

CHANGING LIVES THROUGH LITERATURE

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**Changing Lives Through Literature
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Changing Lives Through Literature

By: Susan Gonsalves

An alternative sentencing program based on English Professor Robert Waxler's belief that great literature can change a criminal's life has spread to death-penalty states such as Texas and Florida, the common sense plains of Kansas, and even across the ocean.

"Reading a good story is like looking into a mirror," said Dr. Waxler. "As the story unfolds, the parts of their lives unfold, and it allows people to gain insight into their behavior and the effects it has on those around them."

Founded in 1991 by Waxler, New Bedford Judge Robert Kane, and New Bedford Probation Officer Wayne St. Pierre, a 1980 alumnus, the "Changing Lives through Literature" program brings criminal offenders to campus-- rather than a jail cell--for 10 to 12 week seminars. As they explore different works of literature, from Deliverance to The Old Man and the Sea, the participants are exploring, and rethinking, their own lives.

Now the program has expanded, in various forms, to a dozen other states and Great Britain, and a Canadian counterpart is in the works. Independent studies indicate a reduction in recidivism rates and decreased violent behavior among program graduates. And the instructors and criminal justice personnel have witnessed firsthand the positive impacts of the program.

Having Texas sign on to the program in 1999 marked a major breakthrough, Waxler said. "The same very conservative people who were literally sending people to death were also embracing this program because they love stories of redemption."

Larry Jablecki, former chief probation officer of Brazoria County in Texas, spearheaded the effort to adopt "Changing Lives through Literature" there. Jablecki, who has a philosophy doctorate, has his groups analyze the works of Plato and Socrates, and documents such as the Gettysburg Address and Declaration of Independence.

"As you can imagine, not everyone in Texas is enthused that probationers are reading philosophy and Steinbeck. Some think they should be picking up litter on the street or shoveling manure in a stable," Jablecki said. "They are afraid we are coddling people. That's why you need probation officers and judges who have courage and are not afraid of opposition. In the end, the reward is in seeing people's lives change."

At UMass Dartmouth, St. Pierre has witnessed a transformation in the participants who would initially turn up on campus dressed in "hip-hop style baggy pants, do rags, wearing a lot of gold with their heads down.

"They are fired up and excited and on their own," he said. "They tone down their appearance. We see their postures change. They look and feel like they belong. So they stand tall, carry their books, and feel proud."

"The program helped me look at things differently," recalled Kevin Fernandes of New Bedford, who participated in 2005 and is now involved in real estate. "It inspires you when you see other people reading and participating in the discussions. I also think the program has a lot of potential because it can reach people when they're young and give them an opportunity to build themselves."

Another participant, Michael Smith, enjoyed the exchange of ideas and reactions at the seminars: "with *Old Man and the Sea*, you could relate to a lot of the things in there. As the course progressed, you'd see interest picking up and people would talk more about the books. Before I would read only if I had to. Now I find myself picking up books."

The program serves to improve many probationers' self-esteem. "Here they are reading college level books and carrying on intelligent conversations. They think, 'if I can do this, maybe I can go to college,'" said St. Pierre. "It gives them a license to dream."

St. Pierre has launched a spin-off, "Inspiring Stories." He performs songs he has written at halfway houses, the Veterans Transition House, and elsewhere, and the audiences discuss song lyrics as they would a piece of literature.

To date, more than 4,000 men and women (including teens) have participated, usually recommended by judges, probation officers, or prosecutors.

"I generally rely on instincts, a gut feeling," New Bedford Juvenile Judge Bettina Borders said of her selection process. "Usually these are young people who have no quiet in their lives. They are surrounded by screaming and fighting. No one ever talks to them, they talk at them. This program works because it lets them express themselves, many for the first time."

Waxler hopes to apply the program's lessons to assist drug and alcohol-addicted populations. "Reading is a good addiction," he said. "It can draw people away from one addiction--drugs--and get them excited about books instead."

In its original form, the "Changing Lives" course translates into less jail and probation time served. Different states have developed different versions--Texas, for example, does not reduce sentences, while in Kansas, the program operates during the week and offenders spend weekends in jail.

The British version, now called "Stories Connect," was launched in 2000 at the Channings Wood Prison in Devon, and has expanded considerably, reaching various populations of prisoners, non-resident offenders, and substance abusers. The current three-year program with offenders on community orders is being evaluated by a former addict who served time at Channings Wood, completed the course, earned a community studies and sociology degree, and is pursuing his master's.

