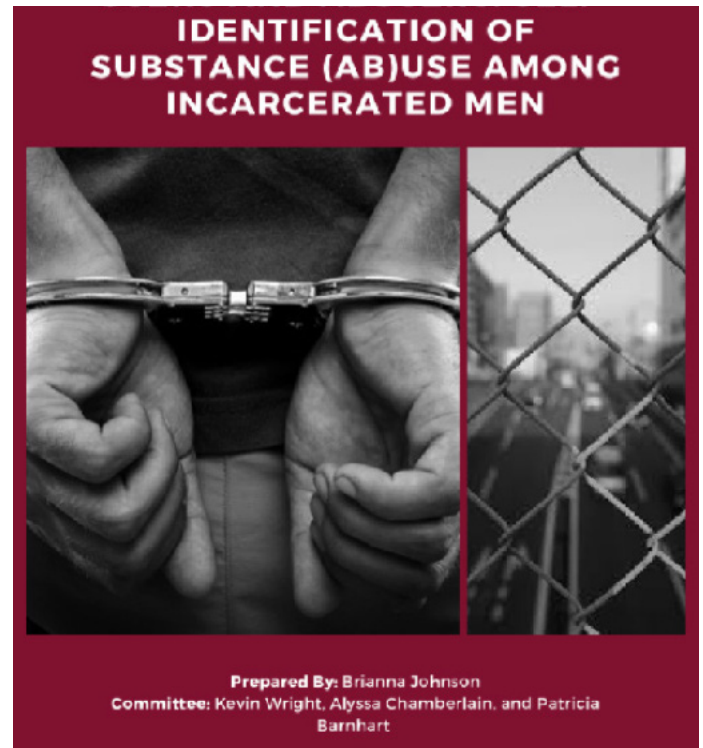
abuse. With the support of the Center for Correctional Solutions at ASU and her thesis director, Dr. Kevin Wright, Johnson created a report and pamphlet analyzing substance users' and abusers' self-perception.

Johnson's thesis, "Users and Abusers: Self-Identification of Substance (Ab)use Among Incarcerated Men," identifies perceptual differences between users who acknowledged a substance abuse problem and those who did not. To do so, she obtained data from a larger study conducted through ASU, one that collected questionnaire data from over 400 incarcerated men at the Arizona State Prison Complex in Florence. Respondents indicated whether they had meth, marijuana, or alcohol in the month prior to their incarceration. Then, respondents were asked whether they believed they had a substance abuse problem or not.

Finally, Johnson compiled her results into two documents: a report, intended for clinicians and a more academic audience, and a pamphlet, geared towards the general public as well as the incarcerated individuals themselves. It was important to her, Johnson says, that her thesis be a creative project, not a traditional report. By making her pamphlet accessible and eye-catching, she hopes to reach a wider audience; she aims to raise awareness among the general public as well as provide

self-knowledge to the incarcerated people affected.

The results of Johnson's research are significant for both the prison communities and the clinicians serving them. One of the main goals of her research is to expand the definition of substance abuse. Johnson's research shows that prison healthcare systems tend to treat individuals who exhibit extreme substance abuse problems while providing other individuals little to no treatment. Acknowledging a broader understanding of substance abuse, Johnson believes, will allow all levels of abuse to be treated. She explains, "By recognizing that perceptual differences exist between 'softer' drug users and 'harder' drug users who say that they do not have a substance abuse problem, clinicians can... offer more comprehensive services, such as intervention programs to help users understand that a problem may exist." Johnson's thesis, by challenging accepted definitions of substance abuse, paves the way for more individualized, comprehensive



The pamphlet Johnson created for her honors thesis analyzes trends and themes among substance users and abuser

treatment of substance abuse problems in prison.

Just as importantly as advocating for systemic changes, Johnson hopes that her research will help incarcerated people directly. Above all, she aims for her research to help restore incarcerated people's sense of autonomy.



Educated about substance abuse and armed with a better understanding of their situations, incarcerated people can make changes in their lives. Johnson believes that education about substance abuse “may help curb recidivism rates, since individuals with untreated substance abuse problems face higher risks for reoffending than those who seek treatment.” By looking at their substance abuse more clearly, incarcerated people can address related issues in their lives and reclaim a degree of power.

In the future, Johnson would like to continue her research and expand it to include other demographics, such as incarcerated women. As a spring 2020 graduate, she is considering pursuing her master’s or a PhD in public policy with a focus on prison policy. Johnson is the type who always wants to do more. Even as she celebrates the successful defense of her thesis, she can’t help but look to the future, noting how much work there still is to do. She hopes for progressive policies, comprehensive healthcare, and broader education opportunities. Luckily, it’s evident in Johnson’s thorough, insightful research that she, and students like her, are more than ready for the challenge.



## AN INTERVIEW WITH LINDSEY SAYA



Photo courtesy of Lindsey Saya,  
([www.instagram.com/lins\\_1283/](https://www.instagram.com/lins_1283/)).

Lindsey Saya discussed his poetry with Imogen Arate on her podcast *Poets and Muses*. In this May 2020 interview, Saya and Arate touch on the effects of the novel coronavirus on the prison population as well as the effect of education on recidivism. His poems, including “Late Night Carousel” and “Farewell to His Prison,” can be found in *Iron City Magazine*.

Listen to the interview here: [Poets and Muses](#) and  
Read Saya’s work (in print or online) in [Iron City Magazine, Issues 3 & 4](#)





# THE GRADUATING AND THE NEW PEAC PRESIDENTS

## OUTGOING PEAC PRESIDENT

### LANA MARIE MOUSA

BA English Literature, minor Justice Studies



By Lana Marie Mousa

It was remarkable to see the Prison Education Awareness Club (PEAC) grow over the past few years. Students and faculty from different academic disciplines came together because of the shared belief that educational opportunities are a necessary component to rebuilding our lives shattered by our prison system. Led by the sensational Dr. Corri Wells since 2011, PEAC continued to drive this narrative forward by encouraging ASU students to design and teach a class at one of Arizona's prisons.

Through serving as an officer for the past two years, I met with undergraduate and graduate students who expressed how eager they were to help create a less destructive incarceration system. I watched in admiration as they led a grassroots effort to bring academic opportunities to those who were often denied them. It was an honor to collaborate with people who likewise believe that education is a right all of us—even our fellow Americans living in our peripheral—deserve. All those in PEAC, and the entire ASU Prison Education Program (PEP), are individuals who have made a difference in a systematically broken institution.

The idea of teaching in prisons may seem unconventional, but PEAC has attempted to normalize this for its members and the ASU community at large. During our monthly gatherings, we discussed the pressing issues surrounding incarceration, and more people galvanized into teaching thereafter. Upon stepping foot into their prison classroom each week, our students eradicated barriers to learning, and by extension, to personal growth. They showed that the right to learn is not exclusive to those outside prison walls. I'm confident that PEAC and its future leaders will continue to foster a community of individuals that will serve as important voices for the prison education movement.

