About 7 a.m. on most Thursday mornings during this spring semester, Meghan Abel and Lauren Smith, two 21-year-old seniors, would hop into Assistant Professor of English Michele Tarter’s car, drive about 40 miles north of the campus to Clinton, and park in the public lot outside the Edna Mahan Correctional Institution for Women.

They would enter a “temporary” prefab building outside the prison, sign the register, surrender their driver’s licenses, pick up visitors’ tags, submit to metal detection searches, and make their way through an initial checkpoint.

They would walk past the minimum security section, which except for the fences would look like any set of school buildings, to another guard office called

The maximum security wing of the complex houses about half of the 600 women in the prison—300 women whose crimes are the most serious under state law: assault, robbery, murder.
The sallyport. After closer check and search of handbags there, they would walk back outside; down a slope bounded by 12-foot fences topped with coiled razor wire; into the maximum security section (known as the “red zone” because a red pass is required), past surveillance cameras, more locked gates, and scary motorized doors activated by an unseen guard; finally into a 30-foot-square room. It has windows along two interior walls, allowing a view to and from a corridor. This is their classroom, furnished simply with tables and chairs around which they and 10 or 12 other women can sit comfortably, spread out some papers and books, and talk in private.

The maximum security wing of the complex houses about half of the 600 women in the prison—300 women whose crimes are the most serious under state law: assault, robbery, murder. Soon after they arrive, some of these women file into the room with their papers. This year the first class attracted 12 women—11 African Americans and one Hispanic, ranging in age from 20 to about 55. Once a week for the next two months, from 8:30 to 10:30 a.m., the professor, the college students, and the prisoners would sit around the tables and talk about the books they’re reading, the writing sounds, and actions of a typical prison morning. By the end of the 10 weeks of the course entitled “Woman is the Word,” it was a play on varying meanings of “the word,” from “the news” as in “What’s the news?” to “the gospel” as in “the word of the Lord.” In this course about women’s biographies, the name is spoken with the stress on “woman.”

Peluso said the prisoners she knew had done similar work with other faculty members, and perhaps a dozen more have volunteered by helping type up the prisoners’ writing. The prisoners all want to be there. Most have been on a waiting list more than a year to take the course entitled “Woman is the Word.” Some signed up simply because it would be a change of pace from the crushing routine of prison life. Others heard about the class and the ideas, and the topics students and staff, a real library now holds over 3,000 volumes, all catalogued by a librarian who once worked as a librarian. As for textbooks, Tarter scrounged for cheap used copies needed for reading assignments. In the beginning, Jimmy McAndrew, a TCNJ trustee with a great interest in the project, helped pay for many of the books and other course materials. The prison staff provided writing materials and let the class participants keep books and papers in their cells—a “huge gift” Tarter called it. The prison staff provided writing materials and let the class participate keep books and papers in their cells—a “huge gift” Tarter called it. By the spring of 2003, most of the kinks had been worked out of the program. Tarter had become known to the staff and prisoners alike as an unflappable, constantly cheery, and optimistic teacher who deserved everyone’s trust. The College English department and the Office of Academic Affairs had rewarded her initiative with more locked security section (known as the “red zone” because a red pass is required), past surveillance cameras, more locked gates, and scary motorized doors activated by an unseen guard; finally into a 30-foot-square room. It has windows along two interior walls, allowing a view to and from a corridor. This is their classroom, furnished simply with tables and chairs around which they and 10 or 12 other women can sit comfortably, spread out some papers and books, and talk in private.

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WOMAN IS THE WORD
As soon as the class (outside of the prison) began, the women were free for the first time in their lives. "We were in a world of our own," said one prisoner. "We could do anything we wanted to do for fun. What kind of guys do you know that would let you do that?"

In the classroom, the women were encouraged to talk about their lives. They were asked to write about their families, their friends, their jobs, and their dreams. They were also asked to write about their feelings, their hopes, and their fears. Some of the women were able to write for the first time in their lives. "I never knew I could write," said one woman. "I never knew I had anything to say.""We were in a world of our own," said one prisoner. "We could do anything we wanted to do for fun. What kind of guys do you know that would let you do that?"

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Tarter and her TCNJ students participate as well, doing all the same assignments in an effort to build trust and serve as a model for the others.

with her time. At the end we made up a book for each of them, with all their writings in it, and gave it to them with a certificate and a handshake. There was a lot of applause, hugs, and tears. Then we signed their books, and they signed each other’s. It was just like a yearbook signing.”

Smith and Abel said they invested more time and emotional energy by far into this independent study project than any other course in their college careers. For every two hours on Thursdays, they read a book, worked up a lesson plan, thought up several writing prompts, and read over papers handed in the week before to offer comments to the writers. They spoke with each other almost daily about the plans, analyzed what happened after each session, and typed up notes for use in a thesis required at the end of their own course. In addition, they thought about their inmates constantly.

Abel, who hasn’t decided whether to pursue a doctorate in English literature or a law degree, has been thinking a lot about the psychological deprivation she’s seen in her group of prisoners. She knows full well the strictness of the rules is justified, especially in a population of adults with such serious problems. However, she sees “no reason at all” for much of the harsh attitude of the custodians, which she sees as designed simply to emphasize who is in command.

A widely held view among the TCNJ students who have been part of “Woman is the Word,” is that they have learned at least as much as the women they have taught.

“It’s impossible to do this and not take away more than you give,” said Crystal Walker.

And Jamie O’Conner said, “It really shapes your way of thinking, helps you decide what’s really important, and how lucky you are. I’ve learned what’s important is not where you are, but who you are.”

Peluso, who was so deeply involved in the first year of the project at TCNJ, who knew she had brought enthusiasm and sunshine into the prison class, and who helped found and supply the prison library, decided to attend law school in part because of the need to improve the prisoners’ situation. But in the end, she took another path as an attorney. “I just can’t do that kind of work,” she said. “It’s too hard, too sad; I don’t have the stomach for it.”

Maybe 2004 is the year.

Lauren Smith, who is headed for law school, said the whole experience with the prisoners has made her, as she put it, “fall back in love with my passion for advocating for people. I feel very connected to them. I know this is supposed to be professional, but in conversations with them I feel a real sense of appreciation and respect. They always ask how I’m doing, and how’s school, and how’s my life. There’s nothing I can do for them, but they still care about me.”

Halfway through the project in March, she said she had a solid understanding of “What it means to have no one to listen to your problems.” She is convinced many of the women now in prison need only a more effective advocate to improve their lives.

“I’m going to make that difference,” she insisted.

Bruce B. VanDusen is editor of TCNJ Magazine

Woman is the Word

The Reading List


Wall Tappings. (Editor, Judith Schaffer). Feminist Press at CUNY, 2002. An anthology of women’s writing spanning AIDS to the present. Prof. Tarter calls it “the primer of the whole course.”
