Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about the future of postsecondary education in prisons.

BY CHARLOTTE WEST

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‘What would you want me to do, sit around and play cards?’

Left: Kathy Tyler, 87, has hardly stopped taking college classes since she was incarcerated in 1977. Right: A pastel by Kathy Tyler.

This “as told to” essay has been lightly edited for clarity.

My name is Mary Kathleen Tyler, I am 87 years old. I was born on Dec. 6, 1935. I am entering my 46th year of incarceration on a charge of first-degree murder handed down in the fall of 1977 for the killing of my ex-husband after he had an affair. I don’t mind talking about that; people are always curious why we are here.

I entered the correction system in 1977. My first encounter with prison education was in 1979 at the Iowa State Reformatory for Women in Rockwell City. Then we had about 60 people. Today we have about 700 women.

The population of women has grown because they have increased sentences and they put mandatory sentences on some serious crimes. And governors like Robert Ray, who served from 1969-1983, used to do a lot of commutations. (He was a true statesman, and a Republican as they ought to be. I knew him when I court reporter and he was a practicing lawyer. Until his death, he continued to come and see me and always remained my friend in spite of my incarceration.)

But there’s only been one woman commuted in all the time that I have been in prison. We’re getting a little crowded in here.

When I came to prison, it was so different. Rockville City was a country prison. As a result of that, we were really treated individually. I’d go to the office, and they would give me cinnamon rolls. Of course, the prison was small then. And in those days, the short termers – but not the lifers – would be able to go out on furlough for work or education.

The prison also farmed out land they owned to local farmers. The finance director managed to use the money from the land they leased to pay us for taking college courses, $.46 an hour. And then we had the Pell Grant, and I seized every opportunity. We could also order as many correspondence college courses as we wanted and I enrolled in two from the University of Iowa as well.

In 1982, the reformatory was shut down and we were moved to the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women in Mitchellville, 20 miles from Des Moines. Today it’s still the state’s only prison for women. I continued to take and accumulate every course that was offered. Our extraordinarily helpful teacher discovered that the University of Iowa offered a scholarship for each course attempted if we funded the first course and got a B or better.

Des Moines Area Community College took over the college program, which continued until the Pell Grant ceased in 1994. I earned an associate from Des Moines in 1990, and two bachelor’s degrees from University of Iowa and Indiana University.

Through research, I found that California State University
Dominguez Hills offered a master’s in humanities. I started that program via correspondence. A thesis was part of the requirement and I wrote mine which I called “Touchstones” addressing the characters that support and protect the tragic characters in four Shakespeare plays. I am the only one, I believe, in the history of Iowa Corrections Institution for Women that has acquired a master’s degree while in prison.

There is always somebody that comes along that’s just a pure gem in your life. And we have a wonderful GED teacher here who is that for me. She facilitated the printing of my master’s thesis. And the paper it has to be on is very expensive and all that razzmatazz. But my thesis will be archived at the California State University forever.

I was able to pay for my master’s because of my prison job. Starting in 1983, I was hired for about 30 years to transcribe administrative law hearings for the state of Iowa which were sent to me via CD or on tape. For the first several years it was $.46 cents an hour, then about 10 years at $1.00 and the last five at $5.00 because the warden thought I deserved that for my professional work. I’m retired now, but I continue to maintain my license after all these years. Our GED instructor helps me get the continuing education classes that are required to maintain that license.

Before prison, I was a certified shorthand reporter in the Iowa court system for 20 years. I acquired that license in 1957 following my graduation in court reporting from the American Institute of Business. Needless to say, the courtroom was an education in and of itself.

Following my bachelor’s and the master’s I took a long hiatus from education here at Mitchellville. I myself was not affected when the Pell Grant ceased because I was paying for my classes, but I did not hear a lot of complaints. I don’t think our low numbers in college is a lack of opportunity. But motivation is so very much a part of doing a college course. And then of course we some people who have very long terms in prison, maybe some think that it’s simply not worthwhile. And then, our demographic is not the same as the general population. We have people who have not had parents who have emphasized the necessity of education.

But I’m just crazy for education. We’re around each other all the time, so others benefit from our being smart and our being ambitious and our being encouraging. And staff benefits from that. The whole system benefits from that because people that are involved in educational programs are not making trouble in the prison. I’m sure if anybody did a study of people in education compared to people who were not, you would find that the majority of disciplinary infractions were people with idle time on their hands.

I remember overhearing a correctional officer call a woman who was taking a certified nurse assistant certificate an “inmate.” She let him know in no uncertain terms was that her title. She was a “nurse.” I never forgot the value of that – that she now self-identified as something far more recognized than an inmate and insisted on that recognition.

Last summer, Grinnell College blessed our prison with their program. While they do not offer a degree, you can take up to 60 credits. If you investigate you will find that Grinnell is one of the very best undergraduate schools in the nation. They supply us with everything, note cards, notebooks etc. and best of all their Ph.D. professors all coming on grounds and teaching our classes.

This gives me an opportunity to interact with some of the premier professors in the country. In the fall, I took a social justice course from Alexander McClean, an internationally recognized law professor from Britain who has organized schools for prisoners around the world. And my jazz course last summer was taught by Dr. Mark Laver, a musicologist. How many musicologists do you know?