## INCOMING PEAC PRESIDENT

### LESLIE FLORES

BS Candidate in Business Entrepreneurship



By Jessica Sills

MA English, BS Psychology

Leslie Flores, the incoming president for the Prison Education Awareness Club, is a junior studying Business Entrepreneurship. She first got involved in prison education after attending Passport to ASU the fall of her freshman year, though she had first heard of some of the prison-related work being done at ASU when she purchased an edition of *Iron City Magazine* at First Friday in Downtown Phoenix. Incredibly moved by the art and poetry, she was instantly drawn to PEAC. She feels that education is an important part of combating the injustice she sees every day in the criminal justice system. So far, her favorite part of working in prison education is seeing the impact of her work. She began by teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at Florence, which was special to her because her father had been incarcerated in 2010 and didn't speak English at the time. She is incredibly grateful for her time so far and is excited to return in the fall to lead PEAC and continue teaching ESL classes at Florence.



# Student INITIATIVES ON CAMPUS

## THE NEWTON PROJECT CLUB

By Madi Margolis, MA English



In collaboration with Prison Education Programming, the Newton Project Club furthers STEM outreach in prison education. This club, a student group on campus, offers courses in science, technology, engineering, and math to incarcerated individuals and juveniles

around the valley, hoping to encourage future education. The president and founder of the club, Xavier Bonelli, is a chemical engineering major in the Fulton School of Engineering. He encourages anyone interested to get involved, even those hesitant to visit a prison or nervous about teaching, in general. He believes, "This club also only requires as much work as you are willing to put in, so give a little or give a lot and we will appreciate it so much."

Whether students want to teach in the prisons, grade assignments, or create lesson plans, there is a way for them to make a difference. In their determination to help the incarcerated succeed and change their futures for the better, the Newton Project Club demonstrates the impact of student initiatives on campus.

<https://asu.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/the-newton-project-club>



Left to right: Anna Bell, one of two Newton Project VPs; Xavier Bonelli, Newton Project President.

## THE PEAC CLUB

By Madi Margolis, MA English



The Prison Education Awareness Club (PEAC, pronounced "peace") is a student-led organization that educates the ASU community on the Prison Education System. Nearly a

decade old, PEAC is well-established at ASU. The club raises awareness for prison issues and advocates for their improvement, both acknowledging the need for more educational opportunities and celebrating the work that has already been done. Lana Mousa, a senior English literature and justice studies student, served as PEAC president this past year. She, along with the other PEAC officers, organized meetings and events throughout the year. The club hosted guest speakers like Zack Shropshire, a former inmate, and Q and A sessions

Making  
an  
Impact

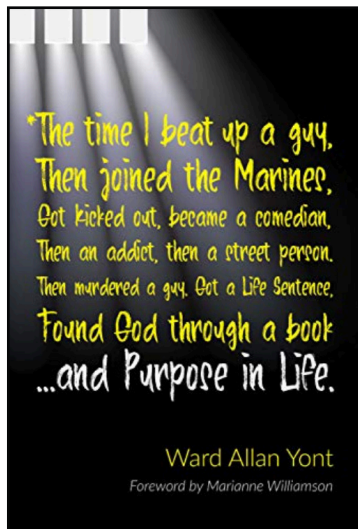
about experiences teaching in the prison. One of PEAC's most notable contributions is sponsoring the annual ASU Prison Education Conference each spring. The event is completely organized by students and their faculty advisor, devoted to the idea that education decreases recidivism. Students looking to get involved in the club can do so in a variety of ways, whether teaching courses in the prisons, providing feedback on incarcerated people's writing, or supporting existing programs. By joining PEAC, students are able to make a tangible impact on their communities.

[peac.serve@gmail.com](mailto:peac.serve@gmail.com)[newton-project-club](https://asu.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/the-newton-project-club)

## TURNING HEADS AND PAGES: WARD ALLAN YONT'S BOOK PUBLICATION

By Madi Margolis, MA English

Ward Allan Yont, a former ASU Tempe Pen Project participant and PEP creative writing student at the Arizona State Prison in Florence, is turning heads and turning pages. On August 28, 2019, Arch Street Press published Yont's first book. The title of the book is a feat in itself, called, "The time I beat up a guy, then joined the Marines, got kicked out, became a comedian, then an addict, then a street person. Then murdered a guy. Got a life sentence, found God through a book... and Purpose in Life." In his memoir, the former Pen Project participant shares the spiritual odyssey on which he embarks over the course of his life. In his own words, the story is "an entertaining mix of psychosis, addiction, and comedic mishap that leads first to tragedy, then a most profound and ironic awakening unto meaning and purpose in life." Equally exciting, the book's forward is written by **Marianne Williamson**, former democratic candidate and six-time best-selling spiritual author. Williamson promises, "We can easily focus on the tragedies in Yont's story, but there is no need to dwell there. For this is a story of resurrection and love—of darkness turned into light and the transformation of the human heart. Yont is not a victim, but a teacher. He has lived his own story and now he illumines ours." If you can't wait to read the rest of Yont's comedic, poignant, and hopeful novel, visit the publisher's website, [archstreetpress.org](http://archstreetpress.org), or [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).



Ward Allan Yont's spiritual odyssey ... *and Purpose in Life*

Foreword by  
**Marianne  
Williamson,**  
author of four *New York  
Times* bestselling books  
on spirituality

An interview with  
Mr. Yont conducted by  
ASU alum Jessica M.  
Fletcher will appear  
in issue 5 of *Iron City  
Magazine* in fall 2020

## "QUICK PICK"

By Adam Anthony Maestas, March

- Buying a lotto ticket is a shot in the dark.
- Either pick your numbers, or they are chosen for you.
- You pay to play.
- The donations add up.
- Virtually everyone goes a lifetime and sees no reward.
- Many sacrifice it all for that one chance, but instead lose everything.
- In extreme cases, some may even die.
- Is it really worth the risk? You decide.
- Family is predetermined. You don't get to choose.
- Perfect strangers. You must adapt. You're encouraged to acquaint.
- Time decides whom you keep near and whom you push away.
- Some you'll never meet, much less know you had.
- Blood makes you related.
- Loyalty makes you family.
- You are a product of your parents.
- You are their reward.
- Your children are a product of you.
- You are rewarded.
- Money can't buy love or bring happiness, but family most certainly can.
- In rare cases, some family may bring grief or deceit.
- Tragically, some will perish.
- Sadly, some will betray you.
- You pay to play.
- The sacrifices add up.
- Many would relinquish everything to protect those they cherish.
- Is it really worth the risk, when push comes to shove?
- For me, the answer's simple.
- I wouldn't die for money, but I'd damn sure die for love!



# CREATING NEW PERSPECTIVES

## IRON CITY MAGAZINE, ISSUE 4 LAUNCH, 2019, AT CHANGING HANDS

By Jessica Sills



Top left: Ken Lamberton (contributor). Bottom: Ken with Lindsey Saya (contributor).