Kathy McLellan, a youth outreach librarian in Shawnee Mission, Kansas, has been instructing juvenile groups for eight years. She has led the program at a range of venues including a library, corrections office, and Johnson County Community College. She has facilitated a similar program, "Read to Succeed," using short stories in a temporary lodging for children and a youth mental health residential center. Another librarian conducts a program called "SAW (Stories About Women)" at a residential center. McLellan noted that the only thing surprising about the program's success is the fact that it is not even more widely used.

"We use a book called *Breathing Underwater* about a teen relationship involving physical and emotional abuse," McLellan said. "This young man came into class without it and we were upset. It turned out he gave it to his girlfriend because she was the abuser. The book made it possible for them to talk about their relationship in a non-threatening way."

"Seeing the lightbulb go on when a connection has been made on an individual level, or when you observe a newfound sense of empathy in a participant, makes it all worthwhile."

Since 2005, Diane Suddes has run classes at a Florida residential facility for youths on probation. "It's amazing to see the juveniles' energy when they understand, and the program is doing what it is supposed to do. It makes them see they have choices. It's an effective way to reach them when they are young so that they won't end up in the adult system." In Indiana, the program links various community groups, including the jail ministry and public library. According to Jane Myers, Indiana Library Federation president, the focus is a book discussion group in place of a community service order as terms of probation.

Program coordinators such as Myers find the program is also rewarding for them: "I've found it easier to recognize different attitudes and respect folks for individual experiences," she said. "The program has helped me develop skills that allow me to be more creative, supportive, and philanthropic."

St. Pierre agreed. "I've gained the same things offenders do--a wider understanding of society and how I fit into it. I have faith in it and know it really works. Once a place gets a whiff of it, it's an exciting way to go."

Urban Literacy Project takes a cue from "Changing Lives" to guide middle-schoolers

Providing a "new neighborhood" for at-risk middle school students at West Side School in New Bedford is the goal of the Urban Literacy Project. Educators adapted the literature and concepts of the successful Changing Lives Through Literature Program to the alternative school setting last year, and the program is continuing.

"We want to give students a glimpse of a new neighborhood. Not only do we want them to engage cognitively with the reading and discussion of good literature, we also want them to become motivated and invest in their futures," said UMass Dartmouth Education Professor Maureen P. Hall in a report entitled, "It Worked for Criminals; It Can Work for Middle Schoolers."

West Side School is regarded as "a school of last resort," a place where junior and senior high students are sent after they are expelled. The population includes at-risk adolescents and gang members who are regularly exposed to violence. "The school is a challenging place to create educational opportunities," Hall noted.

UMass Dartmouth students in Hall's introductory education course spent 15 hours each tutoring middle school students and documented the experience through a semester-long case study.

"I was able to see how teachers have unique ways to discipline the most difficult students in the class. I feel most of these kids have unbelievable potential deep down; they just need guidance to prove it," wrote one of the students

Hall also conducted professional development activities with West Side teachers. Dr. Deborah Sorrentino, West Side principal, spearheaded the pilot project.

An anthology of short stories edited by Waxler and Jean Trounstone and called Changing Lives Through Literature, and the story Greasy Lake, by T. Coraghessan Boyle, were among the works used to engage eighth graders in discussion.

Like their older counterparts, West Side students embraced the opportunity to use literature to wrestle with issues, many of which they encounter on the street, said organizers.

Said one 13-year-old student, "I was mad tired. But now I'm not sleeping. I'm paying attention."

As the course progressed, you'd see interest picking up and people would talk more about the books. Before I would read only if I had to. Now I find myself picking up books.

--Michael Smith, "Changing Lives" participant

Where Changing Lives Through Literature is at work

Location	Participants
England (Devon)	5 men, 5 women
United States	
Arizona	20 men, women
California	12 women
Florida	10 juvenile boys
Indiana	Forming new classes
Kansas	15 women, 20 men
New York	Forming new classes
Rhode Island	Program at University of Rhode Island
Texas	15 men
Virginia	11 juvenile girls
Massachusetts	11 programs, in courts in Chelsea, Dorchester Men's, Dorchester Women's, Framingham, Lynn/Lowell, Malden, New Bedford/Fall River, New Bedford Juvenile, Roxbury, West Roxbury, and Wrentham