Dear Colleagues and Friends,

This past year has been momentous for Changing Lives Through Literature. We weathered the state budget and won a prestigious award from the New England Board of Higher Education. With help from many in the program we held a successful training at Henderson House welcoming participants from all across the state as well as from Connecticut, Rhode Island, Kansas, and Arizona. We completed our major website which is accessible at cltl.umassd.edu and, thanks to the NEH, it will continue to help us grow.

We said goodbye this fall to Beth Lehr, who served wholeheartedly as our coordinator, and we welcome Tam Neville as our new CLTL Assistant and Audrey Pinto as our Graduate Assistant.

Tam has written the last four newsletters and served as a CLTL facilitator for several years. She is a professor and writer who has taught at Boston College and Emerson College. She writes both poetry and essays and is the author of Journey Cake, a book of poems. Audrey is a UMass graduate student in Professional Writing whose undergraduate work is in anthropology. She is now pursuing studies in scholarly and textual editing.

By now you have received a SAVE THE DATE letter for February 4th, 2005, our upcoming training at Henderson House, 9am - 4pm. So far we have some very exciting activities planned for the day.

Taylor Stoehr and the two of us are putting together a day with the theme: How Do We Know It Works? The morning session will include a panel of graduate students from UMass Boston who are spending this semester, in their Methods Seminar in Applied Sociology, studying the nature and personnel of the program. Their topic will be How It Works. In the afternoon we hope to bring together a panel of experts and veterans from areas of public life such as Criminal Justice, Politics and Government, the Academy, and the Literary World. We plan to discuss which questions and issues should be addressed in evaluating the success of our program. Is recidivism the bottom line? Are there other important factors to be taken into account? How Do We Judge if it Works?

We are looking forward to our 14th year. You keep this program running – we hope to see you in February and keep the vision!!

Keep Reading,
Jean Trounstine & Bob Waxler
This semester I was privileged to be a participant/observer in seven of the eight programs currently running in Massachusetts. It was a pleasure to see first hand many different teaching styles and the variety and vitality of each group of students.

I was most interested in the point where a student’s experience meets with a text. In Steinbeck’s *Of Mice And Men*, hope and the risk of disappointment arose as a theme. The students were familiar with the pattern. “Sometimes black parents don’t want their children to be let down, so they don’t support them in their dreams,” said one student. Such instances of the students’ connection with literature arose in every class.

Life and literature are not separate but inextricably bound. The students gain learning, inspiration and perspective from this bond, an experience that is central to the CLTL program.

### Barnstable

Even before the class began, the room was alive with talk.

The group of eleven students, five women and six men, were gathered together in a seminar room around a long table. Professor George Albert started the class. PO Bill McCormack, Judge Joseph Reardon, and drug court case manager Susan Kelly also participate every week. (PO Hank Burke, who also sits in, happened to be absent that day.)

The coed Barnstable group is run a little differently from other CLTL programs. Men and women come to class having previously worked together in a drug program. When they arrive, they already know and are comfortable with each other.

The story for discussion was “Paul’s Case” by Willa Cather. Paul is an unusual, high strung seventeen year old, who doesn’t fit into the life around him. He is repelled by the “ugly, common” world of Cordelia Street where he lives.

The time is the turn of the century and the place is Pittsburgh. The adults around Paul are concerned solely with enlarging their families and moving up in the manufacturing world. To escape this humdrum existence, Paul works as an usher in a concert hall. For him this is the “Portal of Romance” and he is intoxicated with the music, lights, and fine clothes but merely wants to “get high” as an onlooker, a voyeur.

It didn’t take long for the students to recognize Paul’s addictive personality. They pointed out that underneath his stylish bravado, Paul feels a constant sense of dread and desperation. One student noticed that, like an addict, Paul has a sense of the void, of something missing. He runs from this emptiness into a fantasy life of concerts, glamorous singers and plush hotels.

In order to place himself in this world Paul steals a thousand dollars from his father’s bank and travels to New York City where he stays at the Waldorf Hotel. For eight days he lives the life he has always dreamed of. With money and fine clothes, he enters the world of champagne, flowers and elegant interiors.