Top right: Jacob Friedman (Piper Center for Creative Writing), Ken Lamberton, Lindsey Saya, Cornelia "Corri" Wells (Editor-in-Chief), Jacqueline Aguilar (Managing Editor), Laura Pecenco (Project Paint, Director)

On November 8, 2019, *Iron City Magazine* celebrated the launch of its fourth issue at Changing Hands bookstore, Phoenix location. It was a lovely evening in which we heard from two of the contributors to the magazine, Ken Lamberton and Lindsey Saya, and they shared some of their work with us aloud. We also heard from the managing editor for the magazine, Jacqueline Aguilar, and the editor-in-chief, Corri Wells. They answered questions about the magazine and the process of producing and editing it, and they discussed some of the

challenges of the work they do. Also present was Read Between the Bars, an organization that donates books to inmates. They aim to reduce recidivism through reading. This latest issue of *Iron City* includes an excellent variety of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and artwork from people who are incarcerated all across the United States, and one formerly incarcerated contributor from Australia. *Iron City's* 5th issue closed its submissions July 1st and will be released this fall.

## The Prisoner Bids Farewell to His Prison

Lindsey Saya, Arizona  
*Iron City Magazine, Issue 4*

I give you to the dark, goodbye, goodbye.  
Am free to leap and taste the sun's gold flame.  
No more chains, no more binds, I leave you behind.

From the much and the mud I will rise  
To breathe the air that's sweetest beyond the gates.  
I give you to the dark, goodbye, goodbye.

Farewell lonesome cave of mine,  
The grave that held my heart and shame.  
No more chains, no more binds, I leave you behind.

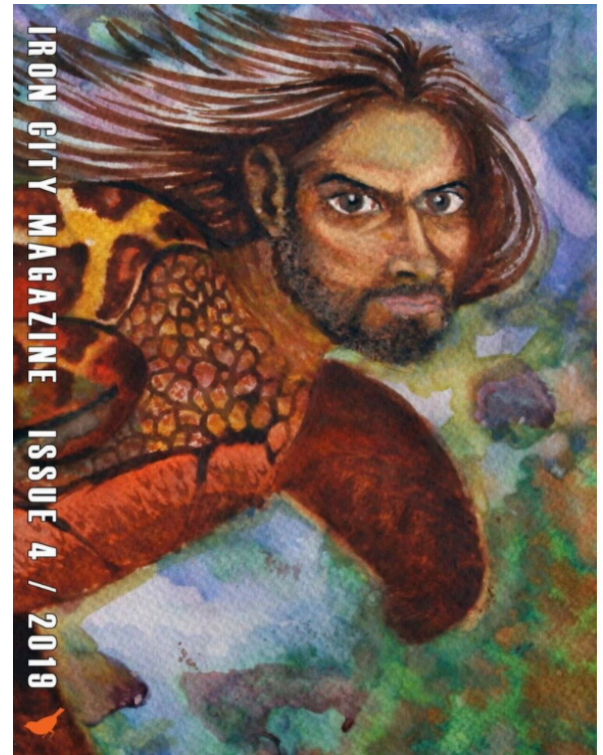
What bleeding sunsets and blue twilights await my eyes.  
How I'll stand in drops of rain and let the wildness in  
me wash away.  
I give you to the dark, goodbye, goodbye.

My debt is met and I  
make peace with grief and hate that swells inside my  
veins.  
No more chains, no more binds, I leave you behind.

To the place where hopes and dreams of savage beings  
are meant to die,  
Where broken men like shattered glass wait to turn to  
dust, I say:  
I give you to the dark, goodbye, goodbye.  
No more chains, no more binds, I leave you behind.



**Surrealist Dream Pt. 1**  
Ricardo Barrera, California  
Watercolor on Pencil on Bristol, 2017  
Project PAINT Participant  
*Iron City Magazine, Issue 4*



**Frida Kahlo-Inspired Self-Portrait**  
Ruben Radillo, California  
Project PAINT Participant  
*Iron City Magazine, Issue 4*



## Never... yet

Matthew Feeney, Minnesota  
*Iron City Magazine, Issue 4*

I've never parachuted from a plane  
I've never panned for Yukon gold  
I've never dozed in a sleeper train  
or gone ice-fishing in the winter cold.

I've never built a home with my own two hands  
and though I've had the urges:  
I've never been to *Burning Man*  
or ridden my bike to Sturgis.

I've never raced an RC drone  
I've never been fly fishin'  
I've never milked a goat of my own  
And this ain't just idle wishin'.

Though I've never walked through a Redwood tree  
I'll do all these things (*and more*)... when I'm free.





***Surrealist Final Project***  
Michael Briggs, California  
Acrylic on Canvas Board, 2019  
Project PAINT Participant  
*Iron City Magazine*, Issue 4



***White Trees***  
Kazten Somari, AZ  
Mixed Media, 2018  
Project PAINT Participant  
*Iron City Magazine*, Issue 4



## **Mi Soledad**

Dany Medina, Florida  
*Iron City Magazine*, Issue 4

Te has convertido en mi soledad Perfecta.  
Me has contemplado en noches oscuras.  
Has abarcado mi cuerpo y mi piel:  
has transformado toda mi figura.

Haciendo de mí un invierno sin verano  
y causando que mis ojos se conviertan en mar,  
llenando mis mejillas de ríos con mis llantos,  
dejando en mis labios el gusto de tu sal.

Me has acompañado siempre en la vida.  
Has sido la testigo de mis secretos.

Me has demostrado que el amor tiene espinas  
y se oculta en lo profundo de mi pecho.

Ya entiendo cuando dices que somos iguales  
porque no ahí nada que nos separe a los dos.

Me gusta cuando hablas con puras verdades,  
Aunque siempre me partas duro el corazón.

Por eso ven y acuéstate conmigo  
y dame el silencio que me hace llorar.

Ya nadie me quiere y eres testigo,  
De esta condena que no tiene final.



## ORANGE IN THE NEW BLACKBOARD JUNGLE\*

By Bootsie Martínez R.

In 1954, Evan Hunter wrote *The Blackboard Jungle*, which was made into a movie the following year. The author, who later went on to enjoy decades of fame as the creator of the 87th Precinct series under his pen name, Ed McBain, was in his starving-writer phase when he took a job teaching at a boys' vocational high school in his native New York City. At that time, students with disciplinary problems, low IQs and what later came to be known as learning disabilities were dumped into vocational schools. Many of them graduated into the penitentiaries.

Fast-forward to the era of whiteboards and *Orange Is the New Black*. The school-to-prison pipeline has ensured that the same kids who would have been relegated to vo-tech in the '50s remain, in the new millennium,

**“THEY *WANT* TO BE IN OUR CLASSES... WITH FEW CHOICES ALLOWED THEM, THEY ENTHUSIASTICALLY EMBRACE EDUCATION.”**

in failing schools that deliver them to the penitentiaries with many of the same issues as their *Blackboard Jungle* counterparts.

Their behavioral issues do not evaporate upon donning the orange jumpsuit. Nor are they magically relieved of their learning disabilities or the less-than-stellar educations that have left many of them functionally illiterate.

While 15 percent of the general U.S. population has a learning disability, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that over half, and as many as three-quarters, of inmates are learning disabled. Many inmates arrive with a history of poor self-control and poor choices, in addition to other issues. Prison structure does help a few inmates; however, many deteriorate mentally and cause problems

inside the walls. Corrections staff and administration struggle with bored and disaffected inmates who have nothing but time to think up ways to get into trouble.

