

RELEASE

*A student news collaborative focusing on the
impact of incarceration in Connecticut*



FOCUS ON
education



Brought to you by students at Central Connecticut State University,
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table of **CONTENTS**

2.....Welcome to Release

By Mary Collins

3.....Pioneering Positive Changes

By Casey Coughlin

6.....Alternative Education

By Jesse Duthrie

9.....Detour on the Path of Education

By Adrienne Gruessner

10.....I Am Not What I Once Was

By Casey Coughlin

13.....Writing for Change

By Casey Coughlin

16.....Creating an Environment of Comfort

By Jesse Duthrie

18.....Staff

welcome to **RELEASE**

Welcome to Release, a publication devoted to collecting stories about citizens with criminal histories and the organizations that serve them. Produced by the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy (IMRP) and created by students from Central Connecticut State University, the newsletter provides profiles, general features, interviews, videos, informative graphs and more. Our goal: to empower ex-offenders and to educate the larger Connecticut community on what it can do to stem recidivism. Release covers employment, housing, education, children of incarcerated parents and other subject areas that relate to building a productive life with a criminal history. For your free subscription to Release, which will be distributed online on a monthly basis and also published in print on a quarterly basis, please register at www.releasenews.org.

Pioneering Positive CHANGES

*A Q&A with Ari Kohn, Managing Director
of Post-Prison Education Program*

By Casey Coughlin

Ari Kohn is the Managing Director and Founder of Post-Prison Education Program in Seattle, Washington. PPEP provides complete wrap around services for formerly incarcerated people who want to pursue higher education. They work with their clients to manage their mental illnesses, council them through addictions, and prepare them with skills they'll need to be successful in college. PPEP is the only program in the country that is supporting the financial, emotional, psychological and physical needs of this population to allow for their educational gain. Ari, a formerly incarcerated person himself, was moved in 2005 to launch this one of a kind program, which has been an absolute success. After over five years of operation and hundreds of students with mental illnesses and drug additions earning educations, their recidivism rate is zero.

COUGHLIN: Tell me about how you came up with this unique idea to provide so much support for this population to really push them beyond a GED or high school diploma.

KOHN: The guy that motivated me to start the program in 2005 is in our office right now; he just got out of Washington State Penitentiary about a month ago. The way it got started was in 2005 I went to a non-



FORMER STUDENTS HELP EACH OTHER STUDY AT THE POST-PRISON EDUCATION PROGRAM OFFICE

profit event that was supposed to be like a welcome home party for a few men and women that were coming home from Washington prison's. I had gone to college in the sixties but I was back in school sort of redoing my 4-year degree so I could have a higher GPA so that I could go to law school and spend the rest of my life suing governments. So I went to this non-profit thing and met this guy who is African-American and 46 at the time, and he had been coming in and out of prison since 1982. He's mentally ill and highly addicted to crack. He got up and spoke at that event, and I was

just blown away by how eloquent and compassionate and intelligent he was, so I made arrangements to take him to breakfast about a week later. I just sat there and listened to him talk for two hours and my whole orientation, since I had just spent the past four years redoing my degree, was education and I just kept thinking as I was listening to this guy, that maybe nothing can help somebody whose addicted and mentally ill but if anything can it would be getting them into a college environment.

Kohn went on to contact the heads of different social justice and advocacy

programs at Washington State University. With their support in August of 2005, the program was created.

COUGHLIN: Where do you receive the majority of your funding?

KOHN: Well back then it was just my mother and I and a few small donations. We ran out of money a few years ago so our primary funders right now are Google Incorporated (<http://www.google.com/about/corporate/company>) and the Sunshine Lady Foundation (www.sunshinelady.org).

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“The researchers found that the reason we were successful had basically nothing to do with the education, it has to do with that we meet the needs.”
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COUGHLIN: What would make you think to go after a company like Google to get funding and not a local state agencies or non-profits around you?

KOHN: The relationship with Google has grown over the past few years. If you work for Google you eat for free, so their employees voted to pay for their lunch one day and donate the money that they paid for their free lunch to three education non-profits. It's unbelievable [that we were chosen]

because prisoners or former prisoners are not a popular population to serve. Three non-profits shared about \$1500, I think we got a money order for \$499. So it was not much but it was fantastic for us. The next year we were the only non-profit they chose, and after spending time with our students the Google staff donated around \$20,000 to us. Google incorporated matched those donations dollar for dollar.

Since then, Google has helped Post-Prison Education apply for and obtain multiple grants ranging from \$20,000 to \$40,000 respectively and continues to be a tremendous supporter.

COUGHLIN: Are you working with any larger organizations on state and national advocacy initiatives?

KOHN: We are not working with any larger organizations. We are so busy every day just trying to stay alive, so we hardly have time to look at anything but is what immediately in front of us.

COUGHLIN: Is this really the only program of its kind in the entire country?

