February 2001

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

I know how pleased we all are to be able to get the Changing Lives Through Literature Program rolling again in Massachusetts, thanks especially to Senator Mark Montigny and Judge Barbara Dortch-Okara. We should have 10 to 12 groups up and running around the Commonwealth within a few months. That's good news.

Susan Jennings is currently serving as our coordinator. She has just started, but is already doing a wonderful job helping to smooth out the financial tangles and putting together this newsletter. By the way, there's a lot of great information about CLTL programs and participants in this newsletter, so please enjoy reading it.

Don't forget MARCH 8TH on your calendar. That's the date for our full day meeting and training session at One Beacon St. in Boston. We'll be sending you details soon, but please plan on being there. We've invited Elizabeth Mehren, a national correspondent from the LA Times, to talk to us at lunch, and the day, in general, should be a good opportunity to update everyone about the program, answer questions, exchange ideas and see good friends. I'm looking forward to it.

If you have questions, please give me a call at 508-999-8752. I'd love to hear from you.

Keep reading and thinking!!

See you on March 8th,

Bob Waxler
Jean Trounstone, co-founder of the women's Changing Lives Through Literature program, brings to her seminars at Middlesex Community College a democratic attitude, a fierce belief in the arts, and a long history of working with women inmates. A professor of humanities at Middlesex, Trounstone spent ten years teaching literature and directing plays at MCI Framingham. “There’s a vulnerability and a rawness to the women there that I find appealing. They’ve crossed over a line, and that appeals to me too...When I started working in prison I found my place in the world in terms of work.”

Trounstone has also discovered herself as a writer. “I hadn’t considered myself a writer until I started in the prisons, and then I felt compelled to tell that story.” After contributing to many newspapers and journals, and co-editing Changing Lives Through Literature with Robert Waxler, Trounstone wrote a book, Shakespeare Behind Bars: The Power of Drama in a Women’s Prison which will be available in February from St. Martin’s Press. The book chronicles the lives of six women inmates as they perform The Merchant of Venice and reflect on their work and their past through freewriting.

A veteran performer of more than 30 plays, Trounstone believes in drama’s place in the everyday world. Doing Shakespeare with women in prison confirmed her belief “that classic texts belong to everyone.”

Trounstone is a scrappy advocate of the women and her programs-- every chance she has, she points out the benefits of educating felons. She cites the inverse relationship between recidivism rates and education, the 15% recidivist rate for participants in correctional higher-education programs, and the cost of a college education, which is one-tenth that of a four-year incarceration.

Given her love of literature, her affection for the disenfranchised, and her need for community, the Changing Lives Through Literature Program meshes with Trounstone’s vocation: You need to do what you talk about. I feel very grateful that I have work that’s meaningful to me. I can’t imagine not participating in Changing Lives. I’m totally committed to it. That’s what happens to people who do the program.

Lynn/Lowell Courts Women’s Program

I recommend that you make notes on the book before coming to class each time. These notes should include in particular, your observations about the characters. What kind of people are they? Why do they do what they do? Do they change during the story? —Jean Trounstone, Lynn/Lowell Court Women's CLTL Program Fall Syllabus

What about the participants’ stories? Do they change during the course of a Changing Lives Through Literature seminar? Jean Trounstone, facilitator of the group that meets bi-weekly at the Middlesex Community College President’s office, thinks so.

Bobby Hassett, Lowell probation officer and regular seminar participant, knows so. “I’ve done statistics on the women in the past. They show that the recidivism of the participants went down, and when the women did commit crimes they were reduced in severity.” It’s this knowledge that keeps Hassett coming back, though he’s discussed the books (including The Bean Trees and Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant) many times. This last fall, when six women from the Lynn and Lowell District Courts graduated, was one of the best.

Hassett credits Trounstone and Lynn Judge Joseph Dever for the success of the program, which has graduated over 100 women since 1992. “I don’t know how many other judges would take a van from Lynn to Lowell every other Tuesday night with a group of probationers,” Hassett says.

