

A Bridge Interrupted

Vanessa Slater and Jahmar

ABSTRACT

This article highlights a conversation between an inside student and an outside student from a Walls to Bridges (W2B) class on the theme of resilience that took place at Warkworth Institution during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. We provide the context for the course, and share reflections on how our relationship was built through this way of learning, memories, and new learnings, and the interruption of the course's conclusion due to the pandemic.

CONTEXT

Jahmar (inside student) and Vanessa (outside student) met in January of 2020 in the Walls to Bridges program (W2B), which was offered at Warkworth Institution in Ontario, Canada. Durham College was the first college to facilitate a W2B program in Canada. This initiative was actualized thanks to Durham College's Dale Burt, who worked tirelessly with leaders at the post-secondary institution and CSC staff to promote and create this unique learning opportunity for inside and outside students. As head of the Mediation program at Durham College, Dale is solution-focused, a seasoned system negotiator, and knows that challenges can often present as opportunities, especially when advocating for a new program or concept. After two years of championing this initiative, sixteen inside and outside students participated in this W2B program, which began in January of 2020.

The theme of this Walls to Bridge course was "Resilience in Society". The reading material came from a diverse range of voices, including Canadian perspectives on resilience and grit. Students explored and debated excerpts from pieces by Tanya Talaga (2017), Mark Pasricha (2022), Viktor Frankl (1946) and Angela Duckworth (2016) among others. Students delved into conversations about loss, positive thinking, judgement, survival, identity, and purpose in life. Some of the conversations were in a large circle, others in smaller groupings.

One of the biggest challenges in the classroom was that students never had enough time together. By the time the outside students were processed, usually at least 45 minutes had been lost. Other times, there were unforeseen circumstances such as a lockdown which prevented anyone from entering

the institution at all. Ultimately, the greatest challenge was that the program was cut short by four weeks due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions that prevented visitors from entering federal penitentiaries.

This interview was conducted via phone during the summer and fall of 2020 as Jahmar experienced being “imprisoned in a prison” thanks to massive COVID-19 restrictions inside. Engaging in collaborative writing and/or other projects with people who are incarcerated is at the best of times challenging, due to various institutional barriers and limitations (see Piché et al., 2014). Add into the mix a global pandemic that rendered many incarcerated people locked in their units (Piché et al., 2022), preparing this paper had further challenges. However, we were and are very committed to sharing our experiences with W2B with others and to continuing collaborative work between inside and outside students, and thus we persevered. In the interview that follows, you will hear our conversations on the meaning of this course in our own lives, W2B methods, our relationship, and the impact of COVID-19.

FALL 2020 INTERVIEW

Vanessa: What surprised you most about W2B?

Jahmar: What surprised me about the W2B program was the willingness everybody showed to want to work with one another, along with the interest to hear each other’s stories. The community that was built in our class, did you feel that it was genuine?

Vanessa: Yes, totally. I felt that the community was totally authentic and genuine. In fact, I was surprised how easily a sense of community was established. I would say that after the first class, we started to really gel. When we came in for the second class there was only excitement in the room. We always sat in a circle with alternating inside and outside students. By the second class we were arranging the chairs in the classroom together and I noticed that the circle we created on week two was smaller, with less space between chairs, than on the first day. We were more comfortable with each other. After a few activities that first day, the anxiety went way down between everyone. Do you think studying with people who are not incarcerated creates a positive learning environment?

Jahmar: Yes, I do believe that studying with people who are not incarcerated creates a positive and healthy learning environment. I believe it helps you to think “outside the box”. It also gives you a different perspective and view from citizens that are living in society. What did you learn about day-to-day life for us inside students?

Vanessa: I learned that inside students have really different access to the library, educational programs, computers, and practical learning opportunities. Some of our classmates had virtually free access to these opportunities, while others were much more limited in terms of access to educational and vocational opportunities in the prison. I learned how expensive it is for people to make phone calls inside, how noisy the prison is, and how bad the food can be. I also learned about how people take care of each other and have each other’s backs. Was there anything about W2B that you would like to change?

Jahmar: The one thing I would like to see the W2B program have is to include some motivational speakers to inspire the students on how they themselves can help bridge the gap between the institutions and the community, and vice versa. Hearing from people with lived experience with incarceration, addiction, etc., would have been interesting and fit into our course theme of resilience. Do you feel that the instructor could have done anything different to create a better environment within the class?