When the story breaks in the Pittsburgh papers Paul is unable to face reality and his life ends in suicide. Judge Reardon reminded the class “We can fool others but we can’t lie to ourselves. We all have to confront our demons.” Students told stories of denial in their own lives. One man recounted how he took drugs as a teenager because he hated himself and wanted to be someone else. Another student mentioned how impossible it was for Paul to go back and start over, adding how difficult it had been for him to rebuild his own life.

The Barnstable coed program began three semesters ago. Judge Reardon, George and Bill all agreed that the change from single-sex groups made for better classes. The lively mixture keeps the students alert and helps them become penetrating readers. Their interest was high and no detail passed unnoticed.

### Dorchester Women’s

The group met in a small UMass Boston classroom. With Professor Brian Murphy, Chief Justice Sidney Hanlon, POs Renee Nixon, Betty Julian, and Pam Pierce, two student researchers and seven students, the room was almost full. When all the students are present, there are eleven in the class, making this women’s group larger than most.

The theme for the evening was “Obstacles in Life” and the class had read two short autobiographical pieces in preparation. The first was “On Being A Cripple,” an essay by Nancy Mairs and the second was “The Letter
A,” the first chapter of My Left Foot by Christy Brown. Nancy Mairs had to overcome the increasing difficulty of multiple sclerosis. Christy Brown was born with cerebral palsy and dealt with this severe limitation by learning to write with his left foot.

Brian opened the class by asking everyone to write briefly on one of two subjects: “What are the obstacles in your own life that keep you from achieving your goals?” And, “Name one obstacle you faced in the past and how you overcame it.”

The two writers discussed had both adjusted to their disabilities with the help of others and through strong character traits of their own. The discussion evolved into an interesting pair of lists. The first was of things that help a person deal with obstacles: faith, family and friends, humor, other interests, independence, learning, forgiving – all things that take you outside yourself. The second list named things that get in the way of overcoming an obstacle. The class came up with fear, negativity, pride, ignorance and passivity, among others.

Towards the end I asked the class if anyone would volunteer to talk about what they had written earlier. To my surprise the students were not shy. One student had tried to help someone in a wheelchair and was abruptly told “Get out of here!” The student realized how angry the person was because she couldn’t do things. She also saw a self-reliant person determined to do all that she could on her own. The student, who had initially been put off by the woman, ended by saying “I don’t like people who like to be pitied.”

Another student spoke of having a child in her sophomore year. She went back for her junior year but didn’t think she could finish. But with the help of her friends she was able to complete her senior year and graduate from high school.

The Dorchester Women’s program was an unusual combination of focus and freedom. Without losing track of the main subject, the students were able to share their experiences with openness and strength. A vital, positive spirit was alive in the room. These women knew how to deal with obstacles and didn’t think they could finish. But with the help of others and through strong character traits, they were not just fulfilling a probation requirement.

Lynn/Lowell

Professor Jean Trounstine welcomed me to her first class. We met in the president’s own conference room at Middlesex Community College. With six students, Prof. Jean Trounstine, Judge Joseph Dever, PO Michelle Carter-Donahue and Assistant Chief PO Bob Hassett, the room was comfortably full.

Jean handed out the syllabus and began with an exercise in “close reading.” This activity immediately engaged everyone present. The poem explored a Holocaust theme. Jean asked, “What do you need to know to understand this poem?” A few students mentioned words they didn’t know, such as “stench” and “Dachau.” Others quickly offered definitions and we went on with the poem.

Once everyone was satisfied with the understanding we’d reached, Jean went on to explain the course as a whole. There were six complete novels to read (one every two weeks) and this made for a demanding schedule. Jean introduced the class, saying “This is a challenging college level course, difficult but exciting.” A few of the students doubted that they would be able to keep up. Others who had taken the course before reassured them. Judge Dever added a story about a girl who had come to him in tears, saying she could only read at a 6th grade level and she couldn’t understand the book at all. But when this student got to class, she was surprised at how much she actually knew.