They offer four more classes every semester, but at my age I only choose one. All in all, I think I have about 240 credit hours and something like a 3.90 grade point average.

Why am I still taking college classes at the age of 87? What would you want me to do, sit around and play cards? So far I’ve got my mind and I’ve got my health. You know, I’m not just gonna sit around and not do anything. I did worry about taking a slot at Grinnell College that other women might use, but that is not so.

I also have the piano. I practice the piano every day and I teach the piano to seven students. I like to do that because I like to give of myself. I also paint pastels. I am also a practicing Roman Catholic, a gift from my Irish-Catholic mother. My faith has helped sustain me always in this journey.

My favorite quotes are from Romeo, “Then I defy thee stars!” And Dylan Thomas, “Do not go gently into the good night. Rage, rage against the dying light.”

I want to “…rage against the dying light.” There are far too many who sit around here and sleep their life away and miss so much. Look at it this way: Who would you rather keep company with?

The person I keep company with most in life is myself. I find that “self” far more dynamic, interesting, challenging, and, yes “adorable” – there I said it – than the sleeper who would bore the hell out of me.
Prison education programs are primed to take off in Mississippi.
Here’s what one class looks like.

CORINTH — In the back of the Alcorn County Correctional Facility, a regional prison in the top-right corner of Mississippi, is an ice-cold trailer.

It’s new. And it’s where Bill Stone — a retired Northeast Mississippi Community College instructor who, for the past three years, has taught a public speaking class at this prison — was headed early Wednesday afternoon.

To get there, he must go through a pat-down. A guard inspects his materials — folders, notebooks and seven copies of the textbook “Practically Speaking.” Then Stone must walk through the prison’s long, loud hallway, past his old classroom; past the canteen, the case managers’ offices and the guard; and past the living pods. Some of his students come to the glass or they shout hello, adding to the din. Finally, after a few steps on a sidewalk walled-off with a chain-link fence, Stone is inside the trailer.

Sometimes, Stone thinks it’s not unlike walking the halls of a high school.

On Wednesday, he had Michelle Baragona, NEMCC’s vice president of instruction, in tow. She’d driven 20 minutes from NEMCC’s main campus in Booneville. Since fall 2017, she has overseen NEMCC’s prison education programs, which are part of a growing movement in Mississippi and across the country. Boosted in part by research that has shown that prison education reduces recidivism, more colleges and universities are offering classes in prison.

Now, as the federal government is preparing to make federal financial aid once again available to incarcerated people starting July 1, these programs are primed to explode in partnership with the Mississippi Department of Corrections. Key stakeholders are on board: In interviews, Burl Cain, the MDOC commissioner, has correctly linked the availability of jobs for formerly incarcerated people, which prison education can help them get, to reduced recidivism.

In the quiet, air-conditioned trailer, Stone was hoping his students could, just for an hour, find some reprieve from prison. Or at least, from their often sweltering hot living pods, which on Wednesday were burning up in the 84-degree heat. All 295 students at this facility can take classes, as long as they have a GED.

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BY MOLLY MINTA

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Carlos White, left, watches as a fellow student gives his speech. Photo: Eric Shelton/Mississippi Today.
Stone was confident they wouldn’t, but in his 28 years of teaching public speaking, it had happened to two students — it’s always a possibility. So he’d tapped one student to start them off.

“Terrence, I asked you to go first,” Stone said. “Are you ready?”

“Ready as I’m gonna be,” he replied.

There used to be hundreds of college classes just like Stone’s in prisons across the country. Up until the mid-1990s, these programs were considered a key part of doing time — an “opportunity for reformation,” according to Higher Education in Prison Research. But in 1994, the Crime Bill took away the primary source of funding, which was the Pell Grant, a federal financial aid program for low-income students, by barring incarcerated people from receiving it.

The classes all but disappeared. Now, they’re making a comeback. In Mississippi, colleges and universities across the state are working with MDOC, sheriffs and wardens to set up what are, for many prisons, the first accredited college classes that have been offered in decades. NEMCC had been supporting its programs with private funding, but the Pell Grant will be a game-changer.

This will benefit the whole community, Baragona said. Not only does prison education reduce crime, she said, but families of incarcerated people often move to Alcorn County. They want their loved ones to be able to support the family when they get out.

“We’re not teaching the people who are in there for life,” Baragona said. “These are people who are fixin’ to rejoin society.”

Since 2017, 77 students have taken NEMCC classes at Alcorn County Correctional. The participation rates reflect the institutions’ demographics, Baragona said. Black students made up 57% of participants, and 43% were white — a ratio that was mirrored in Stone’s class, where 7 students were Black and 4 were white.

More than half have taken three or more classes. Two students have taken five classes.

“I don’t want anybody thinking that this is a patsy,” Stone said. “I want these students to write as well, to speak as well as any Northeast student who has come through my traditional classes.”

He poised his finger over the iPad timer as Terrence Glover stepped up to the podium.

“Hello Terrence,” the students said in unison.

Glover talked about how he hates foreign languages (difficult to learn) and loves fishing. Then, 138 seconds later, his speech was over. It was time for the next student. Stone asked for a volunteer. No one moved.

“Anybody that just wants to get it over with right now?” Stone asked.

