

MMU English Students Reach Out to State Penitentiary

by Billie Barker, '16

“How was prison today?” That’s what my husband asked me when I got home from school late tonight. My answer? It was fantastic. The inmates were insightful, smart, prepared and appreciative. While the group of English students leading the Anamosa Penitentiary Prison Book Club came prepared with discussion objectives and questions, they were barely needed. The half dozen inmates who attended had more than enough questions and comments to fill the hour-and-a-half scheduled.

On this particular evening, Professor Mary Vermillion’s Law and Literature class was facilitating a discussion centered on Louise Erdrich’s *The Round House*, a novel set on a Native American reservation and dealing with issues of jurisdiction, justice and revenge. Circled together in a small classroom graffitied with grade school grammar rules and inspirational quotes, the inmates were engaged and candid.

While discussing the merits of revenge versus law, Michael, a middle-aged African American inmate observed that revenge is linked to immaturity: “It’s a selfish emotion, and comes out the wrong way. Now that I’m mature I don’t want revenge. It depends on where you are in life. I’ve lived it. When I was young, I wanted revenge, not justice.”

Other inmates questioned whether the law resulted in justice. Another inmate, Stan, observed that “when justice isn’t equal – then all that’s left is revenge.”

They agreed that when the law doesn’t serve justice, it leaves a dangerous void that creates imbalance. Mike added that in his case, “if justice had made me whole I may not have taken it to the revenge level. Taking revenge myself ended up affecting more people, just like in the book.”

Mary Feeney-Wilfer, Anamosa State Penitentiary Education Director, is the liaison for this program. She selects the participants, and sits in at both orientation and the book clubs themselves. “It’s a privilege for the men to participate – I wish we could have more involved, but this is a maximum security prison and we’re only allowed two lifers in each session at one time,” she said. “The men really like it. When I check my e-mail in the morning I’ll have at least one thanking me for planning this and asking when the next one will be.”

While the Prison Book Club is an optional project and essay topic in several English classes taught by Professors Mary Vermillion and Carol Tyx, there is also the

option of participating in one of several volunteer book clubs also hosted by Vermillion and Tyx throughout the year, including summer. An approximately two-hour orientation and tour is all that's required to be eligible – it's here that you learn what to wear, what to do, and what not to do. Participants experience the first twinge of claustrophobia at having double steel maximum security gates clang shut behind one after another.

“This makes me want to get involved in changing laws,” said Abby Herb, sophomore English major, after her first book club experience. “I feel it's unfair that some of these men aren't given a second chance...everybody deserves a second chance.”

Todd Cross, junior English/Education major, felt that the discussion expanded his understanding of the literature studied. “They were awesome,” said Cross about the inmates who participated. “I definitely want to volunteer to do more over the summer, especially since then we get to help choose the books. The inmates had so much insight from their experiences, and helped me see more that who you are and where you live affects the level of justice you might get.”

Cross and several other students also found themselves inspired to learn more about changing Iowa laws on reducing life without parole sentencing.