Lynn Probation Officer Michelle Carter also rides in the Lynn-to-Lowell van. The fall session was her first and she found that the van ride, and the discussions, bonded the group together. “We always had a good debate. The views were diverse, because everyone comes from a different background.

There was never any downtime, which was one of my concerns.”

LA Times reporter Elizabeth Mehren participated in several sessions and published a lengthy feature article on the program in January.

At a follow-up session after graduation at the Lynn Court on January 5th, Trounstone brought a packet for each of the women. It contained information on courses of action that most of the women find overwhelming: How to get a GED; How to prepare a resume; How to answer questions on job applications.

Some of the women knew how they wanted to take the next part of their stories: Three of the four Lynn probationers asked if they could participate in CLTL again.
Professor Taylor Stoehr’s class of twenty probationers worked hard with language during the fall term. In addition to reading before each class, they had to complete writing assignments. When they got to UMass Boston, they had to write again. Then they broke into small groups of four or five to discuss the readings and their responses to it. Each group included either Judge Thomas May or a probation officer—John Owens, Bobby Spencer, or John Christopher.

The reading was difficult too. It included Malcolm X’s Autobiography and Frederick Douglass’ Narrative of the Life of an American Slave. John Christopher says “Basically our class is made up of a majority of African Americans sprinkled with Cape Verdeans and Vietnamese and Caucasians. The Caucasian gentlemen are already in the minority, and the literature we read is basically African-American. After the first two or three classes, their interest is jelled. They come in scared but in the end they understand racism.”

Make a list of events in your childhood that taught you important moral lessons.

Stoehr’s prompts raise unexpected issues. John Christopher says the participants learn that “it’s not important to be right, that your ideas are your ideas, and you can learn how to agree and disagree.” He recalls a heated discussion—fueled by reading Malcolm X and Langston Hughes among others—about whether a child’s punishment should include spanking. They never got to the end of that one.

According to Stoehr, the small groups encourage such discussions: “Students teach each other. They are the ones who can figure out at what level to address the issues.”

The writing takes things to another level. At graduation, Stoehr handed out copies of a book he had made of the participants’ responses to the idea of Hitting Bottom. The essays show the men going through divorces, losing contact with their children, losing jobs, watching friends die in gunfights, being homeless, struggling with alcohol and drugs. Though some of the men are not used to expressing themselves through language, they use words like grace and redemption without irony.

Ellery writes: I hit bottom when I found myself homeless, no job, and warrant for my arrest...The readings we’ve done lately were about either forgiveness or hitting bottom. I could relate with each story at least in the feeling of being at the bottom. But every character managed to surpass and achieve and be successful.

For Yvette Missri, facilitating a Changing Lives Through Literature Seminar meant looking at stories through new eyes. “I’d gotten used to reading books for the purpose of examining the characters beyond myself, separate from myself--now I was reading the books through the eyes of the women probationers and they read the books with themselves in mind.”

Missri and co-facilitator Karen Murray are both 3rd year Boston College law students. Eight women graduated from the Dorchester Court seminar this fall. Judge Sydney Hanlon and Probation Officers Theresa Owens, Dee Kennedy, and Yvonne Nelson were regular participants.

The women read Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God and Sandra Cisneros’ House on Mango Street. A particular favorite was How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents by Julia Alvarez. “A lot of women related to the Garcia girls and their feelings of being ostracized from different parts of society,” said Missri.

The fall syllabus also included short stories. Missri noted that two of them were particularly affecting because they talked about “the power of language, the power of speaking up for yourself, and the power of writing.” “Talking Back” by bell hooks, was written from a Southern Black perspective and portrayed a woman breaking out of a submissive role.

“How to Tame a Wild Tongue” by Gloria Albedur describes an immigrant’s experience with language. The main character feels that she can’t speak the Spanish that wants to, Missri said. “The character felt that she was her language and until her language was recognized as legitimate, she herself—and her culture—couldn’t be recognized.