KOHN: As far as we can tell, there is nothing else like this out there. There are some programs that will provide one or a few of the basic needs, like housing, or counseling or drug rehab. But there is not anybody that is paying tuition, books, putting a roof over your head, helping with your kids, doing everything you need to allow you to put your life together.



ARI KOHN, MANAGING DIRECTOR AND FOUNDER OF POST-PRISON EDUCATION

COUGHLIN: Tell me about your students and why your program is working.

KOHN: Since the program has grown and is more well known we currently have around 700 applicants. The most students we have ever supported at one time, which was in the beginning of this year, was 44. (The average for PPEP is 25.) The way we serve them really goes to why we are successful.

Two years ago, we got a grant to have an outcome data study done, so that researchers could look at what the recidivism rate (over a five year period) on our students was and report it back to the legislature. They reported back to the Washington State Senate and told them that we have had nobody recidivate.

So then the question was why? The researches found that the reason we were successful had basically nothing

to do with the education, it has to do with the fact that we meet the needs. It's shared housing, public transportation- live cheap, live frugal, get your degree.

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“You get them to the first day of the second year and you’ve more than flipped the odds; they are almost not going back.”

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One of the researchers threw a fact out to me that blew my mind; he said that half of the people that are going to recidivate do so in the first 3 months. As soon as we heard that number we knew why we were so successful. We pick them up the day after they get out of prison, get them in the office, get them into housing and basically blanket people with whatever they need. That could be medication if

they are mentally ill, help overcoming addiction, tutoring to get ready for admission tests, housing, groceries- that's just always what we've done. We didn't do it because we knew if we got them even to the first day of the fourth month we have just dramatically reduced their chances of recidivism. We just knew we had to do that for them to be successful. You get them to the first day of the second year and you've more than flipped the odds; they are almost not going back.

The cool part about a college campus or a tech school really isn't all just the curriculum. That's a more clean and sober environment than other places. The major role that education does play is it's sort of the carrot that you hold out in front of somebody; it's the hope and the opportunity. You've got to give people that have been locked up hope that they can have a different life. If you don't then when they walk out of the prison they come out hopeless. But if you give them

real concrete hope that they can really believe in then when their feet hit the ground the first day out of prison they are focused on the future and not on being stupid.

COUGHLIN: Where are you sending your students to school?

KOHN: Any accredited Community College, Trade School or University in Washington.

COUGHLIN: Do you provide any in-prison services or just strictly out-of-prison?

KOHN: We can't afford to do anything in the prison because we can't afford to do what we do out here. But we are in the prisons all the time. The way we let people know that there is hope, that there is opportunity, is by taking our current students back into the prisons. When you have people who have been locked up, sort of telling them “been there done that” it is a real concrete opportunity. It's life changing.

COUGHLIN: What is the limit on how much you will spend on a student and what is the average cost?

KOHN: There is no cap and there is probably nothing typical. Over the years we have changed the kind of students we are helping. Now we weed out and maybe won't help somebody who we feel can make it on their own. We realized that there are tremendous amounts of people coming out that are diagnosed with a serious mental illness; so our costs have sky rocketed.



KIMBERLY MAYS AT HER GRADUATION FROM EVERGREEN STATE COLLEGE

Alternative EDUCATION

Touring the Manson Youth Institute's Education Program

By Jesse Duthrie

After sitting in the unoccupied waiting room of Mason Youth Institute for a few minutes, reading the flyers for clothing regulations and visitation rules, I'm met by President Tim Colley and director of academic programming Kim Holley. They are young and enthusiastic as we exchange greetings and head towards MYI's juvenile education facility.

Tim, Kim and I approach the first set of doors that lead to a classroom. Inside is a technical education program: rows of computers are occupied by young men in tan uniforms, a professor stands next to a chalkboard with technical jargon unfamiliar to even me, a relative computer nerd.

Tim explains that this is not part of the high school program, but one of many vocational programs that are offered at MYI. The age range of MYI's 300 or so inmates goes from fourteen to twenty one. Men who enter MYI with a high school diploma, GED, or earn their diplomas in the facility must enter vocational programs for the remainder of their sentences. The programs range from computer technology, culinary education, automotive education, and so on.

At the end of the hallway, we enter the automotive lab. The lab resembles a Midas more than a classroom. A large wooden table to the right of the entrance is filled with half-dissected alternators. A young man, no older than 20, is putting together a transmission by himself in the corner of the room. The rest of the class stands around a green Saab sedan. The Saab is lifted up about six feet or so, and the engine has been gutted out on nearby tables.

The class is no different than an automotive school. The students go through different skills of automotive mechanics and when they complete all the skills, they are given a certificate that can be used once they leave the facility.

"Even if all they learn is how to do an oil change and replace the brake fluids," the automotive instructor tells me, "they'll get a certificate so that when they leave here they can go out and find a job."

Most of the funding for the vocational programs, as well as for the expansion of the school, has slowed down over the past few years. In a state that already spends over 600 million dollars on incarceration, it's difficult for MYI to establish greater funding.

"We used to receive more money," Tim says, "But over the past few years things have really slowed to a halt."

