

# Prison University Project



A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

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## From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

One of the most complicated aspects of running the college program at San Quentin is dealing with the diverse range of feelings that prison staff have about our work. Not only do those feelings vary tremendously from one person to the other, but individuals themselves often have very mixed feelings that can change from day to day.

Sometimes staff are supportive, and even take pride in the program: they work to get students and teachers to class on time; they tell prospective students about the program; and when outsiders come to visit, they share their thoughts about its positive impact on students, and on the institution as a whole.

At other times they keep their distance, or even avoid eye contact. When it's people you don't know, it's hard to tell if they're just shy, or maybe have other things on their mind. Sometimes people are open about resenting the added work and stress that programs can create, especially in the chaotic and understaffed environment of the prison, where morale seems to worsen every day. When staff are feeling overwhelmed and spread too thin, they often feel like we just make things worse.

Some also worry about our safety, and tell us how careful we need to be. A lot of them have seen and experienced terrible things, and want to protect us from what they and others have been through. But sometimes our very presence seems to make them angry, and the cautionary comments have a contemptuous edge, as if they were irritated with us for caring about our students, or wanting to help them. "It's too late for these guys." "They'll never change." "You're wasting your time." "You should be working with kids."

Some people object to the idea of providing college to people who are incarcerated, particularly at a time when so many people who "have done nothing wrong" are struggling to pay for school. Even more, within the culture of corrections, the idea that prisons should be little more than sites of suffering, and that prisoners should receive nothing other than what the law requires, runs

deep. For some staff, feeling contempt towards prisoners, or even degrading them, also seems to serve as a kind of bonding experience with their peers.

Yet clearly not everyone approves of this kind of behavior, or even thinks this way at all. But the problem is that few people are comfortable openly expressing divergent views. At times I wonder if the dominant staff culture within the prison is more the product of intimidation than of consensus – just as is the case with the racist, violent dominant culture that controls the lives of prisoners in most institutions. I can't even count the number of times I've seen pleasant staff become distant and sarcastic, the moment they were posted into a position with someone who was hostile towards programs. I remember one officer, years ago, whispering to me in the midst of a conversation, "This whole place should be a school," as if he were sharing some kind of personal secret.

I always wonder what people think would happen if they were open about their desire to see more productive, hopeful activity taking place inside the prison. I imagine for some it's a fear of being ridiculed, ostracized, or even attacked by colleagues. And yet at times it seems to go even deeper than this – as if some essential anxiety that some people have about themselves were expressed in their need to appear relentlessly hostile towards inmates. Whatever the case, I find it both confusing and ironic that one of the classic features of the stereotypical Criminal — a lack of empathy and compassion — is precisely the characteristic that is valorized within the dominant culture of corrections.

I don't know what it will take to loosen the grip of this type of mindset on so many people working in this field. But I do know that in order for prisons to become not just more hospitable to programs, but mentally and physically healthier places for everyone, those who believe in providing real opportunities for transformation and growth for people who are incarcerated will need to openly express those beliefs, stand their ground, and make their voices heard. When they do, California's prison system — and the U.S. system as a whole — will finally begin to change.

With best regards,

Jody Lewen

## SPRING SEMESTER 2012 COURSE OFFERINGS

- English 99A (2 sections)
- English 99B (2 sections)
- English 101A (Reading and Composition)
- English 101B (Critical Thinking, Reading and Writing)
- English 204 (Critical Reading, Writing, and Research)
- Math 50 (Developmental Math)
- Elementary Algebra
- Intermediate Algebra
- Geometry
- Statistics
- Trigonometry
- Biology with Lab
- History of Photography
- Music Appreciation
- Modern African History
- Philosophy
- Psychology
- Spanish 101
- Spanish 201
- Study hall (tutoring in writing, math, & Spanish)
- Assorted individual math tutorials



Congratulations to PUP's 2011 graduates  
James Houston, Valeray Richardson and Kenyatta Léal

## REFLECTIONS ON AN EVENING AT SAN QUENTIN *by Sharon Dolovich*

For the past few years, I have been conducting research inside L.A. County's Men's Central Jail. I recently had the opportunity to present some of my work to students in San Quentin's College Program. This proved to be an unforgettable experience. I had no idea what to expect when I arrived, and was amazed to find the room filled with 40 or 50 people. Even more amazing was that, despite the length of the paper distributed in advance of the event (over 80 pages), everyone seemed to have read it and to have something to say. But the most helpful and memorable aspect of the experience for me was what I heard from the people who raised questions and offered comments during the Q&A period.

The paper I presented focuses on a unit in Men's Central—known as K6G—which houses gay men and transgender women and keeps them separate from the general population (a.k.a. GP). As the paper explains, although the two populations K6G serves are highly vulnerable to being victimized in custody, K6G is a relatively safe space in an otherwise dangerous and volatile jail. In the paper, I compare life in K6G with life in GP, and try to explain the striking differences between the two.