Missri, who will be clerking for Superior Court in Boston next year, says that participating in CLTL “definitely made me less cynical about the criminal justice system.”
New Bedford Court

Nine years after the first *Changing Lives Through Literature* seminar, 14 men sit around the same table in a UMass Dartmouth Dean's office and talk about whether Raymond Carver's story “Tell the Women We're Going,” ends too abruptly. Does the author really foreshadow the violent end?

Three of the men, Professor Robert Waxler, Judge Robert Kane, and PO Wayne St. Pierre, have read the story before and have some ideas about the groundwork Carver lays. The others, 10 probationers and one attorney, still have their doubts.

“Good literature can affect the lives of criminal offenders in many significant ways,” Waxler has written. “When they interact with good literature, criminal offenders are engaged with stories and with language that inevitably have psychological, sociological, ethical, and spiritual dimensions for them. Why is this important? What are some of its implications?”

Some of the implications include evidence that *Changing Lives* participants have significantly-reduced rates of recidivism and commit less severe crimes when they do reoffend. But the success stories—of men reuniting with their families, going back to school, reading with their children—go far beyond statistics. Around this seminar table, some alchemy of respect and keen intelligence, listening ears and focused thoughts, conjures an electric atmosphere—a humanizing atmosphere.

The questions raised here are not easy. Who's the braver brother (in *Banks’ Affliction* and in life,) the one who leaves or the one who stays at home to wrestle with a dark past? What is the responsibility of a parent for a child? Of a child for a parent? Judge Kane, an imposing presence in shirt-and-tie even off the bench, talks about his childhood. An offender sitting beside him tells Kane about his own absent father and the son's attempts at reconciliation.

Such simple human exchanges are the currency of *Changing Lives Through Literature*. Waxler writes: *Most criminal offenders that I talk about good stories with have felt isolated for too long. They have been pushed to the margins of the mainstream and have, in essence, lost their voice and their connection to acceptable patterns within society. It is as if they are stuck in a perpetual present moment.*

*Literature helps liberate them from that prison, giving them a sense they can create a future for themselves.*

Profile

Wayne St. Pierre

When Wayne St. Pierre heard about the idea of sentencing convicted felons to literature classes from Judge Kane, the probation officer said: "You have to be crazy. What the hell does reading literature have to do with aguy doing B and E or beating his wife?" But, says St. Pierre, he’d been in the job long enough to know that what was going on in the criminal justice system wasn't working. And he had just enough desire to try something new and just enough passion for great novels to team up with Kane and Professor Robert Waxler to help inaugurate the first *Changing Lives Through Literature* seminar in the fall of 1991.

St. Pierre expected that the original participants would do the minimum, that they wouldn't speak up once they were around the seminar table. But “during the first group all three of us were blown away. It was way better than we’d ever dreamed. All the men had long records, many felonies. They’d been to jail and they were probably going back.” But during the discussions about the novels, the men showed a deep understanding of the characters and their motivations. They talked eagerly.

By the end of the classes, their excitement had transformed itself into hope. “They came in thinking they were dummies. Once they made it through the classes you could see them thinking: ‘If I can do this, maybe I can get my GED, or go to Bristol Community College.’”

It's a transformation St. Pierre has seen replayed many times in the last nine years. On the simplest level, he says, you can see the change. "There’s a physical difference in how the graduates look: They stand taller, look you in the eye. On the first night at the university, it’s obvious that they’re not regular students. By the end, it isn’t.”

St. Pierre's belief in the program has led him to not only supervise over a hundred participants through the seminars and their resulting probation, but also to represent the CLTL program in conferences and as a guest lecturer for several terms at Bristol Community College. St. Pierre wrote the proposal for the first grant the program received: $35,000 from the Gardner, Howland, Shaw Foundation. He’s shown perseverance even when it wasn’t professionally easy to do so.

St. Pierre came to the New Bedford probation job with a degree in Psychology and a professional background in mental health. His focus as a counselor is obvious if you spend fifteen minutes at his desk. The people who constantly call to check in are all greeted compassionately, in a kind voice.