All inmates at Manson are required to attend school. For those without high school diplomas or GED's, high school education is mandatory. Each inmate is tested on his math and reading skills upon entry to MYI. They are then entered into class rooms based on their ability and prior education experience. Each day the men must attend eight hours of classes divided only by a lunch break.

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Inside the first classroom on the first floor, young men sit at desks, books open, paying close attention to the

teacher. The teacher, a casually dressed middle aged woman, bounces around the chalkboard, pointing out things on the board and selecting raised hands. The civility is remarkable. There's no backtalk, no passing of notes.

Each classroom on the first floor is quiet and controlled. There's little security on the first floor too; a corrections officer passes by every so often.

The classrooms on the second floor are designated for special education classes. Tim explains how some of the men come into MYI with low aptitudes. These men work towards strengthening their basic educational skills.

The students give me apprehensive looks, but say nothing. I'm made fully aware that my presence is foreign and strange.

By the time we finish visiting the second floor, it's time for roll call. We stand opposite of the large hallway as clusters of inmates stroll through the yellow walkway. The hallway, for the most part, is calm and quiet.

Nationwide studies have shown that there is a direct link to completing a GED during incarceration and the rates of recidivism. On average, a person who completes a GED during incarceration has a five percent less chance of being incarcerated after their original incarceration. Furthermore, the younger the inmate completes their GED, the less of a chance they have of being re-incarcerated.



Amongst the calm atmosphere and positive learning environment, the effectiveness of the education is uncertain. Manson Youth Institution does not track its former students. Therefore, there is no statistical evidence that the education these men receive leads to lower rates of recidivism. To better grasp the effectiveness of the education, an effective tracking system of the ex-offenders could show how the education is or is not working in the long run.

The waiting room is packed when I return to MYI a week later for the fall graduation. Pairs of men and women talk emphatically to one another as they wait for the graduation ceremony to commence.

After passing through the metal detectors, we're led into the gymnasium where rows of chairs are lined up facing a podium. I grab the pamphlet off my chair and take a seat. While I wait for the graduates to enter the gym, I look at the schedule of events: national anthem, benediction, opening remarks, student speech, receiving of the degrees.

Minus the corrections officers standing beside me, I feel like I'm back in 2006 at my own high school graduation. Yet in 2006 the economy was still in tact; words like recession and crash were abstract. For those of us graduates not going to college, the possibility of finding a steady job was unabated. Now, post-wall street crash, the tightening job market has made finding valuable employment a greater challenge than ever. Even regular high

school graduates have difficulty in finding employment.

The men walk in through the back entrance as the spectators stand up and applaud and whistle. They're dressed in cap and gown, the tassels appropriately hanging on the left side. "Pomp and Circumstance" plays in the background.

Tim Colley, the warden, and the vice-principal all give brief speeches. Before the degrees are handed out, the deputy warden asks Tim if he can say a few words. He fires off a passionate speech. He explains that these men are being given a key today. He likens it to a Mercedes car key or the key of a mansion. He tells the men that owning that key is not enough. "What good is a key," he says, "if you don't use it to open the door?"

After a long applause, the diplomas are handed out. One by one the graduates come up to the podium, shake hands with staff, and receive their thick blue degrees. Most of these young men, though trying to remain tough and collected as they walk in front of their peers, crack wide smiles. Their eyes scan the audience for their parents, and when they connect they wave or wink or acknowledge their family.

The middle aged couple next to me, upon hearing the name of their son being called, stand up and cheer loudly. When they sit back down, I notice the mother tearing up. The father hands her a tissue, then pulls one out for himself.

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The graduates, now stripped of their caps and gowns, return to the facility in their tan jumpsuits; their brown colors reminding me that they are inmates. Each brown jumpsuit is a man who made a mistake or followed the wrong path.
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In uproarious applause the final diploma is handed out. Tassels are moved from the left side to the right. The final blessing is given and the ceremony is concluded.

The on looking inmates who've come to watch the graduation are escorted back to the facilities, while the graduates are given the opportunity to spend some time with their families as they partake in some desserts created by the culinary program.

Teachers approach the families to say a few words about their sons' accomplishments in the school. A corrections officer greets a young man and his family sitting nearby me. He tells the family how well behaved their son is. He congratulates the teenage boy, and tells his family they should be proud.

It's bittersweet when Tim alerts the crowd that the ceremony is finished and it's time to leave. After hugs and kisses are dispersed, we sit back in our seats for a head count. The graduates, now stripped of their caps and gowns, return to the facility in their tan jumpsuits; their brown colors reminding me that they are inmates. Each brown jumpsuit is a man who made a mistake or followed the wrong path.

