

May 17, 2018

Open Letter to Governor Rauner from the Stateville Debate Team

Dear Governor Rauner,

We, the Stateville Debate Team, write this letter to implore you to reverse Assistant Director Gladys Taylor's (and thus the IDOC's) *unjustified* decision to terminate the Stateville Debate Team and class, and reverse the *unjustified* ban of our teacher, Katrina Burlet, from Stateville Correctional Center and other IDOC facilities.

--Who We Are --

We are human beings whom society has demonized, dehumanized, discounted, and warehoused for decades in Illinois prisons. In the face of that, though, we each believed in, and worked to rehabilitate, ourselves, until others began to believe in us as well. We are a 13-member team handpicked by the IDOC to be in the debate class due to our outstanding academic records and work ethic.

Several of us are factually innocent of the crimes that we are incarcerated for. Half of us were found guilty by a theory of accountability. Nearly all of us were adolescents or young adults when incarcerated for the rest of our lives.

Collectively, we run the gamut from white to black, atheist to faith leaders among our peers. Most of us are current college students enrolled in major universities like De Paul, NEIU, Ohio University, etc. Several of us are published writers, authors, and artists. All of us are concerned citizens.

--Who Is Katrina Burlet—

Ms. Burlet is the founder of the Justice Debate League. She is also an excellent teacher, an experienced debater, and a devout Christian.

--What Took Place—

We didn't ask to be put in the debate class, we just were, based on our positive records. Katrina Burlet came in to teach us how to debate. She left picking the topic of our first debate up to us. Actually, we even debated about the topic, and then ended up voting on it. We settled on parole and rehabilitation, two things Illinois illogically abandoned long ago.

We then discussed having an audience. Ms. Burlet got institutional approval, and once we had done a ton of research on parole and felt we had a good grasp of the subject, someone posited the question: "Wouldn't it be great if the legislature could see it?" Many of us laughed, doubting they would ever be interested in what we had to say. Ms. Burlet thought otherwise, so we invited them.

Originally the debate was scheduled for December 15, 2017. As soon as Gladyse Taylor learned that nearly a dozen legislators had accepted our invitation, she banned them from attending and then cancelled the debate altogether.

After much effort and lobbying by others, and our teacher jumping through a plethora of newly-invented hoops, the debate was re-scheduled for March 21, 2018. There would be no video-taping the debate, but legislators would now be admitted in to see it. This time, twice as many accepted our invitation.

The debate was a huge success by all standards. Ten percent of the Illinois General Assembly attended. So too did dozens of other policymakers, activists, professors, IDOC officials, people from SPAC, ICJIA, the CAARPR, the ACLU, the John Howard Association, the Prisoner Review Board, and even someone from your office. Several legislators described the debate as “phenomenal.” More than half of the legislators in attendance expressed a desire to work with us on parole legislation. Nearly every other attendee expressed positive views of the event. Weeks later, both WGN and WBEZ reported favorably upon both the debate and the class itself.

Here at the prison it was much the same. During the debate, staff were relaying updates to incarcerated people in the cell houses (who were not allowed to attend) about how well we were doing. Several staff members remarked that many of us deserve release. The wardens were even pleased. Not only did they thank each of us by name in a memo posted on the closed-circuit institutional television channel, but they awarded us by adding us at the last minute to the list of those allowed to attend the first real music concert at Stateville in decades.

After the debate (and then again after the WGN airing of the news segment about the debate class) dozens of other guys incarcerated in Stateville thanked us both for igniting the conversation about parole and for showing Stateville residents in a positive light.

After the debate, we felt proud and started preparing for an upcoming debate on voting rights against Wiley College. Riding high for about two weeks, we felt we had accomplished something positive with that debate, something substantial. Then everything changed on April 3.

On that day, a state legislator was scheduled to attend our class for further discussions about parole legislation. Instead, Gladyse Taylor, without invitation, rudely took over our class.

Flanked by two wardens and an unidentified third person, Gladyse Taylor entered the classroom, ordered both doors closed and (an act which is usually forbidden in Stateville for security reasons), rudely rifled through Ms. Burlet’s personal notes, and announced (without introducing herself) that: a) She had denied entry to the state representative that day; b) she didn’t want any more legislators invited to our class (“no more legislators,” she admonished Ms. Burlet with a finger wag, as if our teacher were a child); and c) she, Gladyse Taylor, had skipped a public event to come set us straight.