"Over the course of parole," says St. Pierre, "a certain amount of trust is generated between the probationer and the probation officer." But for those who’ve been through the CLTL program, a much higher level of openness prevails. And it works both ways. Listening to each other talk about what they’ve read shows all the participants, probationers and PO's, the professor and the judge, that "We’re not so far apart."
When Presiding Barnstable Judge Joseph Reardon heard about Changing Lives Through Literature from Judge Kane, he remembered his own Freshman Literary Seminar at Brandeis with fondness. A lover of books, culture, and music, Reardon set about starting a program in Barnstable. Since 1995, 12 cycles of seminars have been held at Cape Cod Community College and, according to Probation Officer Hank Burke, Reardon has a "near perfect attendance record."

Burke says that "before warehousing someone in a correctional facility, Judge Reardon wants to try every alternative. He puts his money where his mouth is."

In Reardon’s experience, when we put someone behind bars, we’re doing nothing to address this person’s soul. We don’t change them. We aren’t changing anything. The biggest problem in penology today is that, until people internalize changes, locking them up doesn’t work.

Reardon finds a common thread in the minds of the men who come before him regularly: “Most of the men are self-centered outside of their own pleasure at the moment. We’re use to communal thinking. They don’t have families, or extended families. They’re not used to thinking of themselves in community.” Discussing literature helps to change that. “I’m in awe of the group dynamic which encourages this metamorphosis from an unthinking state of existence to a realization of the greater world outside,” says Reardon.

During the seminar discussion, the men are free to express anger, fear, love, jealousy, resentment. “There’s a transference at some point in time; the class starts taking on a life of its own. The men stop saying ‘he’ and start saying ‘I’. It’s incredible when people start talking about why I hit her, why I’m a booser—everyone starts to identify.” Reardon recalls one group talking about the rape scene in Deliverance, when a “talkative young man fell absolutely silent.” The next week he started talking about being seriously abused as a child; given the man’s background and associates, it was probably the only time and space he’d ever had to talk about it.

The constant message Reardon tries to pass on is that each person controls his own attitude; each person decides how they should live. “Nobody can make you feel inferior unless you allow them to. You can’t control how people see you but you can control how you react to that. Attitude is 90% of life, 10% is what happens to you, 90% is what you do about it.”

The message seems to stick. “It’s wonderful,” says Reardon, “you can literally see them changing their thought processes. If this program starts off with ten men—if we can change one of these men—it’s well worth it. I submit that three or four or five are regularly changed and in a significant way. The cost of program is miniscule compared to incarceration.”

Reardon, whose favorite CLTL books include Old Man and the Sea and To Kill a Mockingbird looks forward to his continuing involvement in this “exciting adventure.”

Despite the initial reluctance of some who thought CLTL produced ‘educated criminals,’ Dr. Lore Debowe of Cape Cod Community College calls the six-year relationship between her school and Barnstable’s Changing Lives Through Literature program “a great marriage.” Debowe, who regularly discusses the program at meetings and conferences, thinks that CLTL should be in every community college’s mission statement.

Professor George Albert of CCCC has led The Barnstable program, originally facilitated by DeBower, for several cycles. This fall, six probationers met weekly for eight sessions. The first five sessions included short stories. During the third session, each student was asked to prepare a story to present to the class. The presentation had to include a synopsis, the story’s central idea, and how the student connected to the story.

This assignment is typical of how Albert leads the workshops. Each participant has a voice; each is expected to contribute.

And contribute they do. Probation Officer Hank Burke relates the story of a seventeen-year-old participant turning to a seventy-year-old who had been talking about beating his wife and saying: “You know, you’re full of shit.” After a moment, the man replied: “By God. You’re right.” “Halfway through the third session,” Burke says, “the men start dropping their guard, and start questioning one another, and holding each other accountable.”