Jean and Michelle gave the students a realistic picture of what it takes to participate in the class, carefully explaining the reading process by breaking it down into smaller components. The students figured out exactly how many pages they needed to read each day to finish To Kill A Mockingbird in time for the next class. Jean’s approach was full of enthusiasm, but the difficulty of the reading load was not glossed over. Students were given solid preparation for the work to come.

The heart of the first class was a fascinating, tough story called “Chin,” by Gish Jen. It was a story you couldn’t help but react to and the students were eager to talk. “Chin” concerned the fifteen-year-old narrator and his American family who lived across from a Chinese family in the Bronx. In such tight quarters there was no room for privacy. The American family became spectators to repeated scenes of physical abuse. The Chinese son, also fifteen, was beaten over and over again by his father. After one such incident, the narrator remarks that the boy was so red faced, “he looked at though blood beads were going to come busting straight out of his pores.”

The American family spoke of the Chinese in some of the usual discriminatory ways. In the end though, it was the frustration of not being able to help them that became the dominant theme. This led to guilt and discrimination as topics for discussion.

The seemingly impossible strain within each family caused Bob to comment that the story was “hopeless, utterly hopeless.” Judge Dever protested by raising the redeeming features of the story. I realized this exchange was a piece of comedy, probably acted out many times before. Everyone laughed, caught up in the play of the moment. This added to a feeling of fearlessness. After this introductory class the students were ready to take the leap and be carried forward by the tremendous momentum of literature.
New Bedford

In early November I visited the New Bedford Men’s program. The class had recently completed Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* and this week the text for discussion was Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*.

Professor Bob Waxler led the group. PO Wayne St. Pierre was an active participant, adding comments and questions. Two local attorneys, Don Friar and Charles Zalewski, came to each class. They both agreed that in their daily work they are only able to treat “symptoms,” but in the Changing Lives classroom they witness real progress in their clients.

The class was small but its four students were articulate and eager to talk. I felt I was in a regular English literature class. This was particularly remarkable because the group was so young, most in their early twenties. I was surprised to learn that each had recently come out of jail.

*Of Mice and Men* centers around Lennie and George, two itinerant farm hands looking for work in California during the Depression. They both take pride in the fact that, unlike other farm hands, they each have someone to look after. Many of the men they meet long for human contact but fear rejection and are unable to trust. The reason for this, according to Steinbeck, is that human beings can’t relate to others without exercising power over them. The students agreed that the need for control played a part in their own relationships as well.

Soon after the story opens Lennie and George are hired to “buck” bags of grain on a farm that turns out to be a bed of tensions. The boss’s son Curley and his wife both try to get what they want by wielding power over others. But like most people, what they really want is attention, respect and someone to talk to. The friction between these two desires builds and eventually erupts with terrible consequences.

Hope and the risk of disappointment emerged as a theme. There is one black man in the story – Crooks. He, Lennie and an old farm hand sit talking one night. They dream of owning a piece of land and a place of their own where no one has power over them. Crooks allows himself to hope for one brief moment, but after a disappointment, he withdraws back into his protective shell.

The students had seen the same pattern. One cited a pre-election interview with two black men. One man was going to vote and reminded the other of the time when they had no vote. But the other refused to vote, saying, “I’m not going to get my hopes up only to be disappointed.”

*Of Mice and Men* seems to be a simple, local story but its themes extend to all human beings. The students brought their own rich experience to the book and this enabled them to penetrate deep below the surface of the novel.

Roxbury

The Roxbury group of thirteen men and one woman met in a comfortable conference room in the Roxbury Court House. The facilitator was Professor Jean Flanagan. POs Jack McGrimley and Maureen Dolan - Coyle were present. On the day I visited, Judge Milton Wright also attended the class.

The assigned text was a short story by Raymond Carver, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.” It revolves around two suburban couples getting progressively drunk as they discuss the nature of love. The students had a lot to say on the subject. The range of their experience, and the wisdom and compassion they brought to the discussion, was remarkable.

The story mentions a violently abusive relationship. My own impulse was to discredit the perpetrator. But many of the students sympathized with the character. One man said, “When you fall in love you just fall. You’re very vulnerable and this can be a destabilizing force. It can drive you mad.” Others nodded in agreement.