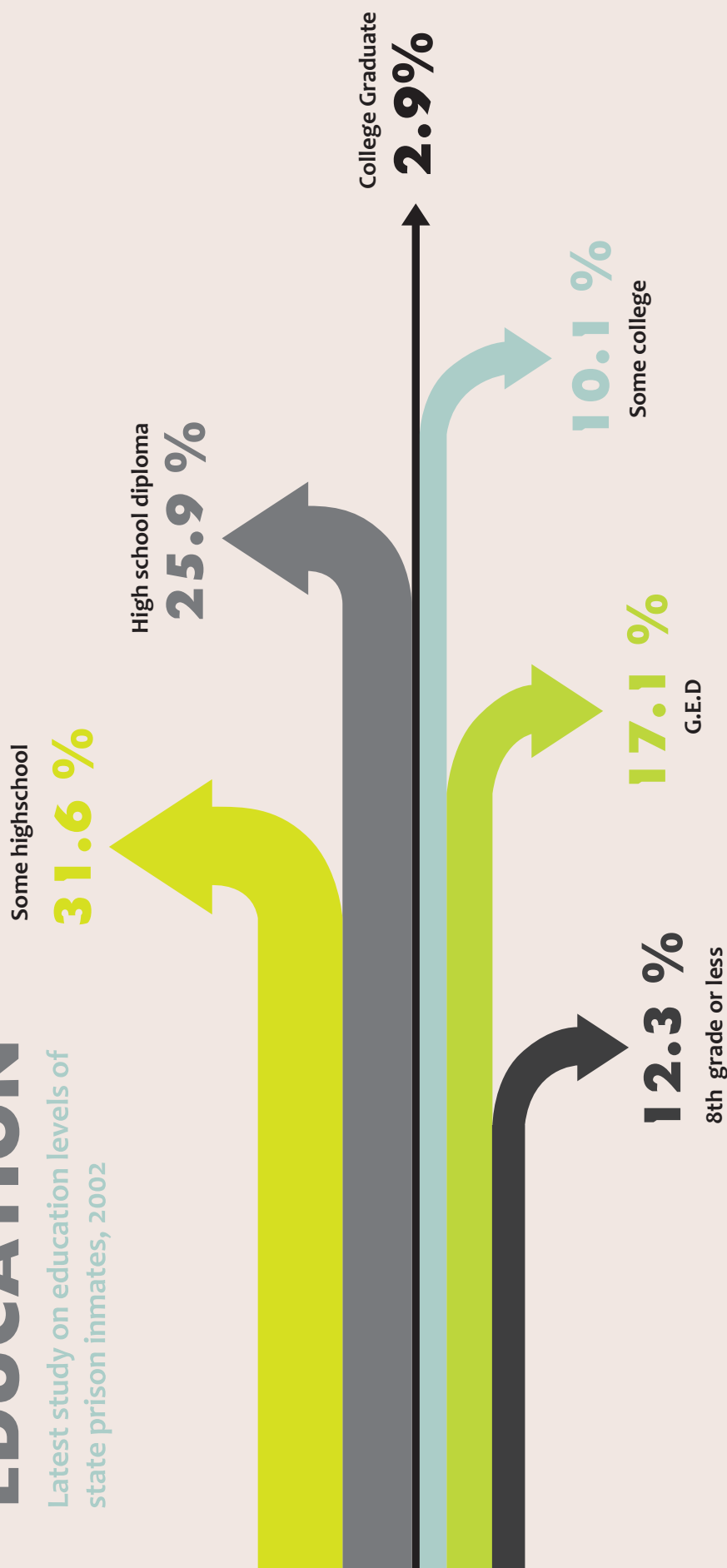
But as they leave the gymnasium, blue diplomas tucked under their arms, it's hard to define them as inmates. They walk erect with smiles across their faces. Their futures are uncertain, as is the society they will one day return to. Some of these men will fall back into a life of crime. Others will prosper using the degrees they've earned. As unpredictable as the job market they will return to, so is the fate of the graduates of Manson Youth Institute, Fall 2011.

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DETOUR ON THE PATH OF EDUCATION

Latest study on education levels of
state prison inmates, 2002



For these and other statistics on state prison inmates, visit
<http://www.libraryindex.com/pages/2528/Characteristics-Inmates-EDUCATION-PRISON-JAIL-INMATES.html>

I Am Not What I **ONCE WAS**

*Education at York
Correctional Institution*

By Casey Coughlin



YORK CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION'S FRONT ENTRANCE

"We are a paradoxical nation, enormously charitable and stubbornly unforgiving. We have called into existence the prisons we wanted. I am less and less convinced they are the prisons we need."

-Wally Lamb
Couldn't Keep It To Myself

During my tour of the Women's Federal Correctional Institution in Danbury, CT I had the opportunity to see their educational facility. Their head of Education lead the tour; a squat man with a balding head. He talked to us about the "girls" and their lack of education. He told us they have two elementary classrooms

and stopped at one to tell us that not many make it through their GED. The classes are taught by other inmates and as our group huddled on the outside of a large picture window, I couldn't help but feel like I was at a zoo. Students slowly scratched at their workbooks while a lesson on verbs was being scribed on the chalkboard. They nervously glanced at the window as we stared in at them.

