

Freedom Fighter for Literacy

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In July of 1972, I entered the State Correctional Institution at Dallas, Pennsylvania (SCI-Dallas). Looking back, I guess I have always believed that everyone should know the value of reading and writing. These were studies that I had taken for granted before entering the prison system, but I have since learned to appreciate them greatly. Based on my thirty years of incarceration, I would say the most obvious reason behind failed attempts at rehabilitating prisoners is their lack of interest in basic vocational and educational skills. Many individuals find the Department of Corrections an easy target to blame for their inability or unwillingness to learn. However, it is not due entirely to the inadequacy of the department, since many educational opportunities exist. The privilege of attending classes has been available to prisoners for as long as I have been here. Unfortunately, few prisoners are willing to seek out and take advantage of these opportunities.

The educational department at SCI-Dallas focuses primarily on adult basic education classes (ABE). Their main objective is to assist prisoners in bringing their reading, writing, and arithmetic skills up to a fifth- and sixth-grade level, while preparing them for their General Educational Development (GED) exam.

Teaching individuals what they need to pass the GED exam and receive their diplomas are the dominant activities of our educational department. Once students receive their GED, they then become eligible for vocational classes, where they can earn certificates in Business Management from Luzerne County Community College. Of course, the Pell Grants for prisoners, which were once valuable assets in helping prisoners pursue their post-secondary educations, were cut out altogether in the mid 1990s. The SCI-Dallas mission statement reads, "The goal of the school of SCI-Dallas is to provide opportunities which will enable students to reach their potential." Although the Department of Corrections is making an honest attempt to meet the prescriptive educational programs, many of us feel that much more can be and should be realized.

Somewhat out of curiosity, I found myself wondering why such a large number of incarcerated men with low-level education would spend so much time in this prison and not take advantage of the educational programs. Why

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were they consistently refusing to enroll in ABE classes? Eager to find the answer, other concerned prisoners and myself conducted an informal survey and found that the majority of men did want an education, but they felt out of place in the ABE classes. A main reason they gave was fear. They feared being laughed at by other prisoners, many of whom are neighborhood friends. We understood their reasons and feelings. In prison, image can be survival.

I discussed my concerns and the survey's results with another prisoner. He suggested that I become involved in the Laubach Literacy Program. The program is designed to help those with less than fifth grade educational skills.

I learned that the Laubach Literacy Program is a program where prisoners are tutored privately, "One on One," based on a system designed by Dr. Frank C. Laubach, which has proven to be effective in teaching adult literacy. In 1930, in the Philippines, the late Dr. Laubach originated a method of teaching adults to read and write in their own language. The method was applied to teaching English. The Laubach method established a network of trainers who would come into the institution and train those both able and willing to become Laubach tutors. It seemed to fit our needs well.

In 1988, a group of prisoners met with prison authorities and members of the educational department regarding the possibility of training tutors to help those students who were not attending ABE classes because they feared embarrassment. Out of that meeting SCI-Dallas Literacy Council was formed. Later, the Literacy Council succeeded in opening doors and connecting with the Laubach Literary Action Organization. Soon trainers came in from Laubach and held the first tutor training workshops, and SCI-Dallas got its first certified tutors.

In time, and with hard work, these certified tutors were authorized to train other tutors. I am proud to say that I am one of the tutors who was taught by the first trainer to come to the prison. By the end of 1991, I had become a full-time tutor.

I received my first student in early 1992. Surprisingly, the first session became another learning situation, as I shared the nervousness that I noticed in my student. "How well was I taught?" After a few sessions I found myself becoming more comfortable. I realized that my training called upon me to help as many people as I could, so I requested additional students. Two of Laubach's basic rules are to respect a student's privacy and to demonstrate a tutor's patience. Something my first student taught me was the true meaning of

patience. Despite frustrations and meager resources, he showed up for every class, and it turned out that each time I taught, I learned as well.

Some of the students I tutor are also enrolled in ABE classes. These students need help mainly in preparing for what is taught in those classes. That might include learning the alphabet or understanding vowel sounds. Once those skills are understood I might help them with their ABE work. Often tutors work in conjunction with the school, and in cases like this the student might then be able to join regular school classes. Other students I tutor are of much deeper concern. Many of these individuals experience severe embarrassment. I give them tutoring that focuses not only on reading but also on ways to adjust, relate, and learn with others.

I advanced in this field when I eventually completed the regional workshops to become a Certified Apprentice Tutor Trainer (ATT). This allows me and other ATTs to train and certify other tutors. Certification comes through the Scranton Literacy Council of Laubach. Over the years, I have worked with at least 23 students.

Up to the present time, the prison staff and the educational department have provided space and time for the Literacy Council to continue its program in the classrooms or in the school auditorium. The administration has been relatively supportive of education and our literacy program. I think the reason for this is plain. As tutors we provide a service to the educational department that is productive and free of cost. In spite of our requests and successes we are still not paid. Prisoner-tutors providing private sessions funnel into the programs more people who are better prepared. This makes the teachers' jobs easier and students' success rates higher. Given the work that we do, it seems to me that the administration could be more supportive, but we generally do not expect much. The years have tutored us. We have learned to do a lot with little. We get our reward from seeing the difference we make.

The best thing about being a tutor is seeing the students' progress, from watching the self-esteem of an individual grow as he moves from learning the alphabet to typing letters to his children. Budget cuts and changes in the tide of bureaucratic or public opinion always threaten the existence of prison educational programming. Being an "each one teach one" program helps us in that we can do what we do anywhere, and with whatever meager resources are available.

It is amazing how much a little patience, a little concern, and a little energy can do. Over the years I am proud to say that I have helped a number of men

ascend into the world of literacy, which I hope has opened up worlds to them. And in return, I have received the joy of believing that I have helped others—including myself—to become more productive, informed, and well-rounded human beings.

I have tutored for myself and for my students because there is a need and opportunity. For me, the ability to read is a tool to expanding freedom. And in some small way my efforts at tutoring make me feel like a “Freedom Fighter.”

Daniel Graves has been incarcerated since 1991. He has been elected chairman for Bread for the World, and treasurer for Laubach Literacy. “My inspiration to ... continue my work comes from God, my parents, Roland and Christine Graves, and my wife, Gloria Graves.” Daniel can be contacted at AM 0633 Unit 1, SCI-Dallas, 1000 Follies Road, Dallas, PA 18612.