### BENEFITS OF PROGRAMS

Programming for inmates helps alleviate some of the issues that lead to discipline problems inside. In addition to substance abuse help, religious programs and vocational training, academic as well as non-credit education is a useful tool to keep inmates engaged and focused on something positive. Education also provides benefits to the inmates as well as to society upon their release.

Estimates of reduced recidivism rates among inmates who participate in educational programs while incarcerated range from 29 percent to over 90 percent, depending on the program. The benefits of inmates enrolled in prison education begin before they leave the facility, however; they commit fewer infractions while serving time and have fewer disciplinary write-ups – including lifers.

Of course, prison education is not all peaches and cream. On a purely practical level, every teacher who enters the facility, whether paid staff or volunteer, just like every other volunteer or staff member who comes into the prison, poses a security risk. Any outsider could bring contraband inside, and teachers need to be scrutinized like everyone else. Corrections staff are needed to check them in and supervise them. And when in-person education is provided for college credit, there are costs involved, even when teachers are volunteers.

### THE TEACHING EXPERIENCE

I have spent the past three decades working and volunteering in correctional facilities in different capacities. Currently, I am pursuing a doctorate at a state university that provides opportunities for graduate students to teach non-credit classes in state prisons. All the volunteer teachers love going inside to teach inmates.

First of all, we get to choose our own topics, so we can teach subjects that we are interested in, and not just prescribed education, as in a credit-bearing program. Secondly, the inmates are self-selected. They want to be in our classes. Okay, maybe some of them want to be out of their cells more than they want to be in the classroom, but that's fine. Once they are our “captive” audience, we have the opportunity to introduce them to a topic that they may discover a previously unknown interest in. In any event, they want the opportunity to keep getting out of the cells badly enough to behave appropriately in class.

Not all of them are stellar students, but enough of them are engaged – asking questions, taking notes – to make me feel as though I am teaching. Delivering content to college students in traditional classrooms, on the other hand, often means competing against cell phones, tablets and other distractions for the attention of students who want just enough course credits to punch the ticket necessary to obtain a good job.

Self-selected inmates are interested in the material. They eagerly prepare for class, devouring the text and agonizing over the perfect phrasing for their homework. With few choices allowed them, they enthusiastically embrace education, even non-credit classes taught by a volunteer. Their certificate of completion is a flimsy piece of paper that whispers they have accomplished something worthwhile, even if it doesn't lead to a degree. It contributes to their microscopic store of self-esteem in a place

**“HE REALLY JUST WANTED  
SOMEONE TO LISTEN  
AND TO TAKE HIM  
SERIOUSLY.”**

where they often experience only degradation and demoralization.

In prison, students are always under surveillance, and they are presented hourly with temptations: drugs, homemade weapons, contraband, fights. But their shoulders straighten when they are addressed politely as “Mr. \_\_\_\_” instead of the anonymizing “Inmate #12345.”

They are not all eager to embrace their teachers. They spend some time trying to figure us out. Why would we teach for free – in a prison? What do we want? What kind of game are we running? Used to operating in a quid pro quo society, it's hard for them to wrap their heads around something-for-nothing.

So they test us. One inmate wanted to pick a fight with me on the first day. He was rebelling against the labelling of inmates, the assumption that they were bad people, etc. I didn't argue with him. I didn't argue because I agreed with him. It took him a couple of weeks to figure out that I wasn't playing him. Then he began to regale me with his opinions on a variety of subjects. He really just wanted someone to listen and to take him seriously.

## HUMANITY

Inmates watch everything you do. They're always on the lookout for insincerity or opportunity. I'm a lousy liar, so I am honest. While I don't give out personal information, I will talk about my experiences. They can relate to these. I'm also honest that I don't know everything. I may have to look something up. Or they may have to. My role is as a facilitator in their learning, not a sage on the stage, imparting wisdom to the unlearned.

I assigned a short story that I had found to be a bit weird and something I thought might appeal to them. I was ready for them to give their opinions, then move on. But one student began expounding on the imagery and the dual messages in the story. I was fascinated. I had not considered the story from those perspectives until he brought them up.

A member of the class told me, “I was watching you. Your whole body language changed when you were listening to him.”

I was honest with them about my appreciation for the different perspectives. “You're teaching me,” I told them.

The inmate who had brought up the new viewpoint puffed out his chest. “I'm gonna get a big head now,” he said.

Everyone wants to feel valued. The fact that a professor from a university was impressed with his thinking probably benefited this inmate more than any of our chats about literature. And the fact that the whole class wit-

**“MY ROLE  
IS AS A FACILITATOR  
IN THEIR LEARNING,  
NOT A SAGE ON THE STAGE,  
IMPARTING WISDOM  
TO THE UNLEARNED.”**

nessed my willingness to be taught showed them something, too.

There was a part of me that wanted to say, “Really, don’t be impressed with me. I got into grad school because I’m a good test-taker and I can string a few words together. It doesn’t mean I know anything.”

But my interactions with them allow them to see me as a human being who is invested in them. They even felt comfortable enough within a couple of weeks to tease me. I stepped backward and hit my foot on the portable whiteboard wheel. They made some cheering noises. “Just

***“THEY LAUGHED. I LAUGHED.  
IT DIDN’T MATTER WHO WAS  
WEARING PRISON ORANGE AND  
WHO WASN’T.”***

call me Grace,” I quipped back. They liked that. They felt that they were being treated as equals. For that moment, we were all equal. I was just a klutz who trips over her own feet, and they were the witnesses to my clumsiness. They laughed. I laughed. It didn’t matter who was wearing prison orange and who wasn’t.

## DESPERATE FOR APPROVAL

The class I teach covers multicultural fiction and literature. Through stories that take place in different cultures and at different time periods, the elements of the human experience can be explored. A student can keep an open mind because it is less threatening to discuss slaves in ancient Rome than slavery in the Americas, for example. But we can arrive at the same conclusions.

It is no shock that the inmates hunger to immerse themselves in other times and places. For me as a teacher, the ultimate joy is the spark of recognition on a confined student’s face as he connects the dots, recognizing the commonalities of the human experience among 13th-century Chinese soldiers, a disabled child in contemporary México, and modern-day New York City police officers. As they examine life through the lens of different cultures, the inmates impart powerful lessons to me about handling the circumstances of their confinement with dignity and grace.

And they are desperate to find the spark of humanity in me that connects with their own humanity. One inmate confessed sotto voce, in what passes for privacy in prison, “Really, I’m trying. I just don’t understand much. You see, I never went to school.”

This inmate is a gangbanger with tattoos covering every inch of visible real estate. I don’t know what crimes he committed to get himself locked up. Don’t-ask-don’t-tell is my policy. I don’t want my interactions with them to be clouded by my judgment of a crime whose circumstances I will never know. What I do see is a man who presents a tough-guy persona but who is desperate for any tiny shred of approval, even from a volunteer teacher of a non-credit class.

I can’t give them much, but I can provide hope and encouragement. I told him not to worry about his comprehension, that he should read the stories as best he could, then listen to the class discussions and go back and read them again. The more he practices, the better he will get. But students who lack foundational education don’t know this. They need someone to tell them that, yes, they can do better in the future than they have in the past.