She also verified that she had cancelled the first (December 15) debate, when she learned that state legislators were planning to attend; informed us that she had come “this close” (holding finger and thumb close to touching) to cancelling the March 21 debate; and told us that she had not allowed the debate to be video-taped because she did not want other legislators to be able to see it.

She then proceeded to threaten us both outright and in thinly veiled ways. First, she told us that she could shut the class down whenever she wanted because it wasn't "evidence-based." Then she mentioned that, assuming that we were all "lifers," or close to it, classes really shouldn't be wasted on us—insinuating that she could take us out of all of our classes. Then she mentioned that some of us may not be properly placed at Stateville—insinuating that she could transfer us to Menard, where there are no programs, and where guys are simply warehoused inhumanely. Then she also claimed to have threatened at least one state legislator at the debate, warning her not to put up any legislation concerning parole, or she, Gladyse Taylor, would "get" her (the legislator). Finally, on four or five occasions, Gladyse Taylor warned that she better not see her name in any lawsuits.

Her main "beef" with the debate: we were distracting the legislature from working on "her" appropriations. We assume she meant the IDOC's appropriations, but at least three times she stated, "the legislature does not need to be thinking about bringing back parole, they need to be focused on *my* appropriations." At one point, she even attempted to claim that this was an effort to help us get an extra pair of boxer shorts, as if that would earn her points with us. It didn't. It was condescending. Moreover, it seems Gladyse Taylor doesn't believe that legislators can walk and chew gum at the same time.

Then came the WGN news story featuring our debate class and the success of the debate. This aired on April 19.

On April 24, we had our regularly scheduled class and were informed by Ms. Burlet that she had met with Gladyse Taylor, who made it clear that this would be our last debate class because Taylor had terminated the class under the guise that it was not "evidence-based," that she (Taylor) did not want us (the students) meeting together any more, but that she appreciated Ms. Burlet's work and would allow Ms. Burlet to teach another class in an adjacent facility.

Also, we were still being allowed to hold a re-creation of the debate for Stateville residents on April 26, and that, although we still couldn't video-tape it, the IDOC was going to do so, and would then decide if/when to release the tape.

Finally, we received one last piece of news—the night before, the The Shade Room on Instagram had posted something about the WGN story regarding our debate class and the debate. By that morning, there were nearly 30,000 "likes."

Wednesday morning, we were all informed by incredulous staff members that Gladyse Taylor had cancelled the re-creation of the debate and banned our teacher from all IDOC facilities.

--Why Gladyse Taylor is Wrong—

--Smokescreens for Taylor's Unethical and Possibly Unconstitutional Conduct—

Gladyse Taylor's "beef" with the class was, unequivocally, that we were getting access to legislators, were successful in getting the attention of the legislature on an issue we wanted addressed, and that several legislators were now considering bringing back parole. To her thinking, this diverted attention away from "her appropriation." She made this crystal-clear on

April 3. As more media attention thereafter was brought to the attention of our debate and parole, she decided to try to nip it in the bud. To do so, she employed one smokescreen after another.

--“It Must Be ‘Evidence-based’”-

Her first smokescreen was that she was killing the class because it wasn’t “evidence-based” (this was also her making good on her first threat). According to Taylor, the 2009 Crime Reduction Act *only* requires that the IDOC provide rehabilitative programming to 75% of IDOC residents (and she specifically noted that none of us would fall into the 75% due to our lengthy sentences). She also noted that the rehabilitative programming must be “evidence-based.”

She furthermore informed us that it doesn’t matter if studies from other states show a specific educational course reduces recidivism, the IDOC won’t consider it “evidence-based” unless a study has been conducted in Illinois in the past 3 years and shows it reduces recidivism here.

There are so many problems with this that we don’t know where to begin. First, there is the obvious fact that it takes 3 years to track releases to even complete any legitimate recidivism study.

Second, the only way to do so is in a controlled study where each course is the only one received by the students and then compare them to non-students. As most people take several classes, religious programs, etc., it’s difficult to determine what the actual catalyst was for any reduced recidivism observed.

Third, under Gladys Taylor’s definition, no volunteer course at Stateville qualifies as “evidence-based,” as they all began operating in the last few years due to the fact that most prior wardens, and the IDOC as a whole, were antagonistic to programs, and even the LTO (“Long-Term Offender”) and P-NAP (Prison-Neighborhood Arts Program) courses constantly change each year and no studies have been done on any of them. (Noteworthy, however, is the fact that they weren’t cancelled at the same time as the debate class.)

