

Character Action Media

Extraordinary Talent in a Most Unexpected Place

Lesson Goals

- Help students understand the value of education in enabling them to improve their lives as modeled by the Bard Prison Initiative debaters
- Develop awareness that no matter where we are in life, the virtues of perseverance and discipline can help us to achieve our own goals
- Help students come to a deeper understanding of the virtue of justice and to apply this deeper understanding to situations in their own lives
- Inspire students to develop their own initiatives to care for others as modeled by the original volunteers who founded the Bard Prison Initiative

Primary Virtues

Discipline: training expected to produce a specific benefit, moral or mental improvement.

Perseverance: trying hard and continuously in spite of obstacles and difficulties.

Justice: fair treatment, due reward or punishment in accordance with honor, standards, or law. A just person gives others the opportunity to have what they need to live with dignity and to improve their lives.

Secondary Virtues

Caring: to help others; a caring person tries to understand another person's situation, desires to help others, and then acts in helping others.

Empathy: trying to understand another person's situation, entering into the feeling or spirit of others and imagining yourself in another person's situation.

Generosity: giving freely of our own possessions, time and/or talent.

Discussion Question Options

Questions begin with those directly related to the story and transition to ones that connect the key themes and virtues to students' lives and the larger community. (Discussion prompts and / or answers are in parentheses if needed)

1. What were the motivations and goals of Max Kenner as a college student, along with his fellow student volunteers as they dedicated their time and talents to helping prisoners with their education? (to give prisoners an opportunity to improve themselves through education, to enable them to become contributing members of society, to treat prisoners with dignity and to reduce recidivism – prisoners committing new crimes after their release)

What virtues did Max and his fellow student volunteers live out? (caring in being generous, respect for others in working to affirm the dignity of the prisoners)

2. The BPI debaters have only been in existence for 2 years and yet have beaten some of the best long-standing college debate teams in America. What virtues enabled them to accomplish this, and please explain how they lived out each of these virtues? (perseverance, discipline)
3. Has the story of the BPI schools and debate team changed how you view and value your education?
4. Justice is defined as the punishments, rewards and opportunities that are in agreement with our laws, and our society's standards. Do you think it is just that convicted criminals should both pay a price for the crimes they committed, and also still have the opportunity to improve themselves while in prison through activities like education?

Would your answers change as you practice empathy and place yourself in the position of the prisoner, and then of the victim or a victim's family member?

Do you think it is fair and just that taxpayers should pay for the college education of prisoners? Which aspects of justice and other factors support your position?

What issues of justice are important to you, within our community locally, nationally or globally? Let's practice empathy again and discuss them from the perspective of people and arguments involved for all sides of the issue.

Journal Writing Options

1. Write about what you want to improve in your life or goals you want to achieve in your life, how the BPI debaters have inspired you, and specifically how you want to live out the virtues lived out by the BPI debaters.
2. Write about how you want to help others improve their lives, now and in the future, as Max Kenner and his volunteers have. Please include in your writing some of the virtues covered in this story.

Extended Activities

1. Max Kenner stated in an NPR interview “When one has to go through that exercise of articulating an argument that you may not respect or may not have thought through, you’re forced to honor the argument, honor another person’s perspective, and I think become more empathetic. I think that’s something that all students could benefit from.”

With this in mind, organize your class or group into teams of 3-4 for a debate. Options for issues to debate are:

- The discussion questions in number 4 above that relate to justice
 - The issue debated in the BPI / Harvard debate – “Public schools in the United States should have the ability to deny enrollment to undocumented students.”
 - Potential employers should not have the right to find out if someone applying for a job has been convicted of a crime.
 - Ask students to come up with their own questions or issues to debate that are relevant to them and their community
2. Organize the class into teams and ask them to investigate and then present to the group as a whole on different aspects of the prison system. Topics to consider are:
 - Educational opportunities available to prisoners in your state
 - Social services available to prisoners in addition to education, and volunteer opportunities available for

those who want to help prisoners improve their lives

- Recidivism (former prisoners committing new crimes and returning to prison): what are the rates of recidivism in your state and for the nation as a whole, causes of recidivism and strategies proven to reduce it
- Profile the lives of former prisoners, now and in the past, who turned their lives around and then made significant contributions to their community.

Internet Resources

<http://bpi.bard.edu/>

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/07/living/harvard-debate-team-loses-to-prison-inmates-feat/>

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/an-unlikely-debate-prison-vs-harvard-1442616928>

<https://hereandnow.wbur.org/2015/10/09/inmates-trounce-harvard-debate-team>

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/08/bard-debate-prison-team-beat-harvards-heres-how-we-did-it>

<http://bpi.bard.edu/60-minutes/>

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Connecting Virtues to Our World

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