Jean asked questions such as “What changes do you notice as the story progresses?” “What stage of love and marriage is each of the couples in?” The student’s answers were both knowledgeable and insightful. In the course of discussing the story, almost every form of love came to light – romantic love, carnal love, sentimental love, love between mother and child, love between two old people, absolute love, possessive love, and love as a creative constructive force. None of the usual clichés were mentioned.

Many in the class were in the midst of serious soul searching. Coming out of addiction and other problems they questioned everything: Is love action or emotion? Can you love another if you don’t love yourself? What responsibilities go with love? There was a hush in the room as the men listened closely to each other. I felt their responses reflected a kind of insight that doesn’t come in a one-to-one session with a counselor, PO, or spiritual advisor. The life each man breathed into the group was essential to what was said.

The students were slow to leave at the end. They thanked me and the judge for coming, shaking our hands as they said goodbye.
I was fifteen minutes early to the women’s class in Worcester and to my surprise I found the room already full. Eleven women sat around a large table in a dusty courtroom. They were talking quietly and their presence transformed the room into a place of warmth and conversation.

Professor Carolyn Labun led the session. POs Kathy Wickman and Heather Rocheford also participated. The class turned to a lively discussion of the assigned book, Whirligig, by Paul Fleishman. The story centers around a teenage boy, Brent, who kills a girl in an auto accident at the beginning of the book. In an unusual act of retribution he travels to the four corners of the country – Maine, Seattle, Tampa and San Diego – building a whirligig (a kind of kinetic sculpture) in each one. He begins as the typical self-absorbed teenager but in the course of his long bus trip he slowly changes into a more compassionate young man with talents and interests of his own.

Students compared Brent’s path to their own, which meant movement away from addiction for several of them. The women were clearly proud of the distance they had traveled from former lives of substance abuse.

Carolyn broke the class up into smaller groups. Here the questions were low key and personal, emphasizing the women’s own stories rather than the text. During his trip Brent had learned in three ways: through study, reflection, and work. Carolyn asked the group which had most contributed to their own growth. Most agreed that they learned best through work.

The range of jobs was wide and colorful – carnie, football maker, dancer, orange picker, waitress, mother. Carolyn explained to me after class that, though the subjects discussed in the small groups may seem easy, they give the students a way to get to know each other, building an atmosphere of comfort and trust.

Everyone came together again at the big table and a more rigorous discussion of the text followed. The students were required to do homework and clearly many of them had. Their comments centered around the book’s themes of guilt, growth and forgiveness. Someone remarked that you can be mature without necessarily knowing yourself. Others agreed.

The Worcester group is characterized by its comfortable friendliness and its attention to the subject – two qualities not always found together in a class. At the end I asked Carolyn if this was one of her best groups. She said, “No, they’ve all been as good at this one.”
Arizona

Moses Glidden, at Yavapai College, plans to build a network of CLTL programs in Arizona. For Bob Waxler's arrival in the spring, he hopes to bring probation representatives from Phoenix and Tucson up to Prescott, contact colleges in these cities, and involve judges and the press.

Connecticut

Brian Sullivan and others currently have a program running at Yale University. They will be doing programs at two other campuses in the spring. CLTL also has strong support in Connecticut from Representative James Spallone in the Legislature.

Kansas

Cherie Muehlberger's men's group in Johnson County has gone to weekly sessions. She was successful in teaching A Lesson Before Dying and is curious to see how her next choice—Chronicles by Bob Dylan—will be received by the group. There is also a juvenile group running and a women's group as well.

New York

At the Day Reporting Center Linda Jacino and others have continued to conduct CLTL groups twice a week. Though they've used the old standards, they've also read out loud plays such as A Raisin in The Sun, Bang Bang You're Dead and the screenplay for Good Will Hunting.

Rhode Island

Patty Fairweather reports that over 12 women have graduated from Rhode Island’s first prison-based CLTL course. In October, they started a new class of 18 women. They have also begun a class in the men's prison.