Carlos White rocked out of his chair. Though he had seemed shy at his desk, he was at ease at the podium. The first thing he was interested in, White said, was TikTok, because it offered access to “a multitude of people from a single device” — that is, to the outside world. He also liked cooking, because it reminded him of his grandmother’s collard greens. His final interest was mentoring. That’s what he wants to do when he gets out.

“So much of the youth go down the wrong road like I did,” he said.

White spoke for 139 seconds, Stone noted. A new record.

The students seemed less anxious and more comfortable sharing. For many, the topic of prison was unavoidable. Another, Vincent Breazeale, talked about the value of education, working and family — three interests, he said, that would “probably be different outside these walls.”

What everyone was really talking about were their dreams, and what they hoped to do when they finally left. One said he’d like to get a dog. Another couldn’t wait to work on cars again. A third student said wanted to start a business manufacturing cologne.

One of the last students to go, Antonio Harris, said that after 19 years of incarceration, he was looking forward to being an entrepreneur when he’s finally released (he’ll become eligible next year).

“I want to be able to work and still kind of like, enjoy life at the same time,” Harris said. “It generates great revenue also.”

By the end, the temperature in the class felt warmer. Stone congratulated the students. This was the first class he’s ever had, he said, where every student talked for more than a minute. He wanted to know how it felt.

“Like riding a bike,” Glover said.

A student named Bruce Parker passed out root-beer-float-flavored candies. He’d used $1.16 of his $20-a-week allowance to pay for a bag.

After a lecture from Stone, it was time for the students to talk to the “navigator.” That is Tina Wilburn. It’s her third day. She’s NEMCC’s eyes and ears in the prison, and it’s her job to advocate for the students. Gripping a prison-issued walkie talkie and a notebook, she wanted to know how they were going to do their homework.

“Are you able to study in the pod where you’re at?” she asked. She’d heard the library was too small.

All the students shook their heads. Dozens of incarcerated people live in each pod and sleep bunk-to-bunk. There’s a lot of distractions.

“It’s extremely difficult,” White said.

Despite everyone’s excitement that day, these students are up against tough odds. They’re unlikely to finish. Last semester, 10 students enrolled, and only two graduated. According to data from NEMCC, the completion rates were higher before COVID, when more career-readiness classes were offered.

Some of the reasons for this have to do with the very nature of prisons, said Ruth Delaney, a program director at the Vera Institute of Justice, a national organization that has been helping prisons set up college classes. For instance, it’s common for incarcerated people to be suddenly transferred for reasons that supersede the class, like a sentencing order that prohibits them from staying in the same prison as a co-defendant.

“A prison is a total institution,” Delaney said. “The minute you cross that threshold, all of your relationships start to feel different.”

If a fight broke out in a students’ living pod, they could be transferred, even if they weren’t participating, she added. That's
more likely to happen during the summer months, when violence in prison rises with the temperature outside. And while some research has shown prisons that have classes become safer over time, the students at Alcorn County Correctional said they had yet to see that happen.

But other reasons can be managed. A huge issue Stone has noticed is dental hygiene. When his incarcerated students have cavities, they’re sent to the Mississippi State Prison in Parchman to get teeth pulled. For weeks after, their mouths are too swollen for them to talk in class.

Then there are some students who get demoralized if they do poorly, even on a quiz that doesn’t matter for their final grade.

“It'll just knock them for a loop, and I'm not used to that,” Stone said. “That's a definite prison-type thing. A regular college student would go, 'well, crap.' They'd just keep on going. For a prison student to make a 40 or a 50, their whole self esteem is locked up in that.”

What makes the difference, Stone added, is support.

All of the students told Wilburn they would be able to finish their homework. Some of them offered tips: The best time to study is around 3 a.m. That’s when the prison is quietest.

The door to the trailer opened. It was a guard. He walked into the middle of the room with his hands on his hips. Everybody turned to look at him.

“I believe they said class is over now,” he said.

So it was.

NEMCC has big dreams for the program. Baragona wants to offer more career-technical programs — classes that are more likely to directly lead to jobs when students are no longer incarcerated. But she’s worried about the logistics of bringing equipment into the prison.

Another issue is giving students computers, which is crucial for learning how to do research. This isn’t possible because they’re not allowed free use of the internet. Stone makes up for that by bringing print-outs of research to class.

Baragona also wants there to be more instructors. Right now, Stone is one of two. Even though society is slowly leaving the tough-on-crime era behind, she still has to “sweet talk” instructors into participating in the program. She was able to convince Stone because, in the early 1980s, he used to minister to a congregant in prison.

And Baragona still hasn’t figured out an efficient way of providing accommodations for students who have disabilities like dyslexia. When the Pell Grant becomes available, she’ll need to set up a system for them to talk to NEMCC’s financial aid office. She’s hoping Wilburn can help with that.

Before class, Baragona asked Stone to tell her if he needed more equipment. A white board would be nice, he mused. Then he thought of something even better.

“A bigger TV would be glorious,” he said. “If someone had an extra 69-inch TV that would be just glorious.”

But right now, the new trailer is enough.

Molly Minta covers higher education for Mississippi Today, in partnership with Open Campus.

