April, 2001

Dear Friends:

I am sure you share with me the energy and enthusiasm coming from our meeting in Boston a few weeks ago. Such moments remind me of the importance of community and compassion, virtues of the human heart which seem so central to the humanities and to our CLTL efforts.

Susan Jennings has done a wonderful job in this newsletter capturing that sense of our program in words and photos. I hope you will enjoy reading through what Susan has given us here.

With all this activity, the 10th anniversary celebration we plan for October 26th at Henderson House should be an extraordinary event. We hope to bring CLTL participants from around the country to join us. Make sure to mark October 26th on your calendar.

Talking about energy, Senator Mark Montigny (D-New Bedford)—Chairman of the Senate's Ways and Means Committee and an important supporter of our program—vowed to fight for continued funding from the Commonwealth. "Changing Lives is just the kind of innovative approach we need to reduce repeat offenses and revocations of probation," said Senator Montigny. "They have a track record of success, achieved through the hard work of reaching out to probationers and helping them to see their own lives as full of possibility."

Let me also remind you that we have several new programs moving forward in Massachusetts—Salem, Woburn, Worcester, and Wrentham, and we have met with a group at the University of Rhode Island who has expressed interest in getting CLTL programs going in several locations in that state.

Finally, hearty congratulations to Judge Bob Kane for his nomination to the Superior Court. We are all proud of Bob's achievements.

Keep reading,

Bob Waxler
A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR WAXLER AND JUDGE KANE

“When we started Changing Lives, we believed that if we could keep it going for ten years it would be around a lot longer, it would be an established success,” says Dr. Robert Waxler, co-founder of the program.

It’s been almost ten years since his first conversations with Judge Robert Kane about education and the criminal justice system. Waxler believed that the humanities, and their power to deepen the national conversation, were being marginalized. Kane, who has a ‘bedrock belief in education’ was frustrated enough with turnstile justice to experiment with sentencing felons to literature classes rather than to jail.


Waxler, a tireless and eloquent advocate, has traveled nationwide, often with Jean Trounstine—co-founder of the women’s program along with Judge Joseph Dever—to talk about Changing Lives.

Waxler writes that reading and talking about good literature can spark “a recognition that we have choices, and an understanding that human experiences are complex and ambiguous.” Such an understanding, Waxler and Kane believed, could help criminal offenders change the way they viewed themselves, and thus change their behavior.

An early study of the program seems to confirm this premise. Compared with offenders with similar backgrounds, graduates of CLTL have far lower recidivism rates. Further studies conducted by individual courts over the years have confirmed this. They’ve also revealed that graduates who do re-offend tend to commit far less serious crimes, and rarely commit violent crimes.

A Changing Lives seminar is clearly something deeply human and restorative for each participant. For probation officers, the conversation is a chance to interact with offenders on an individual level. For professors, the insights these students bring to the table enrich their own understanding of the literature that they love. For judges, the classes present an opportunity to be involved in a truly rehabilitative process.

The community around a Changing Lives table is created from a multiplicity of factors: the literature itself, the democratic interplay of participants, the safety of talking about experience at one remove. For everyone, there is the satisfaction that comes from knowing that one’s yearnings and fears are part of a larger, more variegated, fabric than one might have suspected.

The growth of the program, despite financial uncertainties and set-backs, can be laid at the feet of those most affected by its magic. Probation officers who recruit offenders and colleagues to participate. Judges who inspire others to lend their weight and authority to the process.

Why literature? Waxler thinks that “story is hardwired into human consciousness. Reading and talking about a coherent narrative helps us to develop a coherent life.”

Changing Lives books, such as Dickey’s Deliverance or Morrison’s The Bluest Eye are chosen to resonate with the issues of violence and identity that most offenders struggle with. Talking about such literature, Waxler believes, “gives them an opportunity to exorcise the past that haunts them, the nightmares that imprison their minds.”

Kane says that Changing Lives builds a “civilized community based on language, one that elevates, and doesn’t degrade.”

And the next ten years? Waxler envisions a national grant for piloting programs in other states. He hopes to see Changing Lives transforming other venues too: halfway houses, alternative schools, mental hospitals. “It belongs anywhere there are people outside the mainstream, in any place where people have lost their voice.”
When Professor George Albert of Cape Cod Community College decided to use The Best American Short Stories of the Century in his class this spring, Dr. Lore DeBower phoned her Houghton Mifflin representative to see if the publisher would be interested in donating the book. Soon fifteen copies of the collection were on their way to Barnstable.

