

Character Action Media

Extraordinary Talent in a Most Unexpected Place

If someone told you that a debate team made up of prisoners was about to compete against a debate team from Harvard, who would you predict as the winner? Most of us would predict Harvard, especially given that it is one of the best universities in the world. Surprisingly, most of us would be wrong as the team of prisoners from a New York state prison won the debate. In digging into this story, the prison debate team's victory actually isn't that surprising as the team is trained by the Bard College Prison Initiative (BPI) and has recently also won debates against West Point and the University of Vermont.

The story of how BPI debaters are succeeding at the highest levels of university debate competition speaks to the power of education, the caring and generosity of those who offer education to prisoners, and importantly, is a testimony to the prisoners own discipline, hard work and perseverance as they work to improve themselves. This story of the BPI debaters also presents good questions for us to consider on the different aspects of *justice*.

An Opportunity to Improve

Most of us take for granted that we are offered an education and if we work hard, the opportunity to attend college. This isn't the case for most prisoners who don't have the opportunity to take college level classes in prison. As a young student at Bard College, Max Kenner and other Bard students wanted to change this and volunteered as tutors in local prisons. Max and his friends believe that the best way to reduce recidivism (former criminals committing additional crimes) is to treat prisoners with dignity and to offer them advanced education so that they may improve themselves and become contributing members of society. Eventually their mission grew into a full academic program of Bard College. By 2005 the Bard Prison Initiative awarded its first degree and it now operates 6 college campuses in prisons across New York State. It's amazing how one person's dream and hard work in caring for others, has motivated so many others to join in and to create a program that is now offering college education in not only in New York state, but also in Connecticut, Iowa, Maryland and Indiana, and is planning to establish programs in 10 more states over the next 5 years.

Striving to Achieve

In a 10 year anniversary film of BPI, a number of BPI graduates and Max Kenner speak to the hard work and *perseverance* of its students in working through obstacles and speak to the value of the program. A recent graduate stated in a BPI graduation address, "A college education does not get us better treatment in prison, nor does it guarantee release on parole. The work is hard, the hours are long and there aren't many immediate rewards. However, I wanted to be a better person, and as I stand here today I believe it has made me a better person. What really motivated me was my kids, because I started wondering what am I going to do for them, what kind of example am I going to be for them?" An official of Bard College commented on the students at both Bard's main campus and their prison program stating, "The best students we have are the undergraduates in prison who are the most curious, disciplined, original and hard-working students. When we look at those students and experience them in the classroom, the gift is not ours to the students, it's their gift to us."

The Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) debaters are outstanding examples of the *discipline* and *perseverance* of BPI students. In an article in The Guardian newspaper, David Register, who coaches the BPI debaters described their preparation: As prisoners, the BPI debaters face the significant obstacles of not having access to the internet, must request articles and books that often take weeks to be delivered, and have limited access to their school facilities. Instead of giving up in the face of these obstacles, they *persevere* and spend hundreds of hours reading and pulling out data and quotes that they think will help them in the debates. BPI debaters are *disciplined* in their training. The time they are allowed to meet together at the prison school isn't enough to compete at the highest levels so BPI debaters get together in smaller groups wherever they can - in prison cells, the prison yard and cafeteria to practice. BPI debaters choose to do all of this work in addition to their full schedule of college classes, and as we have seen their hard work and perseverance have enabled them to succeed at the highest levels.

Questions of Justice

Since 1994, the federal government stopped providing financial aid for prisoners to receive a college education. At the time, and still today many argue that it isn't fair and *just* that taxpayers should pay for criminals to receive a college education when most taxpayers themselves are having a very difficult time paying for their own college education, and/or their children's college.

However, others point out that it is also *just* and fair for everyone to have the opportunity to improve themselves, even those convicted of a crime. These supporters also point out that the more educated a prisoner is, the less likely he/she is to return to a life crime once they are released.

This debate highlights an important aspect of the virtue of *justice* that sometimes we can come to different conclusions on what is just- depending on which aspect of justice we believe is the most important. Justice involves both making sure that all people are given the opportunities to improve themselves, as well as determining punishments that are fair and consistent with our laws and the standards of our society. In this case, there is the just and fair desire to give every person, including prisoners, an opportunity to improve themselves, versus the question of whether it is fair and just that taxpayers should have to pay for the college education of those who break the law. We will all face many issues and circumstances in our lives that involve justice, and it is important to commit ourselves to considering every part of an issue or situation in deciding what is fair and *just*.

Caring and Generosity Enable the Dream

Even though the federal government and many state governments won't pay for the college education of prisoners, BPI has been able to begin and grow through private donations. In America there are many individuals and foundations that pay for programs that help others in need and give others the opportunity to succeed. These charitable programs are how many people express their *generosity* and *caring* for others. As we pursue our future careers and goals we may also be in a position to express our caring for others by donating money as well our time and talents to programs such as BPI.

Max Kenner commented, "extraordinary talent can be found in the most unconventional places if we as educators treat people with dignity". For us this really starts with realizing our own dignity and value, and looking to the BPI debate team as a powerful example of what we can accomplish when we value our education and through *discipline* and *perseverance* do our best to improve ourselves. This is probably again best expressed by the recent graduate of BPI, "the work is hard, the

hours are long and there aren't many immediate rewards. However, I want to be a better person."

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.