Fourth, there is likewise no evidence, that Katrina Burlet’s course doesn’t reduce recidivism, as we have yet to be released to track our recidivism rates, and this was her first class here.

Fifth, the State currently has no lists of approved “evidence-based” courses, thus not only do none qualify as “evidence-based,” but Gladys Taylor also cannot point to any “evidence-based” program that the IDOC is going to pay for to replace the free course they were getting from Katrina Burlet and then illogically terminated.

Sixth, while according to Gladys Taylor, the 2009 law may require 75% of residents to receive “evidence-based courses,” as far as we can tell, it in no way prohibits free non-evidence-based courses put on by volunteers. Thus, Gladys Taylor’s reasoning is illogical. She would rather have long-termers warehoused, stir-crazy, treated inhumanely, and violent like people in Menard, than acquiring free rehabilitative skills and being treated like human beings in Stateville.

Also, let’s be clear, the IDOC refuses to pay for any post-secondary educational programs at Stateville. All such programs are provided by professors who volunteer their time, and are funded and supplied by donations from private citizens, colleges, organizations, grants, and fundraisers.

The IDOC only grudgingly allows college-based courses space in the school building, which used to stand 90% vacant. The dramatic increase in the number of such courses was only allowed to occur recently under the guidance of now-warden Nicholson and the organizing efforts of Chaplain Adamson. The IDOC even has an administrative directive that prohibits any IDOC staff or resources from being used to proctor college exams for students taking college correspondence courses.

Finally, as we'll see, the next smoke-screen Gladyse Taylor employed unequivocally proves the fallacy of the "evidence-based" smokescreen.

--"It's Burlet's Fault"--

Now they say that "someday" we can continue the class when they find another teacher. This disproves the "evidence-based" reasoning and clearly exposes it as a smokescreen. Once the "evidence-based" smoke-screen failed, Gladyse Taylor switched to an ever-vacillating excuse for cancelling the class, all of which boiled down to: "It's Katrina Burlet's fault."

The problem with that is that Ms. Burlet did nothing wrong. Moreover, the "evidence-based" smokescreen and the fact that Gladyse Taylor wanted Burlet to teach in an adjacent facility clearly disproves the new constantly changing "It's Burlet's fault" smokescreen. Gladyse Taylor is simply using Ms. Burlet as a scapegoat to try to divert attention away from Taylor's abusive power in cancelling our class and trying to keep us from addressing legislators in person and in an open forum.

How do we know? Because Gladyse Taylor admitted in front of all of us that Ms. Burlet did nothing wrong. On April 3, Taylor told Ms. Burlet that, while she didn't like how she (Taylor) personally wasn't apprised of the debate ahead of time, there was no written rule or procedure that required such, but that she (Taylor) was working on fixing that.

Taylor also admitted to our class that there was no formal written procedure to get approval for events, filming, photographs, etc. and they are working on formalizing the process. (This is a common complaint among volunteers. In fact, we are still awaiting the release of class photos taken nearly a year ago.) The real irony is that the IDOC has no qualms about video-taping every basketball tournament or concert, but when it comes to taping an event that clearly conveys the fact that people in prison can also be intellectuals or are rehabilitated, then they have a problem with it and it is usually verboten.

Nonetheless, Gladyse Taylor's second claim as to why Ms. Burlet was permanently banned was that she allegedly went over someone's head to get the WGN taping done. This is a complete farce. Ms. Burlet had completely abandoned trying to get the class or the debate filmed due to both the Kafkaesque system and the antagonism expressed by the woman in charge of approving such things, when WGN's Ben Bradley asked to do a story on our class. Ms. Burlet informed him that she had exhausted her ability to accomplish *any* taping, but if he could get approval, we would welcome him to our class. A week later, he had approval and camera crew in tow. A month after that, WGN aired a story painting both Stateville and the IDOC in a positive light. Thus, it was Ben Bradley's connections that got him in, not Ms. Burlet going over anyone's head. Once this was pointed out, Taylor abandoned it for yet a third reason, and it continues to change.

--No Programs for "Lifers"--

During the April 3 Threat Session, Gladyse Taylor made it clear that she doesn't believe any state resources should be wasted on people like us, who currently have no foreseeable outdate. Not only is this shortsighted, but it demonstrates her ignorance.

