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Each One, Teach One Starting a Poetry Class Behind the Walls

Author's note: I need you to know that there are angels on earth—people who knowingly and willingly donate their time, knowledge and resources even in the face of adversity. While I was in Redwood City County Jail awaiting a return to the prison system I so loathe, I encountered several of these special beings in the form of Bill Burns, Instructor of Inmate Education, Usha Potter of Project Read, and Bill's AmeriCorps volunteer assistant, Alli. The poetry class and my continuing desire to help others would not have been possible without their persistence and hard work. Copies of "Unlocked Voices," the poetry book that the class wrote together, can be acquired by getting in touch with Mr. Bill Burns at bburns@smcoe.k12.ca.us.

To be perfectly honest, the last thing on my mind when being arraigned for drug possession (19th time) and assault (2nd time) was poetry or prose. True enough, there were colorful colloquialisms galore in my mind. But surely nothing to sit and write down for posterity's sake.

Through some type of divine intervention, I was given an opportunity to participate in a "Behavioral Modification" Program called "Choices" in the Redwood City County Jail. In this program, graduates of the much heralded Delancey Street Project (Shirley Lamarr, Teri Delane, Lissa and Hurry) counsel repeat offenders, sometimes quite rigorously, not about how to quit drugs or stop committing felonies, but how to change their behavior to avoid situations that lead to drugs and crime.

The basic philosophy is simple: "Each one, Teach one." In other words, when you learn something to help improve yourself, pass it on to someone else so they can benefit as well. As Shirley so eloquently puts it, the goal is to "give a damn about the next man."

Here, I must stop to tell you that while this sounds good, I've spent 35 years of my life being an extremely selfish, self-centered and arrogant person that didn't care about anyone but himself. But as I became more involved in the program and learned to trust "The Process," I began to see that helping others not only helped me become a better, more responsible person, it felt good. I *liked* it!

Being reasonably intelligent and well-educated, I was promoted to the posi-

tion of G.E.D./Project Read Coordinator. Along with my co-worker, Kevin Ritchie, we spent one hour in a class setting every day, Monday through Saturday, assisting people who didn't complete high school and/or who read at a low level.

It was in this capacity that I met Bill Burns and Usha Potter. Bill had been involved in a Project Read venture called "Fathers and Families" designed to help inmates keep in touch and read to their children on the outside.

Participating in such a fantastic class put the notion in my head to get a creative writing class put together. One of the things I have been doing in my sobriety has been keeping a journal (or Anger Log) and also writing poetry. It's very therapeutic for me, and I thought it could be for other men as well.

"Each one, Teach one," right?

Well, when I posed this suggestion to Bill (who is a published poet in his own right), he got together with a volunteer tutor named Usha Potter to discuss how they could pull it off. Unbeknownst to me, they had already had a plan to do a creative writing class. The main problem was funding.

To anyone outside of California, the budget crisis may seem insignificant. Certainly, you might assume, all the high-tech companies and movie stars pay enough taxes to keep the state in the black. On the contrary, the state has been living and operating on the negative side of the balance sheet for over ten years. It's so bad now that our illustrious Governor Gray Davis was recalled.

These things are always felt most in education, social services, and, yes, correctional institutions.

So, it was no surprise when Usha Potter's proposal to Project Read to fund our poetry class immediately got turned down. After a series of revisions, it was rejected again. It was not until Usha proposed and wrote out a lesson plan for every day of the ten-week course, made copies, and vowed to teach the class for no pay and after hours on her own time that it was approved.

We were ecstatic; all we had to do was pick a start date and get our students approved through the institution's classification.

Oh no, the students!

In all the excitement of the idea and constantly being turned down, I'd forgotten to ask if anyone besides me wanted to participate! When I made the announcement in our morning meeting, the reaction was lukewarm at best. Three volunteers out of 72 men.

I'd forgotten I was talking to hardcore convicts. Most were two and three strike candidates. They balked at writing poetry.

That's when I had to tell them why poetry was so important to me. I found myself saying, "It's not important to know the difference between a couplet and Haiku, it's important to express how you feel. You can turn the beauty of the world into words you can share, words can make your senses come alive."

I guess they got the idea because I had twenty people sign up although we could only enroll ten in the first class.

When we first filed slowly, languidly into the class, the silence was deafening. That's when Bill stood up, AA style, and said, "I have a confession to make. My name is Bill and I'm a poet." It broke the ice and relaxed everyone.

The class was a big success. We learned structure, image and question poems. Project Read even agreed to publish a booklet with poetry from everyone in the class and made it available to our families through the Service League.

Although I am no longer in the Redwood City County Jail, the last I heard, Bill and Usha were starting their third class.

"Each One, Teach One...."