Almost all inmates – north of 95 percent – will be released at some point. While incarcerated, they have choices: They can fight every day to improve themselves and have a shot on the outside, or they can remain static, cycling through the revolving door of the correctional system, in and out, in and out.

## WHY VOLUNTEER IN PRISON?

My mother, like most people, had never devoted much thought to inmates. One day, we were discussing my volunteer work. “Why do you want to help those people?” she asked, mystified.

I get similar reactions from other people. In the waiting room at my chiropractor’s office, I was chatting with

***“THEY NEED SOMEONE  
TO TELL THEM... YES  
THEY CAN  
DO BETTER IN THE FUTURE  
THAN THEY HAVE  
IN THE PAST.”***



the receptionist, whom I see frequently, and she asked me what I was doing. I told her about teaching in prison. She unleashed a diatribe about how all inmates should be locked up for the rest of their lives. I tried to explain that that isn't reality, but she would have none of it. "Leave them there forever," she said.

These reactions are not outliers. People simply are not informed and don't even think about becoming better educated regarding the invisible population inside the walls. Out of sight....

But not only do "those people" get out at some point, they are human beings while they are incarcerated. Humans need cerebral challenges and stimulation to thrive. Education is never wasted, even on those who will die inside the walls. For those who will be released, the benefits to them and to society are unknowable, although they are quantifiable.

Education fundamentally changes a person. Once that person's eyes have been opened, there is no un-seeing. Inmates who access education inside have greater chances to live fulfilling, law-abiding lives outside. Education is responsible for a tremendous reduction in recidivism and increase in post-release employment.

So it's in everyone's best interest to help inmates become the best they can be.

Prison teaching is not for everyone. After all, there are many convincing reasons not to do it: the guards, the security searches, the lockdowns, the clanging doors, the caged humanity, the cacophony, the smell.

But I want to contribute to the betterment of future society, a society I will live in, too. Inmates are human beings who deserve opportunities to expand their minds and improve themselves. Besides, any teachers who have been in higher education for any length of time have already had gang members and former inmates in their classes, whether they know it or not. The main difference is that the students who are inside are better behaved than students on the outside.

One inmate student in my class observed me closely. He challenged me on the first day, asking me outright why I was there. I thought about it for a moment, then gave the only answer I could: "I hope you get something out of the class."

"A real professor! From a university! Wants to teach us!" he marveled.

Yeah. I do.

\*The above article can also be read at *Medium.com*: <https://medium.com/@bootsiemtzr/prison-education-ecea304d80e9>



*I Am the Way I Am the Light*  
Kazten Somari, New Mexico  
Mixed Media, 2019  
*Iron City Magazine Issue 4*

## in solitary

By Kate LaDew

*Iron City Magazine Issue 4*

a prisoner  
tore a button from his coveralls,  
cast it into the air, careened his body around three times  
and dropped to the cement.  
on hands and knees, he hunted the button.  
when found,  
it was cast into the air over his whirling body  
again again again  
and found, again again again  
until he was able to curl into himself,  
sleeping like when he was a little boy,  
blind to everything around him, exhausted from just being  
alive,  
and waking to an extra day tacked on for destroying his  
coveralls.  
cast  
careen  
hunt  
find  
dreaming of hide and seek,  
of how easy it is to get lost in the dark and stay there  
when hands and eyes open to sew a button  
and close at the sound of a beating heart

Everyone has a story to tell. I can't say the story to follow is entirely my own. Instead, I will tell a collection of stories, many of which belong to the writers I have met while teaching at Perryville. I tell their stories, and my own, as a way of bringing the lives of those in prison outside these bounds. The sense of captivity in the prison extends beyond its gates when we are socially conditioned to see those in prison as separate, as those whose stories will never be heard. We must tell these stories so that we as a society can stop disregarding the reality of our unjust prison system and start advocating for better solutions to our problems than more and more incarceration. In order to communicate these stories, I will begin with the story of how I became involved in prison education.

### Starting Out...

I decided to become involved in prison education when I received a department wide email from Corri Wells in Spring of 2018. I was in the second year of my doctorate and of teaching. Before coming to ASU, I had attended a small liberal arts college. I received an excellent education there, from professors who cared deeply about my well-being as a student and as a person. I certainly had my struggles in the beginning of undergrad. I was a first-generation college student on a scholarship at a school where most people were fairly affluent. Additionally, I was also struggling to find my own identity having grown up in a fairly restrictive home. My first year was not a smooth one. I felt lost and in many ways, I felt that I did not belong. My professors helped me realize that I did. This is what inspired me to teach at the college level. I felt that I could understand the struggles of students who were not perfect, but who had potential, and to be that professor that helped pull them up when they were falling. I wanted to do more than master and teach material, I wanted to connect to my students. By the end of my second year at ASU, I was losing site of this passion. Although I loved teaching at ASU, I felt that my busy schedule was keeping me from applying myself to my teaching in the way I wanted to. I felt that my

education was preparing me to be a researcher first, teacher second, which is not what I had ever wanted. I was becoming depressed and disillusioned with the prospect of finishing my PhD. Then came Corri's email.

One of my biggest challenges at this time was that I felt that while I was learning a lot about social injustices, I was doing very little to solve them. When I saw the opportunity to become involved with the Pen Project, I saw an opportunity to make a difference. Additionally, I saw an opportunity to reconnect with my passion for teaching by working with incarcerated writers. Between the course readings and connecting with the creative pieces of the writers, I became very passionate about prison education. I also taught my first two in-person prison classes that semester in Globe. These classes really cemented my decision to teach in person the following semester. All in all, my experience with the Pen Project helped to develop my passion for prison education and to helped me rediscover my purpose as an educator. Seeing the difference I was making through this work inspired me to be more confident in my decision to pursue a career at a teaching-focused college. I changed the direction of my dissertation research based on this decision and have been able to find so much more meaning in my work since I did.

### Teaching at Globe...

My first day teaching at the Globe prison, I was excited. I remember the drive there quite well. I rode with Corri and two fellow interns and we talked about our experiences so far with the Pen Project. We shared lots of stories about the writing that we had received. I was becoming really passionate about prison education at this point, and it was really nice to connect with others who shared this passion.

The drive through the mountains was beautiful. Coming from the East Coast, I am always blown away by the landscapes of the Southwest. They are so different from anything I had experienced before moving here, and to me, just breathtaking. I have spoken to a few native Arizonians who complain that it is too brown here. I could not imagine seeing the

landscapes that way. To me, they are so alive. As we drove through these picturesque landscapes, I could not help but be struck by the way they must look to the loved ones of the men imprisoned in Globe. The prison is set so far away from most populated towns. It is quite the journey. I am sure these folks do not delight in the landscapes the way that I did, thinking of their loved ones so far out of reach. Or maybe they do, looking for the silver lining and anticipating the brief joy they will find visiting with their loved one.

Although I was not nervous on the drive over, I did start to get nervous as we entered the gates. Although I am used to it now, seeing and hearing all of the doors lock behind me when entering the prison for the first time was nerve wracking. Why all these doors? I remember thinking. What is going on in here that they are trying so desperately to keep inside? Those worries subsided, though, when we entered the classroom. That first class, we co-taught a workshop in which we surveyed different styles and genres of writing. I presented on writing opinion pieces. We then gave the students time to write, after which they shared their work. I was really blown away by the variety of writing they produced and by the quality of their writing seeing as they only had about 45 minutes to work. There as so much passion for learning in that classroom. It was unlike anything I had ever seen. By the end of that first class, I knew I wanted to continue teaching in-person prison classes.