First, as noted above, there *hasn't* been any state resources expended on our rehabilitation. Our rehabilitation came about through our own motivation, the resources and encouragement provided by friends and family, and through private citizens, colleges, and organizations investing their time and resources in us. We are now rehabilitated, not *because* of the IDOC, but *in spite* of all of the IDOC's efforts to hinder such rehabilitation.

Second, Gladyse Taylor's insinuation that we should be denied all educational programs because we are "lifera," shows she has failed to learn any lessons from the last decade. We have seen dozens and dozens of our brothers and sisters who were likewise labelled as "lifera" go home after having their wrongful convictions over-turned or their sentences reduced because they were victims of over-sentencing. For decades, the IDOC inhumanely warehoused the majority of them and denied them educational programs. Now out on the streets, that warehousing/denial of education continues to have ill-effects on their lives, on their relationships with family, and on what they are able to contribute to society.

Anywhere from half to almost all of our class will, in all likelihood, have to be re-sentenced in the near future, due to the United States Supreme Court's decision in *Miller v. Alabama* and its progeny. Several of us are already scheduled for re-sentencing. Several of us will also, hopefully, finally be able to prove our innocence or at least get our convictions overturned soon. Moreover, if a parole system is brought back to Illinois, all of us will be prime candidates for release. So it's illogical to conclude that none of us will ever be released based on our current, largely unconstitutional sentences. The IDOC should be concerned with rehabilitating *all* residents, and preparing them to return to useful citizenship as Article I, Section 11 of the Illinois Constitution states as a goal of sentencing.

--Infringing on Constitutional Rights--

As the United States Supreme Court has noted, when people are incarcerated, they don't leave all of their constitutional rights at the front door of the prison. One of those rights that remains with them while in prison is the right to freedom of speech, guaranteed by both the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, as well as reiterated in Article I Section 4 of the Illinois Constitution.

While it is debatable that Gladyse Taylor's machinations to prevent us from freely speaking at the December debate and any other debates after the March 21 debate would run afoul of the Constitution, her acts of retaliation against us for freely speaking at the debate surely do, and any further retaliatory acts would also be actionable in court.

Another right that Gladyse Taylor's actions in denying a state representative entry into the facility and trying to prevent any other legislators from seeing our debate seems to infringe upon, is our right to make known our opinions to our representatives expressed in Article I Section 5 of the Illinois Constitution. Not only is she hindering our access to State Representatives and Senators, but she is equally denying them access to their constituents.

--What Katrina Burlet Did to Be so Thanklessly Banned from the IDOC--

Absolutely nothing. Her banning was completely unjustified and is nothing but a smokescreen put up by Gladys Taylor to try and divert attention away from Taylor's unjustified decision to terminate the debate class.

This is clearly evidenced by the fact that Gladys Taylor cancelled the class under the guise that it wasn't "evidence-based," and Taylor told Ms. Burlet that she was valued and could teach at an adjacent facility. Then when Taylor started taking flack for cancelling the class, she claimed the class wasn't cancelled (it was, we no longer meet), but we just need another teacher because Ms. Burlet was banned for allegedly breaking a rule.

Taylor's claim as to what rule is ever vacillating, speaking toward its lack of credibility. First, Taylor claimed that Ms. Burlet didn't tell the IDOC that she was planning a debate before legislators when she first requested to teach the course. As noted, she wasn't planning one back then, it evolved organically and was approved at both the institutional level and in Springfield. If it was against the rules to do so, they could have simply denied her request for the event.

Then, she claimed that Ms. Burlet went over someone's head to get the WGN taping accomplished. Not only is that not true—it was actually Ben Bradley who got clearing for the filming of the class—but it's hardly a capital offense worthy of a permanent ban from all IDOC facilities. Now she claims Ms. Burlet failed to properly complete the paperwork to be a volunteer. This is also false. Not only did she follow all of the requirements, but she was allowed in to teach for over 6 months. Had her paperwork not been in order, she would never have been permitted inside the facility in the first place.

The only thing Ms. Burlet is guilty of is donating her personal time and money to provide a debate class for incarcerated men at Stateville. She is thus guilty of doing what the IDOC is supposed to do but largely refuses to do—provide resources toward rehabilitating people.

We refuse to allow Ms Burlet to become the scapegoat for Gladys Taylor's tyrannical actions without setting the record straight. Let's be clear, Ms. Burlet did nothing wrong. She should be reinstated immediately. If anyone deserves to be permanently banned, it should be Gladys Taylor, as she clearly has no problem abusing her authority and lacks the temperament, foresight, and professionalism needed to steer the IDOC back toward its rehabilitative goals.