Vanessa: Our instructor Dale was incredible. Her passion for this program was infectious. She advocated to ensure that we did not have a CSC guard in the classroom, which was a huge win in terms of fostering a relaxed and authentic classroom environment. I cannot imagine how difficult it would have been to relax and speak freely if there was someone in the room who was not actually participating fully.

The one issue about the W2B t-shirts that we were all given was interesting. I think we only got to wear our identical t-shirts together for one class before the CSC guards put a stop to that. They said that during head counts in the classroom, they could not tell the difference between inside and outside students. This was pretty funny to us all since we were in a men’s prison, and only one of the outside students was male. The inside students then joked that all us outside students should show up next week in plain blue t-shirts, like the standard issue

ones available to inside students. We all had a pretty good laugh about it. We had to just laugh off lots of other challenges as well because challenging the system would not have helped this fledgling relationship between the college and the CSC. It was a way for us to bond as students.

The only change I would like to have seen would be to add some down time whereby students could just sit and chat with each other. The reason this likely did not happen was simply because we were so tight on time. By the time we were processed through security (X-ray machines, swab test and sniffer dogs) and led down to the classroom by our CSC contact, we often lost half an hour or more, right from the start. Some of the inside students wanted to show us around the prison a little, after all it is their home. I was able to spend a little time in the library and saw a few classrooms in the school area which was interesting. We also had a tour of the chapel, which is where our graduation ceremony was supposed to have happened.

What would you tell other inside students about the program if you were going to sell it to them?

Jahmar: I would tell other inside students that W2B is an experience that everybody incarcerated should experience. My reasons are that I feel that it gives you the opportunity to interact with law-abiding citizens who have a completely different mindset. You learn how to engage in normal conversations. Also, it helps you to create an open, honest dialogue with your peers. Plus, true genuine friendships are created through this program. For outside students who are considering joining the W2B course, but are skeptical about the stereotypes and barriers, what would you say to help them to overcome these issues?

Vanessa: I would tell them to deeply check in with their assumptions and ask themselves where these assumptions come from. The inside students are people who have caused harm in the past, but their previous actions do not have to define who they are in the present. That is a choice. The inside students I worked with were engaging, smart, curious, and committed to the program. I would tell prospective outside and inside W2B students that if they are fortunate enough to be selected to participate, that they should prepare themselves for a rare and totally enriching experience. I think, generally speaking, if someone is a curious person, Walls to Bridges would be a great opportunity for them.

I got a lot out of the program, and having the opportunity to continue to dialogue and exchange the way we are still doing now is amazing. We can continue to learn from each other even after the course has ended.

Jahmar: If you had the opportunity to take the W2B course again, would you and why?

Vanessa: Yes, I would love to participate in another W2B program. It was the highlight of my week. The course we were studying was called “Resilience in Society”, and the content and readings really resonated for me. The combination of the unique learning environment, the other students, the interactive course and fun activities, and reading materials were a perfect combination of my interests and learning style. I am not great sitting in a typical classroom, so this was definitely more my style.

Were there any specific readings from our course on “Resiliency in Society” that resonated for you?

Jahmar: The one reading that stood out to me most was *The Man’s Search for Meaning* by Victor E. Frankl (1946). The reason I felt that this book resonated with me the most was the fact that I felt I could relate to the experience that the author was describing. The emotion that the people inside the Nazi death camps were going through was also relatable. As an incarcerated inside student, trying to make it back home, it is hard not knowing what tomorrow will be. It is not a guarantee that you will make it back home to your loved ones. That is one of the hardest realities that you have got to wake up every day and face.

The one thing I learned though, is that to make it out of these kinds of situations, you have to embrace and gravitate towards the things that mean the world to you and use it as strength and energy to pull through so that you are able to reconnect with whatever you desire. That is what Victor Frankl is explaining when he describes how the prisoners had to search to find what the purpose and meaning was in life, along with embracing the most important things to overcome these kinds of situations. I really do believe this is so true.

Vanessa: Do you consider yourself to be a resilient person?

Jahmar: Yes, I consider myself to be a resilient person because I believe I have self-discipline and I am a person who will utilize all the resources presented to me to overcome obstacles in front of me.

Vanessa: In March, our W2B course was cut short because of the pandemic and adding new obstacles. How did this affect you personally?

