

Life-changing enthusiasms

BY DAVID TREADWELL

In 1906, Bowdoin College first published "The Offer of the College," which includes the inspiring words "...To lose yourself in generous enthusiasms and cooperate with others for common ends."

Fifty Bowdoin students are currently putting their generous enthusiasms to work for a most unusual common end: Helping prisoners discover the power of their own potential.

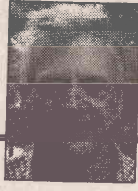
These students volunteer for College Guild, a Brunswick-based organization founded in 2001 by Julie Zimmerman. College Guild offers free non-credit correspondence courses to prisoners around the country.

"We wanted prisoners to feel respected and valued," explained Zimmerman. "We wanted to say to them, 'Here's a stranger who wants to spend time reading what you have to say.'"

Today, College Guild enrolls about 350 student-prisoners and enlists the help of about 90 volunteer readers. Moreover, a waiting list includes hundreds of more prisoners seeking the opportunity to challenge their minds and better themselves. California and Texas enroll the most students in College Guild.

The College Guild's 25 courses run the gamut, from Creative Language to Dogs, Greek Mythology to Gardening, Poetry to Puzzles. Each course includes several sequential units. All exchanges between student and reader are handled through the mail. Only first names are used. The reader never knows where or why the prisoner is being held. Mutual respect guides the process; thus the Guild's mantra, "Respect Reduces Recidivism."

Bowdoin students began reading for College Guild at the outset, and student involvement has grown rapidly over the last few years. In addition to reading, students



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JUST A LITTLE OLD

have helped create curriculum, assisted with clerical work in the office and served on the College Guild Board.

Here's what some students have to say about their experience reading the coursework of prisoners:

"I'm blown away by their knowledge and thoughtfulness. And it's so rewarding to bring a positive satisfying experience into the everyday lives of people behind bars." (Emily Hochman)

"We shouldn't let people just rot in cells. They don't deny messing up; they're just trying to do something to better themselves. (Jackie Fickes)

"As a future teacher, I believe in the power of education. They deserve a chance." (Mitsuki Nishimoto)

"Everyone has a right to an education, even death-row inmates." (Jennifer Zhang)

"Spending one or two hours a week is not a huge commitment to make, especially when you're making such a big impact on someone's life." (Kiran Pande)

The benefits go both ways. College Guild changes the lives of Bowdoin students, just as it changes the lives of the prisoners it serves.

"When I first came to Bowdoin, the concept of incarceration wasn't even on my radar," said Elizabeth Brown. "Now I'm helping create a community dialogue around criminal justice."

Cullen Brownson, a College Guild Board member who currently teaches at a Waldorf high school in Washington, D.C., noted that his experience with College Guild while at Bowdoin helped him become a better teacher.

"In addition to acquiring patience, I learned how to continually push students to challenge themselves," he said.

Moving letters of appreciation from prisoners fill the file drawers of the College Guild office. Here's a very small sample:

"No matter what I've done, I'm still a person with something to offer the world when I'm released."

"I will never forget your kindness and willingness to help those who are forgotten or written off."

"I have to thank you profusely for doing what might not feel like much. Understand that you changed my life."

"Thank you for reaching into your heart to give a faceless student a chance."

In a thank-you note to donors, one student wrote, "Behind the prison gates we can use our newly grown College Guild communications skills to better interact positively with our fellow inmates and prison personnel, including helping other inmates with their legal endeavors. College Guild helps turn many of us CG students into positive mentors to the many we touch inside and outside of prison."

The mother of one prisoner wrote, "Thank you for being there for my son and for all the men and women who are drifting along with your help...clinging to your courses and encouraging remarks to buoy them up and carry them into each new day behind bars."

For information on ways to get involved with — or support — College Guild, go to www.collegeguild.org.

David Treadwell, a Brunswick writer, welcomes commentary as well as suggestions for future "Just a Little Old" columns. dtreadw575@aol.com.

(NOTE: Some readers of the recent "Treading the Boards" column have rightly noted the omission of some other excellent theater venues, such as The Theater Project in Brunswick, the Chocolate Church Arts Center and the Arundel Barn Theater.)