**What the Pell is going on?**

**Here’s what’s happening with Pell implementation in a few places around the country:**

**Wisconsin**

In Wisconsin, the corrections department is currently reviewing applications from interested colleges and universities, and plans to make selections by the end of the month. There’s not enough time to go through accreditation, recruit and register students, fill out financial aid applications and everything else to make a new program student ready by fall, education director Ben Jones wrote in an email. As a result, he does not anticipate any new programs starting by the fall. Currently, 400 incarcerated students are enrolled in postsecondary education in Wisconsin out of a prison population of around 21,000.

**Arizona**

Arizona will be prioritizing distance learning programs “because of the ability to provide programming to a much greater audience with minimal impact on prison operations,” a spokesperson for the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry, wrote in an email. They are still considering face-to-face programs.

The emphasis on college via technology has allowed the state to offer higher education in nearly half of Arizona’s prisons. Currently 700 Pell-funded incarcerated students are enrolled in college programs statewide.

**California**

Pell won’t immediately make much of an impact for college programs in California because of the strong presence of community colleges in the prison system, which is primarily funded through state financial aid. “Long term, Pell will give us the ability to continue to expand and create more BA pathways,” said Rebecca Silbert, senior director for Rising Scholars at the Foundation for California Community Colleges. “But for us, the impact of July 1 is minimal.”

**The Bureau of Prisons**

The Bureau of Prisons (BOP) does not have plans to institute an agency-wide partnership with an academic institution because it is unlikely they would be able to provide services to the entire federal prison system, a BOP spokesperson wrote in an email.

Individual colleges may reach out to specific BOP sites and work with local staff to determine what specific security restrictions might be in place that would affect academic instruction (e.g., certain science lab requirements, the chemicals used within them, and internet technology.)

Since 2016, a total of 206 associate Degrees, 12 bachelor’s degrees, and 13 certificates have been awarded to students incarcerated in the federal system. Currently the BOP has 426 students enrolled at 15 sites.
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BY CHARLOTTE WEST

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From the demise of Pell Grants to the return of federal financial aid

“The 1994 crime bill...initiated the Pell-stripping swing of the pendulum. I envisioned the center aisle of the House of Representatives floor as the pendulum once again swings into the year 2023 with the return of Pell,” says artist Alvin Smith.

If you’ve been reading this newsletter, you already know that July 1 was an extremely significant date in the world of prison education. It marked the first time in 29 years that people in prison were eligible to receive Pell Grants for higher education. Three decades ago, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act — also known as the 1994 crime bill — took a sledgehammer to federal financial aid for incarcerated students.

But as I’ve reported before, July 1 is just the beginning for the return of Pell. It will take colleges and corrections departments a while to figure out exactly what these new prison education programs will entail. A significant move forward, however, was the launch of the Education Department’s new prison education program application at the end of June.

At the time that Pell was eliminated in 1994, there were approximately 23,000 incarcerated students enrolled in college out of a prison population that had just topped 1 million. That means a little over 2% of people in prison were participating in higher education. Today, the Vera Institute estimates that approximately 767,000 people out of 1.2 million people in prison will be eligible for college, with around 2-2.5% expected to be enrolled in college as of this month.

How the 700K figure is calculated is a little fuzzy as the data isn’t precise. Bureau of Justice Statistics info lags several years, so the most recent data on education level is from 2016. A high school diploma or GED is generally the baseline for college eligibility, so the 767,000 is based on an assumption that 64% of the 1.2 million incarcerated people meet that eligibility requirement.

“It was just...gone”

Ever since I started covering prison education in fall 2021, I’ve been asking everyone I meet who was incarcerated before 1994, “What was that moment like when Pell Grants went away?”

I’ve talked to a dozen men and women — most of whom are lifers now in their 50s, 60s or 70s (and at least one octogenarian) — about the ebb and flow of prison education over the last four decades.

For many people inside, education was “here one day and gone the next,” essentially stranding thousands of incarcerated students in the middle of their degrees. Sean Pica, now the executive director of Hudson Link, entered prison in 1987 as a 16-year-old with a ninth grade education.

After a lot of false starts, he had finally earned 118 credits towards a bachelors from Skidmore University when the 1994 crime bill passed. “At this point, it’s not getting taken away because I fucked up,” he said. “So in some ways, you’re a little resentful that I’m finally getting my shit together. And now I’m still not finishing.’

Skidmore came in and packed up their books and their supplies with very little explanation, he said. “And then...it was just gone.”
Some people sensed the winds of change and managed to finish their degrees just under the wire. Last year, I worked with John Corley, the associate editor of The Angolite, to track how the last class of paralegals at the Louisiana State Penitentiary have continued to use their Pell-funded education for the last three decades.

In most places, the elimination of Pell spelled the end of higher education altogether. Patricia Prewitt, who has been incarcerated in Missouri since 1986, was a student at Lincoln University in 1994. She managed to finish her associate’s degree there, but there was no college for women in Missouri until Washington University in St. Louis started a program in 2022. (Now, 30 years later, Prewitt is once again working towards her bachelor’s degree at the age of 74.)

And those who had been able to access Pell before 1994 formed a cadre of lifers who continued to espouse the benefits of education, encouraging others to somehow follow in their footsteps. Many of them became the GED tutors and the mentors for younger men and women coming into the system. Still others fought to bring education back in some form, creating their own college programs.