A few months later, I walk through metal detectors, long winding halls and doors that slowly move open upon approach at York Correctional Institution in Niantic, CT. Guided by Andreus, who introduces himself

to everyone as being from "central office," I am eager to see what York has to offer its inmates. He leads me to the annex, where we wait for permission to access the school. We stand near a fan and Andreu asks, "Can you smell that?" Unsure of how to respond I nod, "fresh air?"

"Nope, that's the smell of so many people living so close together." I do smell it, a mixture of linoleum, cement, cleaning agents and skin. It hangs in the air. We are met in the annex by Mary Greaney, Principal of York Correctional Institution's School. The CO in the annex nods and Mary escorts us through glass doors and into a hallway. We pass her office immediately to our right, and she asks what I want to see.

"Everything."

She and Andreus laugh, but honor my request and we continue traveling. Natural light pours in through skylights above us. Colorful murals distract the eye from the continuum of white.

The school serves around 200 students at any given time; York's population itself hovers around 1,100. Mary Greaney tells me she works to allow any woman wanting to earn her GED or

High School Diploma the opportunity to do so and there is usually only a short waiting list for the academic classes. The vocational classes, however, have a significant wait time due to their high demand and mandatory hour requirements. The average starting grade level for the women working towards their GED is sixth grade.



“As we enter there is a drastic change in air. Musk, cement and wet mop is replaced by relaxer, shampoo, and nail polish. A dozen beautician stations clutter the room.”



Aside from the traditional GED classes, York offers a magnitude of unique programs most being operated by dedicated volunteers. Three Rivers Community College runs a few courses each semester. Students from Wesleyan University tutor and hold book clubs. Short art and movement programs are frequently offered. Renowned Connecticut author Wally Lamb teaches a writers workshop.

Our tour stops first at Mr. Robinson's math class. He welcomes us in and I am introduced. The classroom is long and narrow, scattered with desks. Half the women ignore our presence, keeping their heads in their workbooks. Others gladly abandon their work to examine

their distraction. I smile at them and clutch my pad and pen; trying to scribble notes and be polite at the same time. “Feel free to ask them any questions you have.” Mr. Robinson says, I take a half breath and Mary Greaney interrupts, “Well we were just taking a quick tour, sorry for the interruption Mr. Robinson.”

York CI offers a variety of vocational and higher education options for women who have already earned their GED or Diploma. For the students in these programs certification is obtained through the completion of the courses, which ultimately will help them obtain employment after their release. Hospitality, culinary, computer programs and cosmetology are the most popular.

We enter Mr. Green's hospitality class. It's spacious and at least 3 times the size of the first math class. The lights are half off and Mr. Green stands by a projector screen displaying the information of a five star hotel somewhere in the mid-west. We interrupt his speech about price variation and Mary plays the introductions again. On the far side of the class a woman stands behind a wooden counter, checking a fellow classmate into “The Mineo Inn.” Mineo is a town in southern Italy, over 4,000 miles from the women in York. Mr. Green explains his unique classroom; book work in the front, mock front desk in the middle, and housekeeping in the rear. They learn everything from customer service to commercial cleaning and at the end

can earn certificates in hospitality from START and The Educational Institute.

The Culinary classroom resembles the hotel. Large space, windows, energetic teacher, engaged students. Here the certificate offered is very valuable. It's called Serv Safe and every food operation must have an employee on staff that possesses one. Andreus asks the teacher about the differences in dinner rolls and I watch the women cleaning the deli slicer. There is no charge consideration when determining admittance into any of the vocational classes. All they need to qualify is a completed GED and good behavior.

Mary's staff consists of 25 members (18 teachers and 7 support staff). She herself has spent 22 years with the DOC. Out of college she worked at a runaway house, followed by years as a school psychologist, which is how she started in the prison school system. She is warm, yet authoritative, similar to any other high school's principal. I ask about behavior problems, since I have yet to see any CO's since leaving the annex. She answers with a definitive no. Each teacher has a beeper which will alert a problem, but she says they rarely are any.

“To be here is a privilege, and for most of these women this is the first time in their lives where they feel successful. If there are any problems they are usually verbal between students, when those occur we handle them with the school psychologist and myself.” She goes on to tell me that most teachers want to teach here because they say



“I ask about the success of educational programs in lowering the recidivism rate and learn that the state is not doing anything to track the correlation between involvement and recidivating. I am miffed.”



they feel it's a safer environment than public schools.

We crisscross the white hall again and stand behind solid double doors. Mary fishes through her abundant key chain and unlocks it. As we enter there is a drastic change in air. Musk, cement and wet mop is replaced by relaxer, shampoo, and nail polish. A dozen beautician stations clutter the room. Chatter continues despite our presence and Ms. Cirillo is barely visible in all the commotion. I am allowed to wonder amongst the chairs. The women aren't disturbed at all and continue working despite my interested eyes.

