



College Guild bringing education to inmates



NICK SEIDEL went from repeat offender to paralegal, owing some of that inspiration to the College Guild. Seidel is now working as an intern and going to school to further his legal career.
CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

BRUNSWICK

Tucked away in a small office off Harpswell Road lies the headquarters of an organization that uses Education to combat recidivism among prisoners. Over the last 15 years, the College Guild has worked with more than 5,500 inmates, with usually about 450 students enrolled and just as many waiting to take courses.

The classes that are taught are unaccredited and geared more toward being fun rather than rigorous. There is no syllabus, no textbooks, and the whole process is conducted anonymously through the mail. From prisoners to volunteer readers across the country.

Only first names are used in the exchanges and all work is to be examined by the staff of prisons involved.

Co-founder Julie Zimmerman said the courses were meant to stimulate creativity, reasoning and self-esteem, as well as humor and objectivity. They aren't graded in the traditional sense but rather are returned to the students with helpful tips and rhetorical questions to make them think deeper into the topic.

"I think so many prisoners are treated so poorly. They're not respected, they're not given credit for being people," Zimmerman said.

To be clear, Zimmerman said she doesn't want to make it sound like she thinks everyone behind bars is innocent or that they are all great people, but she does believe they are all people with potential.

Outgoing and articulate, Nick Seidel credits College Guild for helping turn his energies in the right direction.

At 34, Seidel ended up serving four years of a 27-year sentence. His resume up until that point included motor vehicle theft, eluding, forgery, burglary and unlawful use of a weapon by a felon.

Seidel's first classes were creative language and art of the masters. He said both classes were excellent, saying it was a good curriculum and well structured with feedback from the readers. It was the beginning of a new life for Seidel.

"I was very busy in my younger days and definitely focusing my efforts in the wrong direction. I enjoyed my prison experience — it was the most valuable thing that's ever happened to me and it made me a better man. I wouldn't give it up for anything in the world," Seidel said.

Seidel said prison time taught him stress management, social skills and gave him the opportunity to improve the parts of him he liked while working on those he didn't.

Seidel also credits his time in prison for kickstarting his education — both at the College Guild as well as getting his paralegal certification. Seidel, is currently an intern at a legal aid firm in Chicago as well as a current college student. In the fall, Seidel will be attending Roosevelt University to further his legal career.

"I'm moving at 120 miles per hour, but I'm moving at 120 miles per hour in the right direction this time. It's been a wild ride and I'm sure it's unusual, but at the same time it's been awesome," Seidel said.

Guild administrator Pat Friedman said that everyone deserves access to an education and that many of the people who need it most are excluded by everyone else. That, she says, is what makes College Guild unique.

"To our knowledge, we're the only organization offering free courses to prisoners without exclusion across the country," Friedman said.

To those who say prisoners don't deserve benefits for being in prison, Zimmerman points out that losing freedom is punishment enough and denying them a chance to better themselves would be punishment beyond what the law intended.

"It is a very punitive system instead of a system of corrections. It's supposed to be a correctional system and a rehabilitative system. The research shows unequivocally that when provided with education and the respect that comes with it — the self respect, that the chances of them returning to jail after they get out reduce by up to 70 percent," Friedman said.

Zimmerman said many of their students dropped out of public school between third and sixth grade. Generally, she said most of the guild's students never graduated and have had negative experiences in school. There are exceptions, however.

Friedman mentioned a former Guild student who went on to graduate at the top of his class at the University of Michigan. He has since got in touch with The Guild and was made a board member. The student they called Larry had called and told the Guild if it wasn't for them, he would not have taken the next step in his life.

"It's overwhelming, the letters we get, because I didn't expect to be changing lives as much as putting a little light in a dark cell. I didn't expect these dinky little courses would be giving the people self confidence or the desire to learn," Zimmerman said.

The nonprofit 501c3 organization is run solely on donations and the hours put in by many volunteers. Currently, the group is looking to expanding their space across the hall and is looking for funding to do that. The Guild currently has an anonymous donor who has promised to match any \$2,000 donation, allowing the group to expand their operations for a year.

There are about 10 or 12 rotating office volunteers and just a skeleton crew who is paid. There are 11 members on the board and a volunteer force of about 130, including between 30 and 50 Bowdoin College volunteers depending on the time of year.

Friedman said the Guild has become so popular there they have started a College Guild club on campus and students at Bates College have become involved.