In New York, the women at Bedford Hills, drawing on community organizing skills they gained during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, banded together to offer a degree program through Marymount Manhattan College. (The Women Transcending Oral History Research Project at Columbia University’s Center for Justice is currently producing a documentary about these organizing efforts).

In Washington State, members of the Black Prisoners Caucus created an informal study group, enrolling one guy in a correspondence course and then learning the material together. Then the others earned credit by examination for a fraction of the cost. Those efforts would help pave the way for other privately funded programs such as University Beyond Bars and BPC T.E.A.C.H., a community organization focusing on prison education.

In addition to those who started their degrees before 1994, there were those who entered the system in the late 1990s and early 2000s. There were tangible reminders of lost opportunities, the mythology of Pell and a growing sense of frustration and disillusionment among both aspiring students and veteran educators.

Nick Hacheney remembers stacks of 10-year-old course catalogs in the education building when he got to the Washington State Reformatory in 2002. “I grabbed one and looked through it. This thing was like a full sheet fold out, four-page brochure and had lists of courses. You could get degrees in everything from architecture to graphic design,” he said.

He also said that the morale among the education staff who had been there when Pell was up and running was extremely low. “They had helped guys make serious progress and now they were reduced to running GED programming,” he said.

**Reform revolves, rather than evolves**

One conversation I had in early 2022 stands out and served as the inspiration for the artwork by Alvin Smith featured above. Gene Scott was in the last semester of a vocational program at a prison in South Carolina when the 1994 crime bill passed. Scott shared the story of a professor who made an uncanny prediction about the future of college-in-prison programs.

His professor broke the news that funding for college had been cut, and then told the class – many of whom were lifers – to stay out of trouble. “He was like, ‘You’re getting ready to go through what is called a ‘pendulum factor.’ You’re getting ready to witness the department of corrections going strictly to warehousing and then, after a minimum of 20 years, it’ll sway back to rehabilitation.’ And I’ve been holding on to that, waiting for it to sway back.”

History is cyclical – as my friend and occasional co-author Morgan Godvin put it, “popular discourse around prison reform seems to revolve more than it evolves.” For example, some of the conversations we were having about technology and prison education in the 1950s are exactly the same as those taking place in 2023.

It’s not like it’s some great mystery that education reduces the chances that someone will go back to prison after their release and increases the chances that they’ll find a job. Today, everyone loves to cite the famous Rand study, but the role of education in reducing recidivism has been known for decades. The question has always been whether or not there’s been the political will to make the necessary investments.

As the pendulum finally sways back, I wonder what we have actually learned from the lessons of the past 30 years, of what happens when we intentionally remove opportunities for people to gain new skills and knowledge and actively prevent them from living up to their potential.

**About the art**

A few words from artist Alvin Smith, who is incarcerated in Michigan:

“I read about Gene Scott’s experience with Pell, particularly where his professor informed the class that they were getting ready to go through what’s known as ‘a pendulum factor,’ and that it was swinging away from prisoner rehabilitation.

I was instantly taken back to 1996, arriving at Saginaw Correctional Facility in Michigan. The feelings of hopelessness as my brand new cellmate filled me in on the inner workings of prison life there. He told me there were no opportunities for guys with a lot of time. ‘We used to be able to go to college, but they took Pell Grants away in 1994,’ he said.

Subsequently the only thing I could sign up for was custodial maintenance. Yes, you guessed it, to learn how to efficiently clean toilets and floors.

I started looking at a picture of the House of Representatives with ‘the pendulum effect’ in mind. I turned the picture upside down, and there it was! The very same aisle that Democrats and Republicans like to spend so much snarling across. I envisioned the center aisle of the House floor as the pendulum once again swings into the year 2023. Ultimately, the return of Pell means that many won’t have to be left to their own devices. So thankfully, Gene’s professor’s words were indeed prophetic. The pendulum has swung back to rehabilitation.”
They saw the demise of college in prison. Thirty years later, it’s coming back.

As Pell Grant eligibility returns for people in prison on July 1, we wanted to know what the moment was like when higher education went away almost 30 years ago. We asked four lifers to share their experiences with Pell Grants before 1994, when Congress eliminated access to federal financial aid for incarcerated students, in their own words.

Their stories have been edited for length and clarity. This story was co-published with Slate.

'I need to find my way out of here'

I arrived at Muncy in 1985 and college classes were already a mainstay. I took my GED then enrolled at Bloomsburg College. We had two classes a semester and Pell paid it all. A couple years later Bill Clinton ended Pell Grants for prisoners. A lot of people were pissed.

I could no longer afford to go. I had to drop out of college. I hated to do that, because I was emotionally abused as a child and my father was illiterate. He always told me I’d never amount to anything and wasn’t smart enough to do anything with my life. The fact that I had a life sentence made me feel he was right, until I discovered college.

College changed everything. It made me feel like an adult for the first time. And I discovered my identity and intelligence. When it went away, I was dejected and sad I couldn’t accomplish graduating. I would have been the first in my family.

I focused all my attention on my apprenticeship — a multitrade program through the Pennsylvania Department of Labor. My certification is as a maintenance builder, repairer, servicer. It took 6 years to graduate. We had to build custom furniture for staff to fund the program.