Texas

Dr. Larry Jablecki, Chuck Henry (Vice President of Rice University), and co-director Bob Waxler are currently planning to hold a CLTL Conference at Rice University in the Fall of 2005. This will be sponsored by the university’s Baker Institute in order to raise interest in the program in the Southwest. Larry Jablecki has already completed one session this term—and is starting a second one.

Announcements/Media Appearances/New Publications

- There are two evaluation projects currently in process: The UMass Boston study out of Dorchester, directed by Taylor Stoehr, and the Roger Williams University study out of Barnstable, led by Rachel McCormack.

- Co-director Bob Waxler, Dr. Larry Jablecki, and Chuck Henry (Vice President of Rice University) are planning a CLTL Conference at Rice University. This will be sponsored by the university’s Baker Institute in the fall of 2005. The purpose is to raise interest in the program in the Southwest.

- Co-directors Jean Trounstine and Bob Waxler have written Finding A Voice: Changing Lives Through Literature, Theory and Practice, a book based on the NEH website material. This will be published by the University of Michigan Press in the fall of 2005. A major essay by Taylor Stoehr will be published in Change Magazine in April.

- A full package of material about CLTL will be mailed to 1000 recipients in December. Its centerpiece will be a CD mirroring the work captured on our NEH website: cltl.umassd.edu.

- We have received a generous donation of $15,000 from Reverend Lawrence of the First Congregational Church to run juvenile programs in the New Bedford/Fall River area. This is related to the Juvenile Drug Court in New Bedford headed by Judge Bettina Borders.

- In November 2004 Bob Waxler gave a talk and a reading about CLTL at the Navigation bookstore in Dartmouth, MA. In March, 2005 he will give a speech on CLTL to the Indiana Federation of Libraries at their annual conference.
AN INTERVIEW WITH
Probation Officer Michelle Carter-Donahue
(Lynn/Lowell Women’s Program)

Tam Neville: You have been in the Lynn/Lowell Women’s Program for four years. How have you changed during that time in your approach to literature and to the Changing Lives program?

Michelle Carter-Donahue: I think I have learned how to be more flexible when dealing with probationers/students in CLTL. Sometimes things aren’t always black and white and you need to make adjustments.

TN: Has the program changed in that time?

MC: The basics really haven’t changed. We like the small roundtable approach versus the classroom experience. It seems to work for us and the female probationers.

TN: What is your favorite text and why? How does it relate to the student’s own experience?

MC: *To Kill a Mockingbird.* Why? It’s a classic. Sometimes students relate to the mystery of the old neighborhood setting. Everyone has known a Boo Radley while growing up, whether it be the old timer who lives across the street and scares all the kids or the scary house on the corner.

TN: I know you ride in the van from Lynn with the students. What is that like? How does it change your relationship with the probationers?

MC: It’s very interesting. At times, it stresses me out since I worry about whether they will show up on time and show up clean and sober.

We are on that van for over an hour. There is a lot to talk about, good and bad. Sometimes you learn more than you want to know. Your relationship with the probationers grows quickly. It definitely gives you a different prospective on their lives, and sometimes their expectations of a PO change greatly too.

TN: I know that you generously welcome students to your office for help between classes. What is that like?

MC: Some students haven’t even reached high school, so these books can be very difficult. I try to go through a couple of chapters with them just to make sure they realize they will be fine in class. As long as they read the entire book, they will be OK since the rest of the class will help them make sense of the book. It’s important that the PO does the reading. It’s always that unexpected student showing up at the office for help, when the PO hasn’t even started to read the book – that can be embarrassing.

TN: Are you compensated for your volunteer work with CLTL?

MC: Yes, it is part of my regular duties as a PO. It’s considered normal after-hours work. I am compensated with comp time.

TN: How does the reading affect you personally? What is the most important thing you take away from the course?

MC: I come away with some new authors I wouldn’t usually read and I feel a sense of accomplishment getting through some difficult readings.

TN: What is the most valuable thing a probationer takes away from the program?

MC: Self esteem. Probationers who graduate from CLTL feel better about themselves and many times are ready to take a new positive step in their lives.
CLTL IS LIVE!

Visit our new web site at cltl.umassd.edu and let us know what you think!

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