Book Clubs Provide Enriching Prison-Based Experience

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It may seem a simple thing, but reading a book together can allow fellowship between differently-situated people. That is the basic premise for the three prison-based book clubs in which Law, Societies, and Justice students can now participate.

Through the act of sharing a common reading experience, the book clubs allow students to engage with incarcerated individuals in a meaningful way. Discussion, vulnerability, and mutual support offer a platform for connection.

“Those women are just like anybody else,” said Jennifer Henderson, a recent LSJ graduate and a participant in the book club at Mission Creek, a minimum-security facility for women. “The only difference between us and these women are our clothes.

Last fall, LSJ offered an upper-level seminar course titled “The Experience of Incarceration” taught by Professor Steve Herbert. As a component of this class, students committed to participate in a book club for the entirety of the academic year. One of those takes place at Mission Creek, the other two at mens' facilities in Monroe.

One of the Monroe facilities is the Twin Rivers Unit. The book club there recently read and discussed The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, a novel written from the perspective of an autistic teenager. Discussions like that one often expand beyond the book, and provide a forum in which the incarcerated individuals share their personal experiences and growth.

“I think it is really cool to see how open and vulnerable they get”, said Jennifer Henderson, a participant at Twin Rivers. “When you first go in there, you don’t know what to expect beyond talking about the book. They show this openness that I don’t see in a lot of people.”

“I think what strikes me every time is how supportive they are of one another,” shared Delaney Mosca, also in the Twin Rivers group. “I have no doubt that they would support all of us in the same way.”

The LSJ participants indicate that this experience complements their education in many ways. Natalia Parker, also part of the Twin Rivers group, sees it as something unlike anything that transpires in a traditional classroom setting.

“It is a really diverse group of people in there and we are a diverse group of people,” Parker said, “and I think that it gives a lot of
perspective to people's lives and backgrounds. It makes you more sympathetic and empathetic in ways that are immeasurable."

At the Special Offenders Unit, another Monroe institution, a similar dynamic is evident.

“I have rarely encountered a more respectful, open, and honest group of men,” said Jenny Wood. “Their open-mindedness towards new ideas and eagerness to learn is astonishing and inspiring. Overall, there’s a great sense of mutual appreciation coming from both the students and SOU residents that makes it a very positive space to be in.”

The first LSJ-led book club was started three years at yet another Monroe institution, the Minimum Security Unit. That involves a group of LSJ alums, all of whom were involved in prison-based education while they were undergraduates.

The book club at Mission Creek is overseen by LSJ lecturer, Ann Frost, who likes to begin each session by asking participants to share a “rose and thorn” of the week. In listening to how the incarcerated participants respond to this, the LSJ students are commonly reminded of their own privilege and of the reality of others’ situations.

“Recently, students’ roses were that midterms were pushed out a week and the womens’ thorns were that they didn’t get to go to their son’s birthday or their mom’s funeral,” Henderson said.

Despite the hardship the prisoners face, Henderson said, they remain fun-loving people. “They like to joke, they like to laugh, and sometimes that is the only way to get through the type of situation that they are in,” Henderson said.

The book clubs are only made possible by the generous donors of the Timothy Richard Wettack Fund. That Fund, which honors the memory of an LSJ alum who was particularly passionate about punishment policy, was created to provide support for the annual prison-based mixed enrollment course.

Because the Fund grew well past expectations, LSJ has the resources to enable these additional prison-based experiences.

“This is all possible because of the generosity that people have displayed toward the Wettack Fund,” said Professor Herbert, who serves as LSJ Department Chair. “It is beyond wonderful to be able to provide an opportunity for dozens of students to share time with people who are incarcerated. It is a profoundly humanizing experience, for everyone who is involved.”

These opportunities are available to students who take the time to complete an application. For Henderson, this is time very well spent.

“What I would say to people is take that risk and put in that small bit of effort,” she said. “It has truly been one of the most transformative experiences of my UW career.”