Fall 2000

Barnstable Court

Burke, who’s been a part of each of the Barnstable Court’s twelve cycles, knows that Changing Lives is not a misnomer. Besides a lower recidivism rate and a lessened severity of crimes for those who do show up back in the system, Burke cites other, personal, successes: “Successes like staying employed, or parents who say that their kids are being more respectful, or wives that say their husbands are helping them out around the house.” Judge Reardon, a faithful participant since the program’s inception says “we are really giving them alternative choices, other ways to accomplish objectives.”

Add to the list of successes a number of graduates who end up at CCCC as matriculating students.
When Rochelle Burgos and Pedro Tavares let their fellow probation officers know they were reinstating the Changing Lives Through Literature Program in Roxbury, they got eight referrals in one week. Eleven men attended the eleven weekly sessions, held in the cafeteria at the Roxbury courthouse; all eleven graduated.

Working without a professor or a judge, Burgos and Tavares put together a syllabus that included short stories, poetry, and selections from John Edgar Wideman’s Brothers and Keepers. The syllabus asks the students to consider key questions when they read the work. For Wideman’s book, the questions included: What does it mean to live in a lawful society? Why is law necessary in society?

The best assignment, Burgos says, was to “Bring a sample of poetry or some creative expression from themselves. They all did it. I was absolutely amazed at a lot of them. Some brought in a piece of music that they liked and talked about why they liked it.”

The selections—which Burgos collected into “Compositions of Change,” a booklet she presented to the students at graduation—included rap by NAS, a selection from Hamlet, Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” and “Wild Geese,” by Mary Oliver: Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscape.

Some of the men brought in original poetry including “Unforgiven,” a letter written to the children of drug addicts I kept strung out on drugs.” The poem describes the things the author knows the children were robbed of: food, toys, time with parents. “It wasn’t like I didn’t know that I was putting you through pain. I do feel ashamed because I went through the same.” The author asks not for forgiveness but for understanding: “no matter what, don’t choose my route, because the same thing that happened to me. Can be the same thing that happens to you.”

Burgos says that other probation officers often joined the group. “The atmosphere,” she says, “was intimate, almost therapeutic.” Despite the extra work the program involves, Burgos and Tavares plan to run a group in the spring. “When you’re doing what you like to do,” says Burgos, “it’s easy to make it successful.”

Chief Probation Officer Ed Gaffney, an unflagging supporter of Changing Lives Through Literature, hired Randy Ryan as a Concord probation officer three years ago. “He brought the program up in my interview and it’s been part of my job ever since,” says Ryan. “The program is one of the things that I like best about being a probation officer. It’s the only experience in the court where the court really reaches out and respects probationers as men, as people who have something to offer.”

Co-facilitated by Professors Ray and Sandi-Albertson Shea, the Concord Court men’s group meets around a mahogany table in the Trustee’s building at Middlesex Community College, where the Sheas teach full time. The six bi-weekly sessions consist of discussions of the reading, extensive writing, and small group work. Last term’s group of ten probationers read several short stories and novels, including McInerney’s Bright Lights, Big City and Albom’s Tuesdays with Morrie.

Ryan found Washington Post Journalist Nathan McCall’s Makes Me Want to Holler: A Young Black Man in America the most disturbing book. “It was an honest look at the process of a violent mind. The author’s unedited honesty about his hatred and his crimes is a real gift.”

All the participants, including Judge Janet Sanders and Probation Officers Gaffney and John Rourke, do all the writing and reading. At the end of the semester, Sandi Shea types up the contributions and publishes a book of the participants’ reflections, which she presents to them at graduation.

The shared experience is one of the most powerful lessons of the Changing Lives Through Literature program, Ryan believes: In the seminar we read the same books, we do the same writing, we have to participate in the same way. It shows each of us that we’ve all been rejected, we’ve all been victims, we’ve all been perpetrators, we’re all human beings on the same journey.

The literature itself provides the other lesson. “The best part about it is that the literature takes them through the experience,” says Ryan. “It doesn’t talk at them. They’re always being talked at.”