PO Hank Burke says the group of eight probationers had “surprising success” with the mixture of books and short stories they used this term. After reading To Kill a Mockingbird, one probationer said that the novel was outdated, that nothing like that would happen today. The class brought up the Matthew Shepard incident, the story of the Black man in Texas being pulled behind a truck, the story of the African immigrant in New York City being beaten, and the recent shooting of Providence Police Officer Cornel Young Jr. “It was a real eye-opener for all of us,” says Burke. “Maybe this stuff still does go on.”

Judge Reardon, who is splitting his time between the men’s and the new women’s group, plans to have a combined ceremony for all the Barnstable graduates this June.

The Concord group also mixed stories and poetry with novels this term. During one class, they read Poe’s “The Black Cat,” Cheever’s “The Swimmer,” and poetry by Raymond Carver. John Rourke said that reading the stories and poetry “was refreshing. It was a little lighter than what we usually deal with.”

The class of twelve probationers, joined by Probation Officers Rourke, Ed Gaffey and Randy Ryan as well as Judge Janet Sanders, writes at the beginning and at the end of each class. Ray and Sandra Albertson-Shea, co-facilitators of the group, also ask participants to reflect at the end of each session on what they should change for the following term. One participant’s response: “Not a thing.”

The Dorchester Men’s Group, facilitated by Professor Taylor Stoehr, is reading two chapters of Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave each week this term. In addition, Stoehr xerographs stories and passages that mirror the issues the Douglass reading raises.

The beginning of the semester focused on questions such as whose responsibility is it to parent children? Does a child need a father as well as a mother? Who should teach morality? Mid-semester questions include what’s the responsibility of people who are lucky in life—who have money or power—to people who aren’t.

Obviously, some of the pieces are difficult and they’re rising to the challenge.” Each class includes some writing of observation journals, personal responses to the reading, or letters to the authors.

Barbara Kingsolver’s novel, Pigs in Heaven, brought up a lot of issues for the women in Professor Jean Trounstine’s Lynn/Lowell class this term. Chief among them was who has the rights to a child. Trounstine says that when mothers first read the book, “they are strongly against the notion that the community has any rights to a child. By the end, they begin to understand the idea of society having a stake in everyone’s choices.”

Five probationers are joined by Judge Joseph Dever and P.O.’s Michelle Carter and Bobby Hassett. Their syllabus includes Anita Shreve’s Strange Fits of Passion.

By the end of the semester, the participants, including 12 probationers, PO’s Bobby Spencer and John Christopher and Judge Thomas May, grapple with the issue of who has the right to sit in judgment on other people.

PO’s Rochelle Burgos and Pedro Tavares of Roxbury District Court are including Martin Luther King’s speeches in their syllabus this term. Their ten probationers will also read Almost a Man by Richard Wright and Notes of a Native Son by James Baldwin.

The focus on African-American writers this semester will yield to world writers next semester. During their first class, the students talked about what kind of people carry guns and the need for control. At the end of class, they each wrote about what their expectations for the class were.
"I used to think in classes in general you pitch it somewhere in the middle, now I think you pitch it to everybody. You can’t leave anybody out. Another failure experience is the last thing anybody in the group needs."

**Professor Taylor Stoehr** facilitator of the Dorchester Men's group for 6 years, has spent more time than just about anybody thinking about the Ideal Changing Lives class. A teacher for 40 years, nearly 30 of them at UMass Boston, Stoehr says “The first semester of Changing Lives I changed my curriculum and my plan every week. I thought ‘Oh God, I’ll never get this right.’"

Stoehr’s current classes, which typically include 12 to 20 criminal offenders as well as several probation officers and Judge Thomas May, consist of writing about, and small-group discussions of, the stories read for class. Stoehr started the groups as a way to increase participation. After the first small-group session, one of the probationers said: “This is the first time in my life I’ve ever felt I could talk in class. I’ve always sat in the corner.”

![Judge Sydney Hanlon](image1.jpg)

Stoehr credits both judges as well as the Dorchester probation officers for keeping the program going.

“[I couldn’t do it without their participation," says Stoehr. “They love it, they do the writing too. They come because it’s very rewarding for everybody. The issues we talk about are perennial issues and these guys are just fascinating. Their minds are just as full, curious and big-headed as everybody else’s.”

Stoehr believes that the community created around the discussion table is the mainstay of Changing Lives. “The success of the program is right in that room as far as I’m concerned. Most people don’t have situations where they can sit down and talk seriously about life. One of the big losses in our culture is not having these places.”

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**P.O. Theresa Owens** thinks Changing Lives has benefits for probation officers as well as offenders: “It keeps you grounded. People aren’t all the same but we have a lot of the same problems we have to deal with. Professionally you can look at things in black and white. This helps you remember there’s a lot of gray areas,” Owens says.