Ms. Cirillo tells me the women pay minimal prices for the services they receive, the money going to keeping the beauty school stocked with products. Sometimes they collect tips and donate them to local charity. Unlike any other vocational skill offered, the women cannot receive a certificate. Because of security, the students are not allowed to handle the chemicals necessary to dye hair; however, upon completion of the 1500 hour course and prison sentence the state gives the student a voucher to pay for the missing color classes, which allows them the opportunity to complete their certification.

We plunge back into the hallway, gratefully escaping the chemical fumes and I'm told that's all there is. There is still one room I haven't seen: Wally's writing workshop. “No one is here today, they only teach on Thursday but you can still see it if you want.” They think I am crazy for insisting on seeing an empty classroom but Mary consents and leads the way. The classroom is empty, with desks in rows—a line of computers in the back. The only noticeable trace of the writing workshop is left written on the white board. “Elements of a story- plot, character development, setting.”

We end the tour with a stop in Mary's office. It's almost time for the students to go to lunch and they are trying to keep me out of the way. I ask about the success of educational programs in lowering the recidivism rate and learn that the state is not doing anything to track the correlation between involvement and recidivating. I am miffed. Outside the office door I can see the hall now crowded with women. Mary shrugs off my dismay and instead offers me the school motto. “Nom Sum Qualis Eram,” - “I am Not What I Once Was.”

*Next issue,
December 2011:*

FOCUS ON HOLIDAYS

RELEASE will be taking a short winter break in January, but will resume publication in February. During this time we will still accept new subscriptions and comments. Thank you for your support!

Writing for CHANGE

A Q&A with Connecticut
Author Wally Lamb

By Casey Coughlin

For the past 12 years Connecticut author Wally Lamb has run a writers' workshop for the women in York Correctional Institution. Most well known for his fiction novels, She's Come Undone and I Know This Much Is True, his work was featured on Oprah's Book Club and has been on national best-seller lists. Lamb's workshop at York covers any genre of writing and, unlike other educational programs, does not have an education level prerequisite. The workshop, split into two group levels, works to strengthen writing and literacy skills mainly through personal essay. Lamb has also published two anthologies from the women at York, I Couldn't Keep It to Myself and I'll Fly Away.

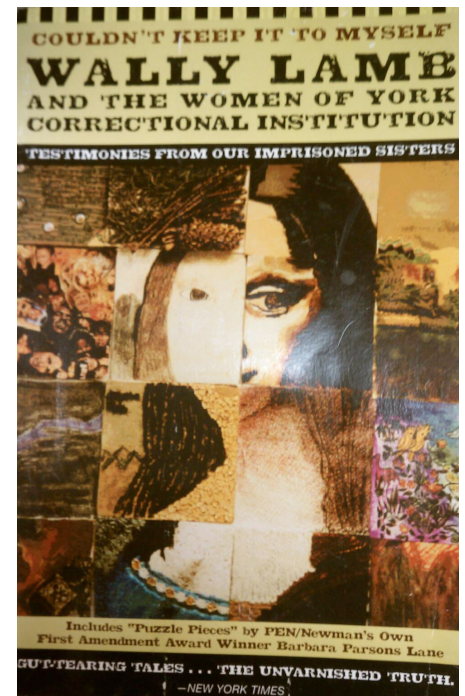
COUGHLIN: Can you tell me a little about your program and how it relates to education for inmates across the state?

LAMB: I do a writing program at York and, although they can choose whatever genre they want to write in, most of them choose autobiographical essay. The women I work with are primarily interested in reflecting on their lives. So my program, although I am not a therapist by any stretch, I do witness the therapeutic value not only from their writing down but also

from sharing it with the other people in the group. They are very invested in revision, which really is what writing is all about. Some of their work has become publishable. But as far as the prison itself I probably don't have a really clear overall view, but I know that most of the education is focused on students getting their GED.

COUGHLIN: What skills are you seeing the women coming into the program lacking?

LAMB: In order to qualify for our program you don't have had to reach a certain education level. In other words, we have ESL students, people who have an eighth grade education, and, on the other end of the spectrum, people who have law degrees and nursing degrees. Because ours is a program based pretty much on personal writing a woman can jump in where she happens to be in terms of her development educationally. There are some weaknesses that are fairly common--grammatical and form usage mistakes. I am not above doing a little grammar lesson if there is an overall need for that. Or I might do a ten minute check-up course on the placement of apostrophes. Another area where there is some deficiency for some students is in reading



WALLY LAMB'S ANTHOLOGY FROM THE WOMEN OF YORK

comprehension. But, again, if I assign a short story as a model I will run a discussion class, so I will throw out a couple of questions and there usually is a variety of reactions. We have no problem getting the women to speak up; they are really great at class discussions and they tend to teach one another. Sometimes a student will be way off the mark as far as what the story seems to be saying. Now I don't mean to imply that everyone has to get the same meaning out of a story that may be somewhat ambiguous,

but if someone is really off the mark by listening to the discussion of the others, she'll get caught up on the meaning of the story if reading comprehension is a problem for her. So what I am saying ultimately is that I am the teacher of the program, but what I love about working with these women is that they teach one another.