Jahmar: With W2B, the pandemic affected me significantly. It prevented me from not being able to reach my full potential within the class. I believe that I had more knowledge to offer and a lot more room to learn. It also put the world on a standstill and all my plans that I was looking forward to were definitely set-back. I was looking forward to getting my completion certificate for the W2B course. I was also looking forward to our graduation ceremony as a group. Basically, I did not get the chance to say thank you, to graduate and say goodbye.

I was also looking forward to getting transferred to a minimum-security facility. I also had another program I was trying to take, which was a psychology program. It is now on hold because of COVID-19. Of course, not having any visitors is also having a huge impact on me. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect your W2B experience?

Vanessa: The pandemic certainly brought things to an abrupt end. I remember our last time at the prison, we were walking towards the classroom as a group – we passed a group of guys and one of them yelled “Happy COVID!” and we all laughed, it seemed hilarious at the time. Little did we know that that was to be our last time at the prison. We did not really even think about it when we were in class because I remember we had a lot to cover that day with our group work projects. I was definitely very saddened and felt ripped off when our professor told us later that week that it was extremely unlikely that we would be returning. I am someone who likes a sense of closure, likes things to end in a satisfying way. I know that does not always happen in life and in relationships, but in this particular case, which was so different for me, it was very hard not to have a sense of closure after working together and building such unique relationships.

Jahmar: In your opinion do you believe that your class accomplished everything that they set out to achieve from the beginning before it was interrupted?

Vanessa: In terms of creating a fantastic learning environment amongst our group, we definitely accomplished that. Unfortunately, because of a lockdown and then the pandemic, we lost some valuable class time, which affected our ability to move through all of the course work, final group presentation, and graduation ceremony. We were truly disappointed not to be able to present our group work activity to each other after putting so much thought into it. Our group projects were really starting to come together and I remember the excitement in the car on the way home with the other students from the college. I think we were all looking forward to the graduation ceremony and group performance as well.

Jahmar: In your opinion, do you believe that the W2B course will be a success moving forward?

Vanessa: I really hope so. I know how much the program meant to the inside students for a number of reasons. We heard many times how grateful the other inside students were to be involved in something so stimulating. For many of the guys, it was the highlight of their week as I am sure you will recall. I do believe that programs like W2B and restorative opportunities are slowly being more and more accepted within federal institutions. I know that Durham College has been approved to run another W2B program in January 2023, which is such an amazing offering to the future inside and outside students. I wish I could take the course again; I know it would be totally different a second time around. Would you sign up for another W2B program if you had the chance?

Jahmar: If I had the chance to sign up for a W2B course again, I would. I would want to be involved with the ideas and the process on how to bridge the gap between incarcerated people and citizens in the communities. In the meantime, I will continue to talk about the program inside and keep my eyes and ears open for any information that might be shared with us.

Vanessa: Thanks so much Jahmar. This has been fun putting this together with you. Take good care.

Jahmar: Thank you, you take care too.

CONCLUSION

One class, Dale showed students a copy of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* and explained that they were seeking submissions from students to collaborate on a piece about the W2B program. No participants had ever heard of the publication before, but we both expressed interest in collaborating on a piece. This interest stemmed from a mutual interest in each other's worlds and the desire to continue to be involved in the W2B community. After the interview was completed, we continued to stay in contact as we have much in common, including a love of spicy food, sports, current events, dogs, and movies. We are also both news junkies.

We are both active members of the Walls to Bridge community and participate whenever possible with other alumni. Having an ally inside the institution has been instrumental for communication and setting up Zoom links so that Jahmar can participate and contribute as much as possible. We are grateful for this coordination and support. In 2021, Jahmar, Vanessa, and Dale presented (virtually) to a group of W2B alumni and community activists at the "Navigating Power and Creating Impact" W2B 10th Anniversary Symposium. This was a wonderful collaboration and all three enjoyed reflecting on the challenges, joys, and memories of their time together in the classroom.

In conclusion, we have found the experience of participating in the W2B program to be enriching and valuable to our personal development. The opportunity to collaborate on this interview for the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* has been a direct result of the W2B program.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Vanessa Slater is passionate about restorative approaches and learning opportunities in and out of the classroom. When she is not in her pottery studio you can find Vanessa in the forest with her dog.

Jahmar is an inside W2B alumna from Warkworth Institution. His interests include the news, baseball, and basketball.