“Someone may be on probation just because they didn’t know they had a different choice or because they didn’t have the tools to make a different choice.”

During her time in Dorchester, Owens participated in 12 women’s groups and supervised nearly two hundred men and women through their participation in the program.

“The program helps different persons in different ways. It helps some realize that they can set goals and reach them.

“Another person--after going to class for ten consecutive weeks--will realize that that’s almost a college course, and that they really can manage school.

“Even those who don’t go on to school benefit. Some women sit down to do homework with their children, others have kept up their journals. A few women have told me that they keep time for themselves, the same reading time they had for the course.”

![Theresa Owens](image2.jpg)

Owens says that one focus of the women’s groups has been breaking out of patterns of domestic abuse. She keeps a

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A letter from one participant, Angell, who wrote: I am grateful for this program because at least now my faith in the legal system has been restored. This is truly what the rehabilitation of a criminal was meant to be. I honestly believe that the first time I was a victim and from this day forward I no longer have to ever be a volunteer and by that I mean I no longer need to volunteer myself for anything in my life which will cause me misery or pain.

Owens, who’s been a probation officer for nearly 17 years, moved to Taunton District Court last December. She hopes to initiate a Changing Lives program at that court with the help of Chief Probation Officer Bill McAndrews.
Profile

JUDGE JANET SANDERS

"Initially I was reluctant to go to a Changing Lives class myself because of stepping out of my role as judge. I felt a little strange about going to class with people who might appear before me," says Judge Janet Sanders of the Concord District Court.

Recruited by Chief Probation Officer Ed Gaffey when she first took the bench in Concord last March, Sanders' reluctance has blossomed into enthusiasm: "I would encourage other judges to become involved with the program and to participate regularly."

A graduate of Stanford University and Harvard Law School, Sanders finds the CLTL discussions sometimes better than the ones she had in college literary seminars. During a recent discussion of an alcoholic father who figuratively ate his children, Professor Sandra Shea asked who Saturn was. Sanders had a vague idea.

Shea said that Saturn’s Greek name was Kronos.

Sanders believes that talking about literature helps offenders "to be objective about their own lives, to distance themselves from their lives with story, to see things as an outsider would see them. It increases their own self awareness."

She notes how the probationers are able to understand the perspectives of victims and family members. "It's not just the alcoholics and wife-beaters they have empathy for, but also those around them."

The Concord group meets at Middlesex Community College and is co-facilitated by Professors Ray and Sandra Albertson-Shea. Probation Officers Gaffey, Randy Ryan and John Rourke participate regularly.

During the recent Boston Changing Lives workshop, Sanders shared her concerns with Judge Robert Kane. "He encouraged me to be myself," said Sanders. "In the class, I wasn't on a higher footing, I wasn't in a position to impose penalties. I was just a human being."

This democratic notion suits Sanders. She finds that all the people in the class "have the same yearnings and ambitions. To have a family, to be loved, to love someone in turn."

During a recent class, when each participant filled out a name card, Sanders considered writing Judge Sanders, or Janet Sanders, and finally wrote simply Janet.

Profile

JAYME SILVA

Before Changing Lives "I didn't think I had the patience to sit down and read a book," says Jayme Silva. "Now I know I have the attention span. It makes me feel I can do something."

A participant in last fall’s seminar at UMass Dartmouth, Silva says "at first, the only reason I took the course was because of the six months off probation. I've been on probation since I was 17 years old. But the longer the class went on the more I wanted to go. I didn't care about the time off probation anymore."

"The program is good for people who still don't think that it's too late to do anything with their lives. It could change their lives if they wanted it to. Keep them out of the system."

Probation obligations kept Silva from accepting a full athletic scholarship to college several years ago. Now 25, Silva's back in school full time doing a certificate program at Bristol Community College.

He also spends time with his son Jayme, Jr., who was three on Christmas Eve. Silva's made a commitment to be with his son in a way his own father was not for him.

Silva believes in Changing Lives. "I think it should be for everybody, especially younger kids. Kids on the brink of getting into trouble or going to jail."

Besides the reading itself, Silva liked the discussions. Often, a story started out seeming simple and Dr. Waxler "would switch it all up on us and get deeper into the question." Talking about what he read made Silva "know I have something to say."

Silva began the class a few months after getting out of jail. "Now," he says, "I'm doing everything right. I'll be broke and living in a box before I ever sell drugs again."

One of Silva's favorite books was Old Man and the Sea. He liked it because of the "fact that the old man didn't give up no matter what people thought of him. He had a mission, a goal, and he followed through and did it."