COUGHLIN: What changes do you see in the women from when they start the beginner course to when they move on to the more advanced?

LAMB: They become much more articulate. They become much better at clarifying their intent. Their writing becomes more polished; it becomes more rich with examples and a lot less vague and unclear.

COUGHLIN: What supportive services are in place for women that are participating as far as them revisiting traumatic events that have happened when they are writing?

LAMB: There are psychiatric services available to them. I know some women who have been very traumatized by earlier events in their lives and they seem to have regular contact with the psychologists who are there at the prison. In my opinion I believe there may be an over reliance on medications, but I know that psychotropic medications are dispensed. Some of the women really invest in a set of religious programming. There is a pretty wonderful program that I have heard from many of the women called the

Chrysalis Program. It is spiritual based program but it is not advocating any one religion. There are many volunteers who are faith based and that is another avenue that the women can access.

COUGHLIN: What effect does it have on yourself and your team from constantly reading such heavy personal stories?

LAMB: Well, it is very tough sometimes to hear described some of the things that the women have lived through or in some cases things that they have done. But I have felt right from the beginning that I am not there to judge them, because if they have been sentenced they have already been judged. The state has judged them. So my mission is only to respond to their writing. That said, sometimes it gets tough. If a woman reveals that her grandfather incested her and humiliated her when he didn't do what he wanted, it's horrible to have lived through something like that, but it's also pretty rough to be bearing witness to those kinds of stories. And that's whether your reading and reacting to writing or whether it is something the woman is revealing during class discussions. So, yes, it takes its toll on me sometimes.

A couple of things really help me with that. One, it seems that in every workshop we run there are tears; sometimes communally shed, sometimes shed by the individual. But there is also a lot of laughter. Some of the women are very funny and I crack

jokes on a semi-regular basis, too. The laughter can be very therapeutic. And for me, because I have been at it for so long, what I get to see is some amazing transformations. Women who started the program very hang-dog and teary over the course of a year or two years they come into their own. They start dealing with the tough stuff in their life and when they feel comfortable enough to share it there is kind of an unburdening that happens. Some of these horrible secrets that have weighted them down for years or decades; it's like lifting weight off of their shoulders. I was a high school teacher for many years and a college professor but I have never had the opportunity before I went to York to work with students over longer than a year or a semester. Some of the women that I work with now I have worked with for 10 years or more. So over time as they develop their skills I see some amazing development of self confidence. For a teacher that is really an exciting thing to be able to witness.

COUGHLIN: In your opinion, where do you think the State of Connecticut's Education system is failing its students?

LAMB: Well, I am not going to speak for the entire education system in Connecticut, but I do feel that the programs within the prisons seem by and large to ignore the women who are there for very long sentences. Some of my students have life sentences and will be there until they die. There are a lot more programs for people with shorter sentences; I

feel that the people with long term are often left out of the planning education. I am a firm believer in lifelong education if a jury or a judge hands down a life sentence for some conviction of a horrible crime then that's still a life sentence not a death sentence. Therefore these people who have life sentences are entitled to have a life and if they want to further their education I think that should be available to them. Not everybody feels that way. There are a lot more people that are more conservative than I am. I understand their point of view I just don't share it.

COUGHLIN: What do you think can be done as a preventative measure? If these women had been writing all along do you think that would somehow have changed the course of their lives?

LAMB: Education is rehabilitative. One young woman I work with now, she's about 28 to 29. She was a street kid, her parents were heroin addicts and when she was 14-years-old she was a runaway and got involved with a rough guy who was maybe a year or two older than she. They decided that they were going to rob a cab driver. They called for a cab and when the cab got there they ordered him to hand over the money. He refused and gave them quite a fight and it resulted in one of the two kids pulling a knife and killing the cab driver. Was she ready for a more formal education at age 14? No. She was an angry young woman, confused and in some ways very naïve. Now she's 28 to 29, she's ready for it.

She's hungry for it. And even without a formal education she's probably one of the best writers that I have worked with down there. So I think that education is definitely a key to people getting out of rough neighborhoods, and getting out of rough situations; however, not everybody is ready and willing to accept that and not every city is willing and able to provide that quality education. Connecticut really needs to better address the haves and the have-nots and make it more balanced. But I do see some hope in that regard and that is with some of the charter schools that are coming in the state.

COUGHLIN: I know you have been interviewed a lot about your work at York, but what is one question that nobody ever asks you that you wish someone would?

LAMB: I guess I would like to be asked: why institutions are not more merciful to the people in their custody?

COUGHLIN: What's the answer?

LAMB: I think it's probably because it's easier to think of incarcerated people as chess pieces rather than living breathing human beings, who are more than just the crime they have committed. I feel that we are all pretty complicated equations whether we are spending our life in prison or have never walked the grounds of a prison. We are all complex individuals. To simply say, "those are the bad guys and we on the outside are the good guys," it's just much more complicated than that.