After I graduated, I went on to specialize in carpentry at the maintenance department for 15 years. I also went to school for computers, and then took a course in AutoCad to use with carpentry. And then took Accounting 1, 2, and 3. I planned a future in carpentry, to open my own business. I just need to find my way out of here to do it.

— Charmaine Pfender, Pennsylvania

Charmaine Pfender has served 35 years in the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. She is one of three original founders of the non-profit Let's Get Free: The Women and Trans Prisoner Defense Committee.

‘There were good people who cared more about my future than I did’

Methamphetamine derailed my 1987 high school graduation. I was then locked in a small jail cell facing murder charges three weeks later. Soon thereafter, I was sentenced to life within the Oregon State Correctional Institution.

I was relieved to find that prison was much more like a college than the violent war zone I feared thanks to the education opportunities offered by Pell Grants. The prison offered two- and four-year college degrees, vocational training and apprenticeships in numerous professions. Approximately 20 percent of the 1,000 prisoners at the prison were taking classes. New prisoners were constantly encouraged to join them, but I could not see a future for myself after being told I would die in a cage.

Thankfully, there were good people here who cared much more about me and my future than I did. I thought I was done with school after a woman in the education department helped me quickly earn my high school diploma. But she immediately encouraged me to enroll in college.

Truthfully, I was afraid of enrolling because I still believed the lie that I had internalized for so many years; that I was not smart enough to ever have academic success. Fortunately, she refused to take “No!” for an answer and finally convinced me to give it a try. I eventually earned a two-year degree on March 17, 1995.

Earning a degree helped free me from a psychological prison that I had constructed for myself as a child. It made me finally believe that I could achieve and become so much more than I ever imagined possible. It is a sad irony that I discovered this freedom only in a cage, but prison education was an essential key to my personal freedom.

Finally understanding the value of education, I wanted to continue but my educational journey came to a screeching halt. Congress abolished prisoner Pell Grants just six months before I graduated and I could not pursue a four-year degree because both colleges quickly left in 1995.

Sadly, my fellow prisoners and I witnessed guards gleefully celebrating as college classes ended.

— Mark Wilson, Oregon

Mark Wilson, 54, has been an Oregon prisoner since 1987. He earned a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Oregon in 2019. Since 2019, he has served as a member of a legislative working group seeking to improve prison educational opportunities.

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It was like a badge of honor

In 1982, I started my incarceration in the Maryland State Penitentiary, where 90% of us were serving life sentences. The other 10% were serving virtual life sentences (50 years and above). College programs such as Coppin State College (now Coppin University, an HBCU) was one of the few tools available for an incarcerated person to improve himself and to stay positively focused away from destructive behavior. A few incarcerated people were also earning master's degrees.

I can vividly recall the disappointed faces after the college coordinator, Ms. Yolanda Hendricks, informed incarcerated people that the undergraduate program was going to cease operations. Being part of that program was like a badge of honor. It also encouraged students to earn their GED so they could go to college.

It really felt like I was in a comfort zone when I earned my GED and then went to college. I was so proud of myself when I walked across that stage in 1989 and received my degree.

The most devastating effect of the Pell Grant removal was an increase in hopelessness. With “hopelessness” comes an array of destructive and self-destructive behavior.

Ninety percent of all programs in the penitentiary were created by incarcerated people that had earned a degree or were in pursuit of a degree. When the Pell Grant ceased, many of those programs eventually stopped functioning. The programs that remained were taken over by prison officials and were only a fragment of what they once were.

— Craig Muhammad, Maryland

Craig Muhammad has used education to reach back and help his incarcerated peers to become better human beings. He is a writing tutor for the University of Baltimore Second Chance College Program, a trained peer support specialist, and a facilitator for the Georgetown University Law Center Legal Writing Program.

Gladiator school

As the old-school California Youth Authority van pulled into the infamous Youth Training School, I thought my life was over. It was, at the time, California’s largest youth prison, known as “gladiator school.”

It was 1991. I’d spent the previous two years fighting and losing a juvenile court fitness hearing for a shooting I committed as a 16-year-old. I got transferred to adult court, refused a deal, lost a first-degree murder trial, and wound up sentenced to 25 years to life in prison. I was a classic case of what they today would call a “youth offender.” Back then, we were “superpredators.”

There was one redeemable thing about gladiator school — I discovered that the facility actually had a Pell-funded bachelor’s program in sociology from the University of La Verne. For a kid who acquired his GED in juvenile hall at the age of 16, being able to perhaps parlay my woes into a college degree was the only inspiring thing in my life.

I eagerly enrolled and quickly knocked down 39 units. But then, in fall 1992, a race riot handed me time in solitary confinement, a DA referral, and a gnarly transfer to an even more volatile youth facility. Over the next 15 years, during which time Congress killed our access to Pell Grants, I spent most of my time in and out of administrative segregation.

Illustration: Kamikaze Mergatoyd.

It wasn’t until I was doing my last long-term stint in the hole that I started to contemplate a different mode of life on the inside. While in lockup, I’d received a reply letter from Thomas Aquinas College in Ojai, California responding to my request for donated paperback philosophy books. One of the professors there visited me regularly, became my friend, and caused me to contemplate universals, question my ethics, and deconstruct my malformed ideas about my purpose on the planet.