During my presentation at San Quentin, I got a range of responses during the Q&A period. Not everyone was convinced by my argument. But two things especially struck me about the conversation. The first was that everyone was willing to hear me out and to treat the project and my work with respect. Given that I am writing about the experience of being incarcerated when I myself have never been locked up, I would not have been surprised if some people in the group had been hostile to my efforts. But I was grateful to discover that this was not the case, and that instead people seemed ready and willing to engage me in conversation and to try to help me get the facts right. The second thing that stood out to me was the willingness of people in the group to talk about their own experiences and to relate them to the culture of GP that I described in the draft.

I regularly present my work to people in the legal academy. (In fact, this semester, I presented the same paper I presented at San Quentin in January to law professors at University of Connecticut, University of Chicago, Emory University and Harvard Law School.) Sometimes, there may be a person or two in the audience who knows something about prison from having represented people in custody. But those are the exceptions, and in most cases, the legal scholars who read my work will know little if anything about the experience of incarceration. At those times, I am always the "expert" in the room. Yet in January, presenting at San Quentin, it could not have been more different. At San Quentin, everyone in the room had spent years living that experience, and thus knew far more than I ever could about prison life. In fact, over the course of the conversation, I discovered that there were many people in the room who, having spent time in Men's Central Jail before being transferred to the CDCR, even had firsthand knowledge of the facility I talk about in the paper.

The conversation brought home to me in a powerful way why I do the work I do. A lot of my writing analyzes the law and policy governing prisons. Whatever the particular topic, I always end up at the same place, demonstrating the folly of current practice and pointing out that the people the state sends to prison are fellow human beings who deserve to be treated as such. Presenting my work at San Quentin, and being able to talk about it with people who not only think about the issues I write about but live them every day, helped to give me a renewed sense of purpose. For that gift, I am extremely grateful to all the students who were there that night, as well as the staff at PUP for making the event possible. I hope to see you all again before too long. ■

—Sharon Dolovich is a law professor at UCLA who teaches and writes about prisons and prison law. The article she presented at San Quentin is "Two Models of the Prison: Accidental Humanity and Hypermasculinity in the L.A. County Jail", 102 *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* (forthcoming 2012).

## RECENT ARRIVALS

We are pleased to announce the following additions to our staff over the last 4 months:



### **Amanda Howell, Program Associate**

Amanda began volunteering with the Prison University Project in early 2011 and joined the staff in October. She has previously held positions with the United Nations Association Film Festival, the Institute for Public Accuracy and the Rosebud Agency, where she worked on the management team for artists Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars and J.J. Cale. Prior to volunteering with PUP Amanda served as a weekly tutor at Hillsides Home for Children,

based in L.A. She holds a BA from UC Berkeley in mass communications with an emphasis on public policy.

### **Tatum Wilson, Program Assistant**

Tatum was previously the Families & Youth in Transition Liaison for San Francisco Unified School District. She advocated on the behalf of homeless students regarding their education rights and provided services for these students to succeed in school. In her spare time, she volunteers for Volunteer Marin.



### **David Cowan, Administrative Assistant**



David began working for the Prison University Project in May 2009 as the program clerk. After serving over twenty-two years, he is now the first graduate to be employed by PUP post incarceration. Formerly, David was enlisted in the U. S. Air Force as an Aircraft Armament Systems Specialist and Weapons Loading Standardization Crew member. He is currently set to enroll in San Francisco State University as a sociology major. *Read David's article on page 4!*

### **Katy Negrin, Development Associate**

Katy has worked for over a decade in international human rights. Most recently she was a project manager with the Open Society Institute in Budapest, focusing on access to education for marginalized groups. Previously she worked as a human rights officer in Kosovo and Bosnia. She holds a BA and JD from Columbia University.



## ... AND A MESSAGE FROM AMY



Amy Roza transitioned from her role as Prison University Project Program Director this winter. She writes: "I am incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to collaborate with faculty, students, staff, and other friends of PUP and to contribute to the Prison University Project's essential mission." Amy has recently joined the Goucher Prison Education Partnership which offers developmental and college courses to students incarcerated in Maryland. She begins her work there this June.

## FROM ANCIENT AFRICAN KINGDOMS TO THE MODERN DAY

*Studying African History at San Quentin*  
by Nathaniel Moore and Anna Henry

This spring semester, approximately thirty students enrolled in African History; their enthusiasm was palpable from day one. The course's historical scope stretched from Ancient African Kingdoms to the modern day and covered a wide berth of topics including the role of African women in rice cultivation in the Americas, the contemporary salience of traditional structures and cultural practices in African societies, and the importance of language policies in post-independence African states.

Throughout the semester, the students engaged a variety of perspectives through weekly academic articles as well as two fictional novels and a film created by African artists. Although it is impossible to cover every aspect of such a vast Continent's history, the amount of topics and regional diversity that the students examined was immense and truly a testament to their intellectual capacities and passion for learning. The topics and readings came alive when students openly commented and shared ideas with one another during class discussions.