Something like that dedication seems to shine now in Silva. Changing Lives "gave me a boost. It made me want to go to school. Even when I'm done with this program, I want to continue with school."
NEW MASSACHUSETTS PROGRAMS

WORCESTER

Worcester CPO Bill Mattel’s frustration with jail fueled his interest in Changing Lives. “The jails are bulging at the seams. They’re trying to keep a lid on things rather than treating people. The benefits that were at one time available are now gone.” Several Worcester probation officers as well as Judge Zide are teaming up to start a CLTL program in May.

Bill Hosmer, a former English Teacher and current administrator at Worcester State College is co-facilitating the class with Tuck Amory, an Urban Studies professor and poet from South Africa. When Hosmer voiced his nervousness about working with a new kind of student, Amory, who’s worked in prisons, replied: “You just let the material carry the class, because the material is good.” The two plan to use selections from the Changing Lives book as well as the Spoon River Anthology.

BARNSTABLE

Judge Joseph Reardon of Barnstable Court has his hands full these days. In addition to the ongoing men’s program, he’s started to attend the new women’s classes. CPO Hank Burke says that the women’s program is “something we wanted to do since we started the men’s group.” This fall they finally had enough probationers.

Professor Sheryl Hirschberger of Cape Cod Community College is facilitating the seminar with help from Probation Officer Jennifer Delinks. “We’ve really had a lot of fun putting together the syllabus and reading stories that we hadn’t read before,” says Hirschberger.

During their third class, the women read “My Man Bovanne,” by Toni Cade Barbara, and “Lust” by Susan Minot from We Are The Stories We Tell, a collection of women’s writing. Hirschberger spent some time sketching in the cultural and generational background to the stories.

She says her main concern from the beginning has been switching from her teaching role to one as facilitator. Guided by the discussions at the Boston workshop, she and Delinks have been coming to class with prompts and questions for discussions.

“Every week I’m getting more comfortable and relaxing into it,” says Hirschberger. “The first time through can only be the tip of the iceberg. I’m only starting to understand the potential of what can happen within a class.”

WOBURN

Oriel Greene, chair of the Middlesex Community College English Department, was part of the interviewing team that hired Jean Trounstone, who was at that time teaching in Framingham prison. Greene followed Trounstone’s participation in Changing Lives with interest. “What pushed me into participating myself,” Greene says, “was hearing a report on federal finances, that there was more money spent on prisons than there is on schools. I thought maybe I’m in the wrong place.”

At the same time, CPO Ed Gaffey, mainstay of the Concord CLTL program, was talking to his friend CPO Charlie Winchester about starting a program in the Woburn Court. Judge Marie Jackson Thompson conferred with Judge Kane and the Woburn program was up and running.

The first few sessions with 12 probationers and three probation officers have been “dream classes,” according to Greene. “Everyone seemed to have done their homework, the level of discourse was extremely high. I was impressed by the kind of subtleties that the probationers were picking up, the level of the observations—the literary observations, not just the life observations.”

Winchester has already recruited four women for a possible joint program with Concord.

OTHER NEW PROGRAMS

When Vincent Basil from the Office of the Commissioner of Probation became the chairman of the Board of Regents of North Shore Community College, he contacted Salem District Court to see if they were interested in offering Changing Lives classes again.

In September, Essex County Superior Court will join the District Court to sponsor a class at the community college. Several Probation Officers who have previously been involved with the program are committed to coming. Judges Wexler and Bone also plan to participate.

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After a few-year hiatus, the South Berkshire District Court plans to hold a CLTL class in late spring. Professor William Corby of Berkshire Community College will facilitate with help from Judges James McElroy and Fredric Rutberg.

Judge Jack Conners of the Wrentham District Court was a recent guest at a UMass Dartmouth class. He was joined by a probation officer and a professor. They hope to have a program in place for the fall.
As a lover of literature, Changing Lives has been “very exciting for me personally,” says Professor George Albert of Cape Cod Community College. “You read the same piece of literature time and time again, and allow people’s minds to work on it. You get new takes, new perceptions, your understanding of it just keeps deepening.”

Albert’s understanding has been deepening for a long time. A teacher for 35 years, Albert has facilitated 19 sessions of Barnstable’s Changing Lives men’s program. He’s also represented the program at several conferences.

Though Albert reuses standards like To Kill a Mockingbird, his syllabus changes for each session. During his most recent class, students read selections from The Best American Short Stories of the Century including “The Farmer’s Children,” by Elizabeth Bishop.

“One of the most important parts of the program is simply the probationer’s choice to enter the program,” says Albert. “They’re saying they’re ready for something different. In that sense they’re guaranteed to succeed.”