I own my mistakes. I went on the ride of being a follower trying to survive the idiotic politics I was too afraid to buck. My beef is with the obstacles placed in the way of the academic climb I’ve tried to make since then, after I changed my life, flipped my script, and started to explore my capacity to exist beyond the limiting confines of what I’d been indoctrinated to accept for myself.

I’ve been on never-ending college program waitlists for nearly 10 years, while staying discipline-free, dropping custody points, and earning my way from maximum security prisons to the medium-security facility I’ve been at since 2018. After every transfer, I had to start the climb again, from the bottom rung of a ladder that placed me last due to my life sentence.

It took me 30 years to get back on track.

— Ghostwrite Mike, California

Ghostwrite Mike is a student at Coastline College, transferring to Merced College in the fall. He’s a published poet, illustrator, and journalist. His work has appeared in Exchange, a literary magazine by incarcerated people published by Columbia University School of the Arts. He’s the co-founder of the Barz Behind Bars (B³) poetry workshop at Valley State Prison in California, and managing editor of the BarzOnline literary blog for the Ben Free Project, producer and co-host of the Lifer Cypher podcast at University of New Haven’s WNHU, and carceral strategies consultant to the board of the non-profit Radical Reversal.

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Illustration: Kamikaze Mergatoyd.
In solitary confinement, your neighbors are your teachers.

Kwaneta Harris reads to her neighbors through the vents in her cell. She’s served more than seven years in solitary confinement in Texas. Illustration by Lewis Waters, an artist incarcerated at the U.S. Penitentiary Hazelton in West Virginia. Follow him on Instagram at @Lew_the_Artist.

This week we’re featuring an essay by Kwaneta Harris, a writer who has spent more than 7 years in solitary confinement in Texas. I’ve read some of her other work on prison labor and what it’s like to be incarcerated in 129° heat without air conditioning, so I was excited to hear what she had to say about education. She shares the stories of young women who entered the Texas prison system as juveniles and illuminates how they struggle with basic literacy. She stands at the vent in her cell — where she spends as much as 22 hours a day — and reads to her young neighbors.

The women at Lane Murray, Kwaneta’s housing unit, have on average a 7th grade education, according to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. It raises some important questions: Even though federal law guarantees an education to incarcerated students 21 and under, how is that education actually delivered, if at all? What kind of support do students receive if they need help with basic literacy? Are students with disabilities receiving accommodations? And, as college programs start to expand with the restoration of Pell eligibility last month, are corrections departments also investing in increasing access to adult basic and secondary education?

While we’re focusing on Texas, this is an issue across the country. Last month, the Massachusetts Department of Corrections opted not to reapply for more than $2 million in state educational grants that support prison programs, according to the GBH News Center for Investigative Reporting. Those state grants covered 80% of the DOC’s expenses for educational programs at a high school level or below.

Last year, Sean Addie, the director of correctional education for the federal Education Department, said that many states leave federal funding for secondary education, such as Perkins dollars, on the table. “[W]e need to be thinking proactively about how we can get students who maybe are not yet ready for postsecondary education ready for… these new opportunities,” he said during a session at the National Conference for Higher Education in Prison in November 2022.
She’s in solitary confinement. She still tries to teach her neighbors how to read.

By Kwaneta Harris

Reading has been my lifeline after seven years in solitary confinement. With my earplugs jammed in deep — sometimes too deep — I’ve read books, magazines, and newspapers and found respite amid tortuous conditions. That includes no air conditioning, TV, or recreation. Cold showers. Frequent water and power outages. An overrepresentation of people with mental illness.

The hole is like all trouble, easy to get into and hard to get out of. In male prisons, men are sometimes in the restricted housing unit because they have been identified as belonging to gangs. But that’s not often the case in female prisons. Women are assigned to live here for various reasons. It could be a consequence for behavior, like having phone sex with a partner; for violence, like assaulting staff members; or for rule violation, like having contraband (even if someone set you up with it). Sometimes, it’s outright discrimination: I’ve seen women get sent to the hole for speaking in an Indigenous language while talking to their parents on the phone.

Many of the young women living in my pod in solitary are transfers from the Texas Juvenile Justice Department. In this state, children as young as 14 can be charged as adults for certain serious offenses, and all 17-year-olds who commit misdemeanors or felonies are considered adults. Most of them are youth of color. If these kids have a history of assault, solitary confinement is often their ultimate destination. [Editor’s note: In 2021, more than one-third of people in solitary confinement in Texas women’s prisons were 18-25, compared to about 10% of the total prison population in that age range, according to the Liman Center for Public Interest law at Yale University.]

Although incarcerated young people 21 and under are guaranteed an education under federal law, that doesn’t always happen in practice. Women in some restricted custody levels are given low priority for educational programming, while others aren’t allowed to participate at all.

Several days pass. A guard writes my paperwork, I realize that she doesn’t have more than a third-grade education.

I feel like shit. Immediately I’m flooded with flashbacks of other young women: The 23-year-old who always “forgot” her glasses, or the one who brushed off the chaplain when he asked her to read a Bible verse aloud. The incidents might seem unrelated, but these women were trying to distract from the truth. They struggled to read. I had missed all the signs.

Tameka, for instance, had been incarcerated since she was 14 but was in her late 20s when I met her. She once had a teacher tell her: “If you shut up, maybe you’ll learn to read.” She was so embarrassed she began fighting staff and writing escape letters in hope of being placed in solitary so she wouldn’t have to go to school anymore.

