

OPENING UP TO STUDENTS

The Oregon Department of Corrections (ODOC) participates in a national educational program called INSIDE OUT.

Inside Out brings college students together with incarcerated men and women to study as peers behind prison walls. It is an opportunity for students to reconsider what they have come to know about crime and justice, and an opportunity for those inside prison to place their life experiences in a larger framework.

Inside Out is a national program, with courses offered at more than one hundred institutions across the country. The University of Oregon has the largest program, with eight trained instructors and courses available in sociology, geography, and literature.

The core of Inside Out is an academic course, meeting once a week, through which 12 to 18 “outside” (undergraduate) students and the same number of “inside” (incarcerated) students attend class together at either the Oregon State Penitentiary or the Oregon State Correctional Institution. Three courses each year are offered exclusively to Clark Honors College students. Both course sites are located in the Salem area, and transportation is provided by the University.

Inside Out creates a paradigm shift for participants, and deepens the conversation. It transforms our collective approaches to understanding crime, justice, freedom, and inequality. By fostering individual transformation, the program serves as an engine for social change.

The courses offered vary and prisoners are enrolled as University of Oregon students. The courses cost prisoners \$50 and they receive credits towards a degree.

I took my first course, called Prisoners and Post-Conflict Resolution, in January-March 2018. It was a life changing experience. After completing the course I wrote an open letter to the students, which was included in a published Anthology for the class. This is what my letter said:

OPEN LETTER TO OUTSIDE STUDENTS

There are a lot of things each of us will take away from this course. Many of you have expressed how it has changed your life and/or inspired you to go a new direction in life. However, I ask you to do one thing before you strike off in the world. Remember that what the course material teaches us above all things is

none of us are perfect and we are all capable of change no matter how far astray we may go.

We are all imperfect in our actions; we are all imperfect in our thoughts. What matters most is that we take lessons from the women and men we have read about, the imperfect humans they were, and strive to become better people in the way that we see and interact with the world, just as they did.

Society in general perceives prisoners in a particularly negative light. There is every variety of "reality" TV show that portrays all the most negative aspects of incarceration and catches people at their worst but never shows prisoners and programs, like Inside-Out, making a difference. The news sensationalizes crime and provokes emotion one way or the other depending on the political slant of the day. As you know now, prison isn't a reality show.

Had you met me several years ago you would have met a very different person. I have spent 21 years in isolation for stabbings, assaults, extortion, and other prison violence. I was a part of the problem as well as a product of my environment. People called me unrehabilitatable, incorrigible, and even an animal.

During those many years in my solitary hamster cage I picked up books by Bobby Sands, Mandela and many other former prisoners that began to change not only how I seen myself but how I seen the world. I began to see myself as something more than simply a convicted felon with no hope of redemption and angry at my situation and the world.

I have made changes in my life that I credit to former political prisoners like Bobby Sands. I identified with their experiences in prison. I didn't know when I signed up for the Inside-Out program that I would be reading material I had spent so many years absorbing. Those former political prisoners words and deeds helped change my life. I hope that you can see not only by the course material but also through the prisoners you've met that we are more than the crimes that brought us to prison and our pasts do not defines us. While we will always be judged by these things we are more than a moment in time. Like the people we have read about it is about who we are now and who we are striving to be.

Take what you have learned here and make changes in the world. Be it becoming involved in politics or simply voting. Remain humble and engage the world.

Thank you all for sharing a moment of your lives with me.

I intend to start a new Juvenile Justice course being offered soon.