Albert believes his role as facilitator is to fashion “the opportunity for dialogue to take place. My goal is to say as little as possible so that the ideas come from the student. The less I say, the better.”

Albert has dealt with marginalized populations as a Jesuit, with the Aids Action Committee in Boston, at CCCC, and with Changing Lives. “It’s important work,” says Albert, “Extraordinarily valuable.”

“The key of the program is the free flow of ideas. The opening up of individual’s minds and hearts for the first time. For many, it’s the first time that people value and recognize that what they say is significant.”

Those who work with Albert credit his humanity and his empathy for the students. Probation Officer Hank Burke says “he’s worked with street people. He’s worked in soup kitchens. He gets involved. It’s not just talk and he earns respect because of it.”

At the recent Barnstable graduation, Judge Joseph Reardon called Albert “one of my heroes.”

Presiding Lynn Justice Joseph Dever says he will be “ever grateful to Judge Kane” for introducing him to Changing Lives. “It’s the joy of my judging.”

“One of the most fortuitous days in my professional life was attending a seminar on “Law and Literature” at Brandeis in the early 90’s. Bob Kane chatted about Changing Lives and mentioned how interested he was in a women’s group. I thought Lynn would be the perfect place.”

Together with Middlesex Professor Jean Trounstine, Dever began the first women’s group in 1992. Over a hundred probationers from Lynn and Lowell have graduated from the group. The Dorchester women’s group has been going strong for six years. This year, Barnstable, Woburn and Concord Courts have also added women’s programs.

A former public defender, Dever finds a common personality trait in the people that appear before him: “They’re completely absorbed in themselves without an ounce of self worth. Changing Lives frontally attacks that problem. The women begin to look at life objectively for the first time through the characters in the books.”

Dever says that judicial involvement in the program is important: “It does so much for these ladies’ images of themselves that they can have a conversation with a judge. They can agree or disagree and their opinion is just as
NEW YORK

At the Suffolk County Day Reporting Center, a Changing Lives group meets twice a week. Started in September, after a visit from Professors Waxler and Trounstine, the group reads primarily short stories, including The Man Who Killed his Shadow, The Lottery, and Poe's The Tell-Tale Heart.

Linda Jacino reports that she and her fellow facilitators spend all their free time in the library looking for new material. A certified reading specialist, she says CLTL "ties in with everything I believe in."

"One of our graduates brought up Changing Lives as a key turning point in his recovery. He’d never read before and now, instead of turning on the TV, he picks up a book."

Jacin and co-facilitator Daureen Dawber will panel a discussion of Changing Lives at a statewide conference in May.

TEXAS

In March, Professors Robert Waxler and Jean Trounstine spent several busy days speaking with judges, probation officers, and professors in Brazoria County where 500 probationers have graduated from Changing Lives seminars.

They also spoke at the University of Houston to educators interested in CLTL. "It was a good opportunity to spread the word on the program and to lay the groundwork for additional development in that state," said Waxler.

The visit included television and radio appearances, and interviews with the Houston Chronicle and The Facts, a Brazoria County paper. The latter paper quoted PO Larry Jablecki as saying that prisons are operating "as toxic waste dumps occupied by many thousands of non-violent and relatively petty criminal offenders."

Jablecki, head of Adult Probation in Brazoria County, has spearheaded the Changing Lives ‘revolution’ in Texas.

We read to know that we are not alone.

C.S. Lewis

MAINE

The Maine Council for the Humanities, in conjunction with the Maine Department of Corrections, offered Changing Lives Through Literature seminars at four sites in Maine this winter. Victoria Bonnebakker of the Council heard about the program three years ago through newspaper articles and subsequently met with Professors Waxler and Trounstine.

The hope is that these four programs will serve as the seeds for a statewide presence of CLTL.

RHODE ISLAND

Dr. Dorothy Donnelly, chair of the English Department at the University of Rhode Island, recently spoke with her Dean about starting a series of Changing Lives seminars in that state. The Dean, she reports, is "very excited about the program and can’t wait for it to get started."

URI Professor Karen Stein, who provided the original impetus for the program, attended the CLTL meeting in March.

Other supporters of the incipient program include the Attorney General’s Office and the URI Center for Non-Violence. Dr. Bernard Lafayette and Susan Peterson of the Center will co-facilitate the first seminar.

In August of 1993, a Providence Journal Editorial urged the citizens of Rhode Island to think seriously about modeling a program in that state like the one started in Massachusetts.

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Programs in Arizona and Kansas also continue.

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Department of English
University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth
285 Old Westport Road
Dartmouth, MA 02748