#### A Shaky Start...

Although I had had a wonderful experience teaching in Globe, I did grow nervous before I began teaching at Perryville. I had volunteered to teach alone, which I was pretty confident about at the time. I did, however, attend a security training before starting my class that worried me. The instructor of the training spent a lot of time going over worst-case scenarios that I felt extremely unprepared to deal with. On top of this, I had grown up with very strict parents and basically been conditioned to see the world as a scary place. I have spent a lot of my adult life trying to recondition myself, but this training snapped me right back into panic mode.

I emailed Corri voicing my concerns. Luckily, she

was extremely patient with me and ended up attending my first class with me. I felt a lot better after that first class, but was still a little nervous. I ended up teaching with a co-teacher, Nathan, who was wonderful. By about our third class, though, I felt so silly to have ever been scared. The scariest thing about the prison, I realized, was the building itself. The gates and locks in every direction lead you to believe that there is a danger inside. In reality, this danger is imagined. During my time at Perryville, I have met only kind, bright students with a passion for learning. I am so grateful for Corri's patience and for my decision to stick with prison teaching. If I had not stuck with it, I would have missed out of the best teaching experience of my life. Teaching at Perryville has helped me to develop my pedagogy in ways I never could have imagined. It has impacted the way that I teach my classes outside of the prison setting as well as within it. Below, I will describe my experiences teaching at Perryville and what these experiences have taught me.

#### My First Class...

My first semester, I taught a class called "Rhetoric and Popular Culture," with my co-teacher, Nathan. I was really excited about this opportunity because I love incorporating popular culture into the composition classroom, and I was really excited to teach a class in which I could share knowledge from my research. This class was a real learning experience for me. I learned about the contextual constraints of teaching in the prison setting and about the lives of my new students.

This first semester, I used the textbook *Rhetoric in Popular Culture* by Barry Brummett. The textbook provided an overview of rhetorical theory, reviewed different lenses of rhetorical criticism, and provided examples in popular culture for students to analyze. The textbook made for extremely interesting class discussion, which was one of the reasons I fell in love with teaching in the prison setting. The conversation truly never stopped. The students read the textbook so diligently, came to class with questions, and were always ready to rethink concepts in the book and to challenge each other to think more deeply and more critically.

One thing that really struck me in this first class was the personal connection these students had to



the material. The students that I taught had various educational experience. Some were finishing up their GEDs, while others had bachelor's degrees. They also had differing experiences with writing. Some wrote often as a hobby. Others had not written in years. Still others did not particularly like writing at the beginning of the semester and enrolled in the class to improve upon this. What I did find they had in common, however, was a quick and genuine connection to writing about popular culture. I have found in my teaching that bringing popular culture into the composition classroom usually enhances the connection students feel to their work. Often, students have connections to music, film, television, or sports that work to build their identity. Bringing these connections into the classroom tends to make students' work more meaningful to them. I felt that this effect was even further expanded in the prison classroom, as many of the women reflected on music or films they connected with their lives before their incarceration and explored the relationships these pieces had to their identities.

## Returning to Perryville...

The next semester, I taught "English Composition." This class was so enjoyed by my students that the next semester, I taught a similar course, "Writing Across Genres." In both of these courses, I assigned writing from various genres including personal essays, stakeholder analyses, short stories, rhetorical analyses, plays, opinion pieces, poems, business correspondences, and songs. In these classes I alternated more creative pieces with more academic style writing pieces in order to give students the opportunity to experiment with different genres. I found this to be really important as many of the students in my class had not written in quite a while and having this genre flexibility allowed the students a greater opportunity to find their voice.

I found that in the more creative genres, students were more likely to take risks and to adapt the form further away from the model pieces I would provide. I also saw students start to find joy in the writing process through these pieces. To me, joy is writing in the most important thing these classes could possibly cultivate. Many of these students had never had a positive academic experience before.

Providing a space where these students can start to see themselves as learners and gain the confidence to further their education is, in my opinion, the most important thing these classes can do.

## The Personal Essay....

Of all the assignments I have taught, the one I have found to be most impactful is the personal essay. For this reason, I always start my course with the personal essay as the first assignment. One benefit of this assignment is that all students are subject masters of their own personal stories. This allows students who may have stepped away from writing for a while to transition back into it by translating knowledge they already have onto the page. It can be a great confidence builder and help the students cross that first threshold of starting writing over.

Since beginning teaching the personal essay, I have had students share a wide variety of stories. I have found that most of the essays fall into one of the following three categories 1) Stories about life before prison, entirely removed from the present context. In these essays, women define their identity not as an inmate, but as a member of society existing outside of their current situation. 2) Descriptions of important relationships – usually with their friends, family, or their religion. Often, these essays will focus on the ways these relationships have changed and/or strengthened during the student's time in prison. Or 3) Stories about what led to their incarceration. Often these stories told of lifelong issues that eventually led to crimes committed. Just as often, however, they told of rather sudden spirals (most often involving drug addiction) that ultimately led to this fate. Many students expressed that writing the personal essay could be cathartic, either by helping them put into words the pain they had experienced or by helping them reconnect with their identity outside of the prison system. Below, I will share synopses of some of the personal essays that stood out to me at Perryville. These essays broadened my understanding of my students and their circumstances as well as the role writing could play in one's life:

## Casey's Story

When Casey\* was a young woman, she enlisted in the United States Army. She saw this as a way to serve her country and to make a positive impact in the world. She went into the experience filled with a youthful determination to pursue a meaningful career. The opportunities for her life were endless, or so she thought.

During Casey's military training, she was sexually assaulted by her superior. She was scared. She wondered if she had somehow caused this to happen. She felt guilty. She felt ashamed. Her dream had turned into a nightmare. She would tell no one. And then it happened again. And again. Casey felt lost but had nowhere to turn. When she finished training, she thought the abuse would end. However, it just continued. Two other men continued to assault her after she changed locations after training.

For eight years in the military, this abuse continued. Casey told no one. She bottled up her emotions surrounding the issue. The shame, the victimization. She internalized it. It became a part of her identity, an identity she was not proud of. She felt that she had failed in her career. She blamed herself. And she became angry.

This anger eventually translated itself physically. Casey could not control her anger and in fits of rage, she started to hurt her loved ones. She was eventually incarcerated for assaulting her partner. It was only when she arrived in prison that she started to reflect on the source of this uncontrollable anger. In therapy, she finally opened up about her abuse in the military. She started to understand that she was projecting the anger she felt inside onto others, and in turn victimizing them just as she had been victimized herself. Once she understood this connection, she could start to heal.

When students finish their assignments, they have the option to share with the class. Casey chose to share this story with the class. As she did, her voice cracked. At times, she cried.

But every time she faltered, she told us, "I have to keep going. I have to get this story out."