--Why Volunteers Should Be Cherished--

Volunteers provide an essential service that the IDOC refuses to supply—post-secondary education. This not only contributes to institutional security (as clearly evidence by the reduction in violence at Stateville), but also public safety (in the form of reduced recidivism). The IDOC claims both of these as institutional goals but nevertheless won't allocate a penny toward post-secondary classes. Every single post-secondary class at Stateville is provided by volunteers and private funding.

Volunteers are selfless people who come in and contribute to society in countless ways. They should be cherished and encouraged. Instead, they are often harassed and taken for granted by the IDOC; or even worse, as is the case here, they are used as a scapegoat by a corrections official caught abusing her power. Society should be appalled by this.

If the IDOC truly believes in their mission statement of rehabilitation, you would think that they would be bending over backwards to accommodate volunteers, not harassing and banning them.

--What we Got--

Let us quickly juxtapose what we got from this class to what we got from Gladys Taylor for our effort.

We got a tremendous amount from this class. Not only did we learn how to debate and improve upon a variety of other skills—writing, analytical, public speaking, communications, etc.—but several of us were able to use this class to fulfill requirements necessary to obtain our bachelors' degrees.

The success of the debate boosted our confidence, made our friends and families proud, and inspired us to want to hold regular debates about how to address other social issues. It showed us that sometimes our voices *do* matter; that we *can* contribute to the dialogue, and may even be able to come up with some answers to solve societal ills. In short, it returned a modicum of humanity to us, as the debate not only gave us a platform to be seen as human, but we were then treated as such by powerful people immediately thereafter.

We also received a modicum of hope. Many of us assumed that debating parole would be good only for the learning process; that we would, as usual, be speaking into a vacuum. However, after all of our research, the success of the debate, and the legislators' interest in working with us on a bill, it has given those of us sentenced to die here hope. In prison, hope is priceless. It can literally mean the difference between striving for a better future or suicide.

In contrast to all of that, what we received from Gladys Taylor was threats, disrespect, worried friends and family members, our professional debate coach lessons cancelled, our teacher banned, our debate against Wiley College cancelled, and the infringement upon both our right to free speech, and our right to make our opinions known to our representatives.

This from someone who is allegedly "pro-programs" and allegedly believes in the IDOC's goal of "rehabilitation." We think not. In this case, her actions clearly do speak louder than her words.

--Conclusion--

It was a debate. The debate team was learning the format and structure of a formal debate. It snowballed into something much bigger than expected. Sadly, one successful debate got the class cancelled and got a phenomenal teacher banned from the IDOC. Why? Because a single IDOC official felt overshadowed and wants to not only silence our voices but control what issues the General Assembly considers.

The move by Gladys Taylor to terminate our debate team was completely unprovoked. As the warden noted, we did nothing wrong. No one violated any rules, nor was any legitimate justification given.

The art of debate is a touchstone of American democracy. It was at the heart of the crafting of our nation's Declaration of Independence and Constitution, as well as our State Constitution. Every law and policy that we have come about through debate.

The skills we acquired through our participation on the debate team, which included public speaking, effective communication, and gaining control of our emotion and temperament in the

midst of disagreements, are fundamental to being socially engaged. This is also critical to the IDOC's alleged goal of reducing victimization and preventing crime. This class should be available to all IDOC residents. Instead, it is now available to none.

Prison debate teams are nothing new. They have bested debate teams from Harvard and Boston College and taken on teams from Oxford and MIT. They have existed for decades. What is new is a prison official like Gladys Taylor engaging in mass retaliation and trying to silence a prison debate team for peacefully exercising their First Amendments rights, and then when there's blowback for it, she tries to use a selfless volunteer teacher as scapegoat.

Finally, Gladys Taylor's antagonism towards legislators coming to hear incarcerated students flies in the face of the United Nations 2013 "Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners," which holds that government agencies or officials interested in the well-being of incarcerated people, "shall have all necessary access to the institution and to prisoners."

For all of the above reasons, and in the interests of justice, we respectfully request that you personally get involved, and: a) reverse the IDOC's banning of Katrina Burlet; b) reinstate our debate team with Ms. Burlet as its coach; and c) issue an executive order granting all Illinois legislators unfettered access to the States' prisons.

We all thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

The Stateville Debate Team

[You can put the names here if you want]