We cannot say enough about students' engagement during discussions, their sizable commitment concerning the weekly readings and the extraordinary amount of learning that took place in such a short period of time. As instructors, we would like to thank the PUP staff for their support and continued commitment to this program and we would like to thank the students for providing us with the opportunity to learn and grow alongside them. ■

—Nathaniel Moore graduated from the University of Illinois with a joint Masters degree in African Studies and Library and Information Science and a graduate minor in African-American Studies. His research interests include Post-Independence language policies and education, Diaspora assistance networks and the cultural revitalization of African librarianship.

—Anna Henry holds a joint Masters degree in African Studies and Library and Information Science. An Education Associate at the Museum of the African Diaspora, she currently helps develop K-12 curriculum that links the circumstances and histories of people of African descent for the museum's Diaspora Curriculum Project. She also works as a Community Developer for AFS, an intercultural education program that facilitates youth exchanges for American students to over 40 countries.

## **The More Things Change the More They Stay the Same: My Great Transition** by David Cowan

On December 27, 2011, I paroled after more than 22 years. Once free, I found many surprises, one of which was my lack of surprise by many experiences, and the normalcy that immediately ensued.

Working is part of the normalcy that returned. I still work for the Prison University Project, and I'm still working on database issues among other tasks. It feels wonderful to finally work in a healthy environment after so many years. That isn't a surprise, but it is pleasant nonetheless.

The first surprise for me was the sense of normalcy that I felt as soon as I crossed the gate, not the overwhelming feeling of newness that would make my eyes glaze that I heard so much about. I didn't know what I should expect to feel before I went through the gate, but I felt that it was right.

My experience was just the opposite of what many people told me being out after so long would be like. People told me that the cars would seem fast. They didn't, it was only my friend Ern's driving. They told me that a mall crowd would freak me out, but the crowd at the mall seemed to be like it had always been. I'm surprised at how distant prison seems, almost like it never really happened, yet how intensely I miss my friends and a lot of staff members.

My surprises have been delightful even when it seems they shouldn't be. Like when other drivers cut me off I think, "This is great!" Or when people don't smile on public transportation, I just want to hug them (but I don't). As much as things seem the same and as much as I feel the normalcy of life has returned, I do understand that I am still making a great transition.

Technology has changed but I have always been technically inclined so operating some instruments was kind of intuitive. I started texting as soon as I got the phone, (and no, I didn't have one when I was on the inside). I still had to get used to using the internet and my phone for almost everything from obtaining general information to finding my way when I'm lost, which happens more than you might think.

One of the many factors that contribute to a healthy transition is the presence of a good support system: family, friends and community members who are available as human beings, not just service providers, throughout and beyond one's transition. My support system is amazing! I have not had any need or desire that has been too big or too small for them to respond to.

My great transition is easier because of a lot of difficult internal preparation before parole, and the mutual respect and love that I enjoy with the people who stood by me at my lowest point and who continue to do so now. ■

### **Who We Are and What We Do**

**The mission of the Prison University Project is to provide excellent higher education to people incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison, to create a replicable model for such programs, and to stimulate public awareness and meaningful dialogue about higher education and criminal justice in California and across the United States.**

**The College Program at San Quentin provides approximately 20 courses each semester in the humanities, social sciences, math, and science leading to an Associate of Arts degree in liberal arts, as well as college preparatory courses in math and English, to over 300 students. The program is an extension site of Patten University in Oakland. All instructors work as volunteers. The Prison University Project receives no state or federal funding and relies entirely on donations from individuals and foundations.**

**Major expenses include textbooks and school supplies, publications, education and outreach activities (including conferences), office rent and utilities, and salaries for eight staff members. PUP's annual cash budget is approximately \$740,000, but when the value of all volunteer teaching hours (and other pro bono labor) is included, PUP's annual budget exceeds \$1 million.**

## **SCIENTIFIC INTUITION AT SAN QUENTIN**

*by Samuel Israel*

In the fall of 2011 I co-taught an introductory neuroscience course at San Quentin.

One day some students in the class expressed interest in what I did in my lab, and since they had learned about the importance of calcium in neurons, I thought I could try explaining how calcium imaging worked, which is an important technique I use almost every day.

When a neuron is activated, calcium enters the cell from the outside. This increases the cell's calcium concentration. There are special dyes that will increase in brightness with an increase in calcium concentration. So basically, we can use these dyes to see neurons firing, which in my opinion is awesome.

One of the students suggested that I might need another technique to verify the calcium imaging data, to make sure the increase in calcium imaging was due to the neuron firing.

It's true that an increase in calcium doesn't necessarily mean a neuron is firing in every situation. Calcium could be released from inside the cell somewhere or the dye could be leaky and fluoresce falsely under certain circumstances.

I was shocked because not only was he right, he made a comment that a reviewer probably would have made had I tried to publish the data. It's customary to attack a question from different angles, specifically because false positives do arise. Those students had learned the structure of a neuron only a week before. A small amount of education can bring out scientists even within a prison. ■

*—Sam Israel is a 2nd year graduate student in the Helen Wills Neuroscience Institute at the University of California, Berkeley. He works in the lab of John Ngai, where he studies the neurobiology of fear and smell.*