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Creating an Environment OF COMFORT

*Teaching a GED Program
to Ex-Offenders*

By Jesse Duthrie



CHARLIE ROSENTHAL STANDS NEXT TO GED GRADUATE

On a busy street in downtown Bridgeport, the Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport takes aim at reducing recidivism by offering its own GED program. In 2008 Career Resources was led by Liz Dupont-Diehl in applying for a Program Improvement Project (PIP) Grant through the State of Connecticut Education Department (SDE). Unlike other grants being proposed at the time, Liz applied for the grant under the condition that the GED program would be run specifically for formerly incarcerated citizens.

“The thinking was that the group dynamic would be helpful to learning – everyone having experienced the same challenges,” Liz Dupont-Diehl

commented. “At the time we were and are the only SDE PIP adult education program in the community working solely with ex-offenders.”

GED completion has been statistically proven to reduce national recidivism rates. In a study conducted by Brown University and Princeton University, recidivism rates reduced more than five percent for men who received their GED’s in prison. Outside of prison, GED completion has also been shown to lower rates of recidivism.

Chartered with a program new to Connecticut’s education system, Charlie Rosenthal of Career Resources was tasked with being the teacher for

the ex-offenders. Charlie molded his class based on his prior education experience as an alternative education teacher and his past history working with ex-inmates. Though never incarcerated, Charlie describes himself as “comfortable with this kind of population.” He adds, “Working in alternative educational career that goes back to the sixties, I’ve learned that you can’t take yourself too seriously.”

His classroom is a hybrid of a computer lab and a standard high school classroom. Tables are aligned in rows with two computers per table. An archaic map hangs on the wall, nearly out of sight, seeming ancient in the new technology era. A white board is positioned next to the rows of desks. A few small tables are scattered around the white board.

Some students sit at the computers working on programs I can only describe as “Rosetta-Stone-ish,” though there are numbers instead of foreign words, and the intensity of the student ranges from slow to enthused. Another student is sitting at a table with a large test booklet open. He scribbles math equations down, which are most likely algebra (which is required for the GED certificate).

Another student is sitting at a desk with another student and their conversation is focused on things non-academic: football, cars, etc.

The smorgasbord of student discipline is not accidental. Dan Braccio, the CO-OP program director, informs me why Charlie has structured his classroom like this. “Not everyone in the class needs to be on ‘page 17’ at the same time. Students are able to progress at their own pace with those subjects that are more difficult for them without pressure. I think that traditional classroom settings have been part of the reason that our students have dropped out of high school.”

Instead of teaching a traditional, formulated class based upon dates of completion and structured material, Charlie tends to let the program flow according to each student. None of the men hold high school diplomas, and many of them don’t even possess fundamental math, reading, and writing skills.

It’s Charlie’s warm sociability that gives these men the ability to return to a classroom setting after incarceration. Charlie jokes around with the students; his grey beard and red cheeks are reminiscent of a jolly Santa Claus. But to Charlie, it’s more than just making friends and telling jokes. He’s creating an environment of comfort.

The level of comfort seems only to extend to Charlie. When Charlie asks them what they think of the program and how they like it, they purse their

lips and say nothing. They are not the easiest to connect with immediately. It takes time, Charlie says, before they can trust a person in an educational setting.

“People don’t learn until they feel safe: physically and emotionally. My specialty is making my students feel comfortable so they can admit they have problems with their reading and math. They can be very defensive. Once they admit their weakness, then they can start to learn. I feel like I’m nurturing their brains and their souls.”

Charlie implements several ways of nurturance. In the warm weather, he likes to bring in hamburgers and hot dogs for barbeques. He also likes to conduct small exams on a six-week basis. The purpose of these exams is to show the progress the students are making in hopes they will continue to strive for the GED.

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“Once [the students] admit their weakness, then they can start to learn. I feel like I’m nurturing their brains and their souls.”

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However, there is room for improvement in the program. Dan suggests that program could use more multi-media resources to teach the material in a more dynamic way. The class could also use more part time instructors; Charlie is the only teacher in the class.

“When I get sick,” Charlie says jokingly, “the class gets the day off!”

There is a significant amount of research for the completion of the GED during incarceration. Studies have shown recidivism rates go down over five to ten percent for men who’ve completed the GED program while incarcerated. Also, the younger the person is upon completing the GED while incarcerated the less likely their chance of recidivism.

What little research has been done about the completion of a GED program post-incarceration indicates that there is a decreased rate of recidivism. The majority of information that is known is told by personal accounts of former graduates who’ve gone on to be successful.

As Connecticut’s unemployment rate hovers around nine percent, the GED has become less effective in finding gainful employment. However, there are secondary options for GED graduates. Trade schools are an option. In order to enter a trade school a person needs to have a high school diploma or equivalent. There is also the route of college, particularly community college, where scholarships are available for low-income students.

Charlie has seen several of his students move on to community college and trade schools. He’s also seen students disappear from the class: presumably dropping the program or worse, incarcerated. He cannot control the paths of these men; he can only guide them towards a better future.

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