After class, she told me that writing her story down and sharing it with the class had helped her heal in a different way than her therapy sessions. She felt that she was finally able to translate all that she had experienced and learned about herself into words and get it out into the open. She did not have to hold it inside any longer. This student opened by eyes to the therapeutic value of writing.

## Beatrice's Story

Beatrice\* was my student for two semesters. She loved her husband, Luke\*, with all her heart. Every opportunity she had to write about her personal life, she wrote about him. She wrote the story of how they had met at work and how their relationship had grown over the course of the year from sharing lunch, to a passionate romance, to a marriage proposal. She told us that he had taken on her children as his own and described how much he loved their family. She wrote beautiful poetry about their love. She recounted the way that brushing up her writing was improving their long-distance romance, as she would now send him her creative writing pieces.

Then, in my second semester, she shared a very different story, the story of when she and her husband had temporarily separated. The usually blissful couple was going through a rough patch. Her children had grown and were no longer living at home. Her mother was ill and needed full time care. As her kids were not around and Luke had the more well-paying job, Beatrice took a leave of absence from work to take care of her mother. Her siblings agreed to do the same when her leave was over. When her leave ended, though, her sibling reneged their promises. She quit her job to take care of her mother and this caused huge problems in her marriage. Her once supportive partner was accusing her of allowing herself to be taken advantage of by her siblings. He was upset that she had no time for him and devoted her whole life to her mother. Seeing her mother's condi-

tion, Beatrice felt she had no other option. Luke had had enough. He asked for a separation and moved out.

Shortly after, Beatrice's mother died. Luke attended the funeral. Afterwards, she assumed they would reconcile and the separation would end. Much to her dismay, he told her he did not know if he still loved her and wanted to remain separated. She felt hopeless. This man was her entire life and without him, she felt she was nothing.

After months without her husband, Beatrice became depressed. She started doing drugs. She had never done drugs before, but she needed something to take away the pain of her loss. Before long, she started selling drugs to maintain her own habit. She began dating another drug dealer, Joe\* and moved with him to Mexico. In Mexico, the relationship turned extremely abusive. Joe would beat Beatrice and dig holes in the backyard, threatening to kill her and bury her in one of them. He would lock her in the bedroom and threaten to kill her if she left. Her life had spiraled out of control and she had nowhere to turn. She had warrants out for her arrest in the US and no one to run to in Mexico.

One day, she decided she could not take the abuse any longer. If she stayed in Mexico, she knew Joe would kill her. She called her son and told him she was coming back to the US.

"You can't come back," he said. "You will go to prison for years."

"It's my only choice," she replied. "It's that or death."

When Joe was sleeping, she escaped the home through an open window and ran to a neighbor for help. From there, she arranged transportation back to the U.S. When she returned to the U.S., she was arrested at the border. She says now that the decision to return saved her life. Since her return, she has gotten off of drugs. She has renewed her relationship with her children and resolved her issues with her husband. She started to learn about herself, what mattered most to her, and started to take pride in her resilience. She now has renewed faith in her

future and hope for a life after incarceration.

This story, which contrasted so much from the others she had told, taught me that there is so much more to a person than a single story. Beatrice is more than the story leading up to her incarceration, as are all of the women in Perryville.

### Mary's Story

Mary was a student in my first class, "Rhetoric and Popular Culture." Although Mary did not write this piece for the "Personal Essay" assignment, her work served as inspiration for incorporating the personal essay assignment into my class the following semester. Over the course of the semester, our class talked a lot about the rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos and the ways we saw these appeals enacted in popular culture. For the final writing assignment, I asked students to analyze a popular culture artifact of their choosing. Choices ranged from songs, to advertisements, to episodes of television shows, to movies, and more. Mary decided to write her analysis on the emotional appeals of her favorite Alicia Keys album, *The Diary of Alicia Keys*.

Mary's analysis was very interesting in that she carefully combined first-person reflection with rhetorical analysis in order to provide an insider view into what this album meant to her and how these appeals might impact others. Mary explained that growing up, she had a very rocky relationship with her parents. They were very controlling and would not let her listen to most music or spend a lot of time with friends. As a result, Mary felt quite alone. One day, when she was in her teens, a friend loaned Mary *The Diary of Alicia Keys*. She remembered listening to this album in secret and connecting with the emotions in the music. She thought about Keys' journey to stardom and how she had followed her dreams and fought for a better life. Mary connected with this sense of hope and it helped her reach for a better future as she grew up.

Mary's search for a better life was interrupted when she arrived in prison. Upon her arrival, Mary felt just as lonely and hopeless as she had in her adolescence. Then, one day, she made



a friend who offered to let her borrow some music. To Mary's surprise, she had The Diary of Alicia Keys. Mary borrowed the CD and could not stop listening to it. She again connected with the hope in Keys' lyrics. She connected with her former self, who had been so young and full of hope. She decided that she would not let her hope run out. It was not too late to start all over again. And that is just what she did.

After reading Mary's work, I told her that I found her piece to be moving and that she was a very talented writer. She told me that no one had ever told her that before. What a shame, I thought, for someone to be so unaware of their own gifts. Working with Mary taught me that many of the women I was teaching had not had positive experiences with education previously, despite their creativity and talent. I feel a major value of prison education is to help provide students with this positive view of education and hopefully inspire them to continue education later on.

\*Name changed to preserve writer's privacy

## Reflections...

Sometimes after class, as I sit outside the San Carlos unit and wait for the shuttle back to the main complex, I stare out into the surrounding mountains. I remember the feeling I had when I first saw these mountains, on my cross-country road trip from Florida to Arizona before starting my education at ASU. I had never been to Arizona, but had decided to move out here when I was accepted into the PhD program in English Writing, Rhetorics, and Literacies. The first time I saw these mountains, I was overcome with a sense of freedom and adventure. These mountains were everything the west had symbolized in my mind. A new beginning, endless opportunities, a life of endless possibilities. I thought about what it must be like to stare out at these mountains from inside the prison yard, knowing none of that freedom or adventure was yours to have, knowing that all you had of that was the memories of life before and hope for life after. Staring out at these mountains had me thinking a lot about freedom, about autonomy, about how essential it is to our very being. A therapist once