Many of the 34 participants in the Shea’s seminars have later become students in their regular MCC classes.
In addition to the seven programs represented in this newsletter, three Massachusetts Courts, Salem, Worcester, and Woburn, have expressed interest in starting up Changing Lives Through Literature programs.

In Dartmouth’s House of Correction, Public Information Officer Bernie Sullivan, inspired by CLTL, initiated a reading group. The men, mentored by inmate David Pasquarelli, read many of CLTL’s most popular books, including Russell Banks’ Affliction. The program’s success has spawned a second men’s group as well as a women’s group.

Since CLTL’s beginnings in 1991, several states have adopted the program after individual professors, probation officers, or judges encountered it through news articles, conferences, or conversations.

Dr. Lawrence Jabiecki loves to bowl and tells the story of how, as a young man, he traded a bowling ball for a philosophy book—that book sparked an interest in the humanities that hasn’t diminished. When he heard about the Changing Lives Through Literature program, he thought of it as revolution in criminal justice, a revolution he’s since taken to Texas, a far more conservative state than Massachusetts.

Since January 1997, the Community Supervision and Corrections Department in Brazoria County, Texas has sponsored 36 CLTL classes with 445 adult probationers, men and women. All seven county judges are supporters of the program and classes are held at Rice University, Alvin Community College, and Brazosport.

Dr. Jill Carroll facilitates the women’s program. Dr. Jablecki, who facilitates the men’s classes, uses philosophical texts, including Plato’s Dialogues and the “Essay on Liberty” by John Stuart Mill.

From Prescott Arizona, professor Moses Glidden of Yavapai Community College reports, “I can give you a rough estimate of [CLTL] graduates: 60 in 6 semesters, and according to Judge Kuebler, none are back in the system at the present time. For some reason, I doubt that. Nothing works that good, but that’s what he said last summer.”

Late last year, Professor Robert Waxler visited the Phoenix, Arizona programs. Two community colleges in Phoenix (Mesa and Phoenix) are involved as well as a number of probation officers and judges. Some of the judges have started a scholarship fund and each CLTL graduate is awarded one college credit for graduating. Since the program began, 135 probationers have been enrolled and 59 have graduated. Current classes are coed.

In Riker’s Island Prison in New York, John Ctes Curtis runs a fluid CLTL school-in-a-jail, serving juveniles and adult males. He is currently experimenting with a family group using the CLTL model.

Suffolk County Court in Long Island, New York initiated a CLTL program last fall, after a visit from Professors Robert Waxler and Jean Trounstine. Syracuse University’s program graduated 12 men recently.

The Johnson County Kansas Department of Corrections teams up with Johnson County Community College, the County Library, and the District Court to offer CLTL seminars to men, women, and juveniles. Funded by Back Roads for Books, a non-profit group, the team served 130 people during the last few years. Facilitators include instructors, teaching assistants, and librarians.

Judge William Cleaver, a participant in the men’s group, says: “I have been amazed at how isolated these people are—they have little awareness of what is going on outside their very small world. I have seen signs of awakening among some of them…If we can reach one individual, the program will be successful.”

The teen group, whose reading list includes Ironman by Chris Crutcher and All Over but the Shoutin, by Rick Bragg, has graduates from one session speak at the first meeting of the following session. Kathy McClelan, one facilitator of the juvenile group, says: “I truly believe that teach of us is capable of and responsible for creating the story that is our life.”

Last winter, Wendy Robertson and Avril Joy from Durham, England visited five programs in Massachusetts after reading about CLTL in a House of Commons report.

In a lengthy and well-written report, they describe their meetings with five judges, four facilitators, seven probation officers and twenty-one offenders.

Judge Dever, they write, calls the program “the joy of his judging.”

They note that, for Professor Stoehr, “helping men arrive at a new sense of their own society through the group and their interaction with each other is central.”

The full article can be found at: http://www.wendy-robertson.co.uk/prg2.htm#9

We’d Like To Hear From You!
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Visit us on the Web at
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Spring 2001

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