

LIFE ON THE INSIDE

LEVERAGING THE LIBERAL ARTS BEHIND BARS

BY KEVIN COBURN '81

WHEN ELEVEN UVM UNDERGRADS in the course “Justice Studies” arrive for a weekly class meeting, they are required to leave their keys, cellphones, and other personal belongings at the door before walking through a metal detector under the watchful eye of a correctional officer. It isn’t part of an extreme measure to remove distractions from the classroom. It’s just part of the routine for the students taking the course with incarcerated people at the Women’s Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility in South Burlington.

PHOTOGRAPH BY COREY HENDRICKSON '98



Opening doors, for UVM students and their counterparts in the prison, was the impetus for the course developed and taught by Kathy Fox, professor of sociology and director of the new UVM Liberal Arts in Prison Program. Spring semester 2017 was the first time in Vermont that undergrads and inmates took a course together on the “inside,” and it represented UVM’s entry into the renowned Consortium for the Liberal Arts in Prison established at Bard College. UVM is the first public institution and the first land grant university to join.

Admittance to the consortium, and plans to begin offering for-credit courses to qualified incar-

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cerated Vermonters beginning this spring comes after patient and persistent advocacy by Fox, who sees a liberal education as transformational in the lives of individual students and society at large. This semester UVM is teaching an introductory sociology course to men in the Northwest State Correctional Facility in Swanton and a course on mythology for female inmates in South Burlington.

“I’ve been very impressed with the number of smart people in prison,” Fox says. “They work hard not just because they see education as important, but because they crave doing something meaningful with their time and bettering themselves. If we take the power of liberal arts seriously—the power to reason and the capacity for critical inquiry—our prison system provides extremely fertile ground for its application.”

GROWING UP IN TULSA, OKLAHOMA, Fox received some early lessons in fairness and privilege that informed her research on social problems and eventually criminal justice. After attending a private Catholic elementary school, she volunteered to be bussed to Booker T. Washington, a racially and socio-economically integrated high school on the other side of Tulsa. She observed that only when white middle-class students were bussed in did the district infuse a lot of resources into the school.

“I was very aware that my trajectory might be different from other kids I knew, not because of talent or smarts, but because of access to resources,” Fox says. “That struck me as wrong. But the experience made me a sociologist.”

Her father, a tax attorney in Tulsa, served as an early role model. He fought to establish fair voting districts in the city—the existing system underrepresented densely populated lower-income neighborhoods dominated by African Americans.

“He got threatening phone calls and was harassed. But he didn’t back down,” Fox recalls.

It was a later conversation with her father that finally set Fox on the path to her profession. She had just graduated from high school and was taking a gap-year (before the term became fashionable), waiting tables and casting about for a clear direction. The things she was interested in, she told her father, didn’t seem to have any academic application.

“He asked me: ‘what do you spend time thinking about?’ I told him I wondered why people behaved differently in crowds as opposed to small groups. Or why some groups get labeled negatively and others didn’t. ‘There’s a name for that,’ he said. ‘That’s sociology.’”

Fox is not an “armchair” sociologist—her research takes her to places most people don’t want to go but where the magnitude of need and opportunity for positive change are the greatest.

Her doctoral dissertation at California-Berkeley focused on a prevention program for intravenous drug users on the West Coast, most of them homeless and at high risk of contracting HIV from sharing needles. Fox conducted qualitative research on the program, and in the process, provided free condoms and taught addicts how to clean syringes.

She joined the UVM faculty in 1994. Teaching introductory classes and seminars in criminal justice, her research interests turned increasingly towards offender reentry and reintegration in Vermont.

“I’d never been inside a prison, but I was really

struck by the notion that these are people’s sons and daughters, husbands and wives,” she says. “I’ve often said every citizen should visit a prison, because they would understand how dehumanizing the environment is, and they’d meet people that don’t need to be there.”

Fox increasingly began to see higher education as a key lever to change the lives of inmates and improve outcomes after their release. She also became convinced of the societal benefits of education on the “inside”—providing higher education reduces recidivism and dramatically improves the odds that returning citizens could become successful, crime-free, tax-paying members of society.

“Vermont is an ideal laboratory because of its scale—we can try lots of new things,” she says. “The state spends \$65,000 per year per in-state inmate (more than four times what it spends for each public school student from kindergarten through the twelfth grade).”

The recidivism rate in the state, while better than the national average, has hovered at about 45 percent for the last decade. Incarcerated citizens who are released with a high school education have a recidivism rate of 24 percent. That drops to 10 percent for inmates with two years of college, and about 5 percent with four years of college.

“Vermont, like the rest of the nation, is investing vast sums of money in a correctional system that has the potential to deliver better results,” she says.

FOX IS A GREAT BELIEVER in experiential learning, and bringing her UVM undergraduates into the prison provides them with a first-hand look at lives of the incarcerated. The learning is a two-way street—inmates learn academic content alongside UVM students in a classic college seminar while the undergrads develop a sharpened sensitivity to the obstacles inmates face in their day-to-day lives and long-term prospects.

The class typically sits in a circle, with UVM undergrads and students from the prison seated next to each other. It is one of the few times in the inmates’ weekly routine that a uniformed officer is not present in the classroom.

“A big obstacle was breaking down the walls as much as possible. Both groups were a little intimidated so we did some ice breaking exercises to establish the things we all have in common. For instance, I’d propose they talk about what their one food would be if they were stranded on a desert island,” Fox says.

There would be laughter—nervous at first, then more spontaneous—as the students discussed the merits of a diet consisting of pizza versus ice cream.

“The best way to understand our criminal justice system is to talk to people within it, from all angles,” Fox says. The impact, she hopes, will be that the shared human experience will affect UVM students as they go forward in their professions. If they someday work in a management role, for instance, maybe they’ll hire a formerly incarcerated individual.

Sociology major Sarah Bull ’17 worked with Fox as a teaching assistant for the course. In addition to the Monday afternoon class, she spent an hour each

RECIDIVISM RATES IN VERMONT

HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA

24%

2 YEARS COLLEGE

10%

4 YEARS COLLEGE

5%

Wednesday evening in the facility meeting individually with classmates to answer questions and help them with assignments.

“One of the ladies told me every week how empowered she felt to be part of the class,” Bull says. “She understood that we were not going in just to ‘study’ them—that we were learning as much from them as they were from us. She told me she appreciated the fact that we were using their perspectives to improve a system where she feels she has no voice.”

One of the “inside” students who was recently released, wrote to Fox saying she never imagined she could go to college, but feels that she can after being part of the course. As the program continues to take root at UVM, that’s a result the professor behind it hopes will repeat many times over.

“A liberal arts education certainly changed my life,” says Fox, “I’m confident it can change the lives of those inside our prisons, and improve our communities in the process.” **VQ**