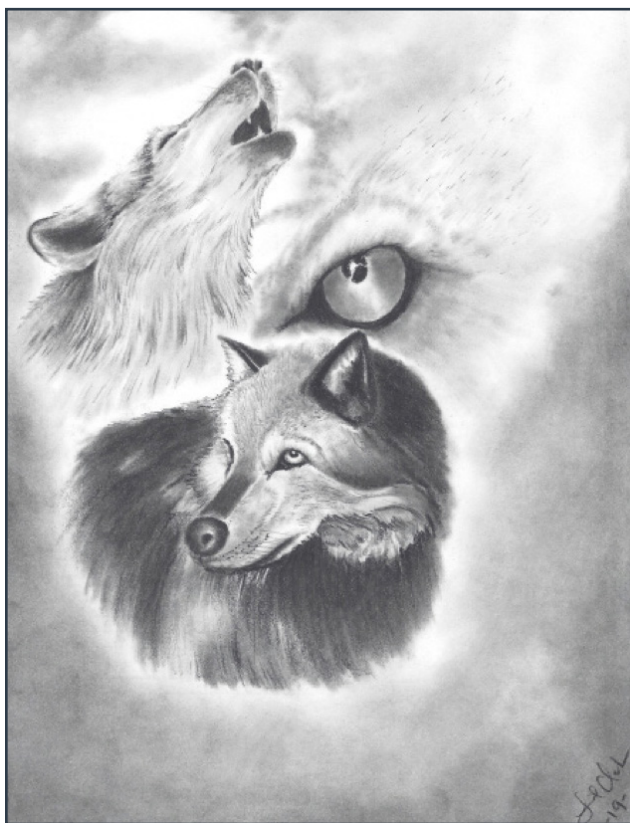
told me that challenges to one's autonomy were the most common trigger for depressive. As much as I try to connect with the women in my class and to bring some sense of positivity into their lives, I cannot fully understand what they are going through. I look out at the prison complex. I see a bird perched on the tall metal fence that separates the imprisoned from the free. I watch the bird take flight, soaring out of the complex without a care in the world. To her, the boundary is arbitrary. She cannot be held inside. I long for the days the ladies in my class will feel this freedom again.

Now that I have been out of the Perryville classroom due to coronavirus, I am missing my students terribly. I had a few students who had taken two or three of my classes. One student who had been with me for all three semesters was going home over the summer. It is sad to not be able to say good-bye and to wish her well in the future. It is sad not to have a proper end to our class to allow students to reflect on the work they accomplished. But what is even sadder is to think about how scared my students must be during this time. Every time I hear about another prison population falling victim to widespread contraction of the Covid-19 my heart aches for my students. I hope that they are safe and that this pandemic passes as quickly as it can.

I remember at the end of the first class at Globe, one of the students asked me why we came out to volunteer. It seemed he could not imagine why we would want to spend our time teaching people in prison. The question saddened me. In my three semesters teaching at Perryville, I have gotten similar questions from time to time. Although the classroom can sometimes feel like an oasis outside of the prison setting, questions like this have a way of snapping me back to reality. The prison system treats women and men as if they are, in totality, the worst thing they have ever done. It is a system that takes the joy and the hope out of these bright women (and men) and keeps them from wishing for better. I see prison education as a positive oppositional force to the norms of the prison system. I see prison education as a way to bring back that hope, that fire, that drive, that dream for a better tomorrow, that resides in each of these ladies. To me, to be part of the prison education program is

to be part of a quiet revolution that is changing the realities of so many.

My experience teaching at Perryville has taught me more about myself and my career goals than any other experience I have had. Before coming to ASU, I knew very little about prison education. I could not have imagined it would be something I would become so passionate about. The more I learned about ASU's prison education program, though, the more it drew me in. It seemed to me a way to teach in a way that could really change lives for the better. When I applied for the Pen Project, I took a leap of faith that has led me to rethink my whole career. After teaching at Perryville, I have a new sense of purpose. When I graduate, I hope to obtain a job at a community college or small liberal arts college so that I can make teaching the center of my career. If possible, I hope to work for a college that has a prison education program or even to help build one. My experience teaching at Perryville has cemented in me the belief that education can change the world, if only by changing a few lives at a time.



*Lone Wolf*  
Lionel Clah, New Mexico  
Charcoal on Paper, 2019  
*Iron City Magazine Issue 4*



*See Hear Speak No Evil*  
Becenti Virgarett, New Mexico  
Ink on Paper, 2019  
*Iron City Magazine Issue 4*



# IRON CITY MAGAZINE: WHERE WE ARE GOING

The last (4th) issue and the forthcoming (5th) issue of *Iron City Magazine* would literally not be without grants from Arizona Humanities and the Ibis Foundation of Arizona. *Iron City* would be possible but not nearly as lively on the art end without our association with Project Paint, a state supported prison arts program in Southern California. Nor could the magazine exist without the all-volunteer labor of our twelve editors. Without them, the work just wouldn't continue. I am amazed and humbled again and again by their empathy and concern for the welfare of others, as well as by their talent. And I am grateful for the technology that enables us to work together across borders, both state and pandemic. And underlying all are the artists and writers who pour their hearts out to share their wisdom and talent in our pages. ~ Corri Wells, a Founding Editor and Executive Director



## IRON CITY MAGAZINE:

CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS BY AND FOR THE INCARCERATED

The first issue of *Iron City Magazine* was published in print and online in 2016. The magazine's fifth issue will be available this fall.

To order a print copy of the first four issues or read them online free, visit



*Iron City Magazine* — through art and literature by the incarcerated and those who love them — reminds us that there is inherent value in each human life. And that a prison stay should not attempt to deprive anyone of their humanity, talents, and unique insights.

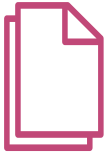




## ABOUT PRISON EDUCATION



**BEFORE RELEASE, ALL ARIZONA INMATES  
MUST OBTAIN AT LEAST  
8TH GRADE EQUIVALENCY**



**INCARCERATED STUDENTS CAN TAKE GED  
PREP CLASSES - YOUNGER PRISONERS  
MUST TAKE THEM**



**SELECT PRISON STUDENTS WHO CAN PAY  
TUITION MAY ENROLL IN DISTANCE  
LEARNING CLASSES**



**PRISONERS MAY PARTICIPATE IN  
VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL TRAINING  
PROGRAMS**



**SOME ARIZONA STATE PRISONS OFFER CREDIT  
CLASSES VIA ASHLAND UNIVERSITY FOR  
SELECT STUDENTS WHO CAN PAY**



**SELECT STUDENTS MAY TAKE NON-CREDIT  
CLASSES LED BY VOLUNTEERS  
LIKE FACULTY AND STUDENTS FROM ASU**

## WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

ASU students and faculty can apply to volunteer teach in prisons. Students receive internship credit for teaching. We also collect books to donate to prison libraries.

For more information, visit [pep.asu.edu](http://pep.asu.edu) or contact:

- Naala Brewer, Prison Education Programming (PEP) Director Naala Brewer, math and social sciences ([nbrewer@asu.edu](mailto:nbrewer@asu.edu)),
- Tsafrir Mor, Co-Director, physical sciences ([tsafrir.mor@asu.edu](mailto:tsafrir.mor@asu.edu))
- Cornelia "Corri" Wells, Co-Director, humanities and social sciences ([cornelia.wells@asu.edu](mailto:cornelia.wells@asu.edu))

Somewhere in the world, there is someone wondering if anyone else feels the same way they do. Maybe they're across the globe, maybe they're five feet away, or maybe they're a Pen Project participant like myself. Wherever they may be, they seek to encounter that expression that resonates with their experience. It is for that reason that every piece of art you make is vitally important. Each of your voices is vitally important. Never hesitate to speak out, even if only to one isolated soul. Someone will hear you.

*-Pen Project Intern*

## ABOUT THE NEWSLETTER

This issue of *Prison Education News* was compiled and edited by Madi Margolis, Jessica Sills, and Dr. Cornelia "Corri" Wells.

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Thank you to each of the contributors, who took great care in submitting meaningful pieces and sharing their experiences. This publication was a collaboration among many voices. We hope those voices echo powerfully.



**Department of English**