Plus, many of these girls who came into adult prisons as children have been criminalized and traumatized their entire lives, and when they get to prison, the trauma continues. Most also have mental health issues and learning disabilities. You can’t learn when you’re in survival mode.

In solitary confinement, ‘school,’ when it is provided, often consists of a packet of education materials dropped at your cell door. There are no teachers for us here. If there are, I’ve never seen or heard them. In response, the girls often rip the packets into small pieces and push them back under their doors. You can’t teach yourself from packets when you can’t even read the instructions. [Editor’s note: When we asked the Texas Department of Criminal Justice about this, they confirmed that students receive “individualized instruction packets,” but said that they have the option to work with a teacher.]

But you would be highly mistaken to conflate literacy with intelligence or even a desire to learn. In 2017, when 23-year-old Moriah discovered I was a nurse, she asked me to teach her the names of the major bones. I helped during rec time — we started at the toes and went up the body. Other girls started coming out and those who didn’t watched out their windows. We have some great artists who began sketching the skeleton. Eventually, everyone had a sketch in their cell, taped on the wall. Moriah was eventually released and is now a certified nursing assistant and home health aide. The craving for knowledge doesn’t stop at the prison gates.
Moriah is an example of how people learn in different ways. A peek inside her background reveals the common denominator in most women’s stories — poverty. Walking in her shoes is to live in dilapidated housing, breathe asthma-inducing air, reside in food deserts and self medicate to deal with it all.

And our one-size-fits-all approach to educating children doesn’t attempt to address these challenges. The Moriahs and Tamekas of underfunded schools have always been the convenient scapegoats of legislative budget cuts and victims of our non-existent social safety net. As if the solution for getting a high-quality education is to be born in an adequately funded zip code.

In the meantime, I can’t wait for the state of Texas. Now, I stand at the vent again reading aloud to the young women — smiling as I complain.

Kwaneta Harris is an incarcerated writer in solitary confinement in Texas focusing on the intersection of race, gender and place. She focuses on illuminating how different incarceration is for women. She is working on a book about youth transferred to adult solitary confinement.

Open Campus wants to hear from you!

What are the different ways in which higher education intersects with the criminal justice system? We are looking for examples of collaborations between universities and prisons, and incarcerated people and students and/or educators, outside of formal prison education programs, in both adult and juvenile facilities: art shows, independent research, guest lectures, literacy programs, mental health and wellness programs, legal writing clinics, etc? I’m particularly interested in highlighting collaborations between currently incarcerated people and outside college students. Please email charlotte@opencampusmedia.org or write to Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062.

Open Campus is a news organization that covers education. We don’t investigate criminal cases or report on crime-related issues, nor do we provide educational courses or assist individuals. When we receive a letter, we will add you to our mailing list. Given the volume of letters we receive, we cannot always respond personally, but we appreciate your interest.

We work with incarcerated writers, but do not publish unsolicited manuscripts, essays that have been published elsewhere, poetry, or stories on topics other than education. We are looking for story pitches that offer new and surprising insights about higher education in prisons.

There is no cost to subscribe to College Inside. But as a nonprofit newsroom, we rely on donations. If you would like to support us, please send a check made out to Open Campus Media to 1 Thomas Circle NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20005.

About this newsletter

Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about prison education produced by Open Campus, a national nonprofit newsroom. Topics we cover include college-in-prison programs, Pell Grants, and career and technical education. We launched College Inside in December 2021 and now publish a biweekly email newsletter and a monthly print edition.

You can subscribe to the email newsletter at https://bit.ly/3ToP2Uz. You can also sign up for the print edition at https://bit.ly/3oMCmss or by writing to Open Campus Media, 2460 17th Avenue #1015, Santa Cruz, CA 95062. (We are unable to distribute the newsletter electronically through prison messaging systems).

You can reach us at charlotte@opencampusmedia.org, via JPay, Corrlinks, Securus, Connect Network, GTL/Viapath, or at the postal address above.

Write for the Prison Journalism Project!
The Prison Journalism Project (PJP), a partner of Open campus, is a digital magazine for incarcerated writers and others to learn the craft of journalistic storytelling and share news and stories about life behind bars. PJP invites incarcerated and incarceration-impacted writers to submit articles, essays, poems, art and cartoons that incorporate firsthand observations and experiences of life and realities in the criminal justice system. Word count is 500 - 1,200 words. Send a submission, request a full submission packet, or ask to connect with PJP on JPay at jpaymail@prisonjournalismproject.org, or write to Prison Journalism Project, 2093 Philadelphia Pike #1054, Claymont, DE 19703. Art should be sent to PJP Art Department, 2625 Alcatraz Ave., #328, Berkeley, CA 94705.

The Sentences That Create Us
The Sentences That Create Us is a new book focused on writing behind bars. It features the work of more than fifty writers, most themselves justice-involved, to offer advice, inspiration and resources.

Thanks to support from Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, PEN American is distributing 75,000 copies of the book to individuals in prison, as well to prison libraries and higher education and creative writing programs working with justice-involved communities. A copy can be requested online at https://t.co/ST7zHTQawK, or write to: Prison Writing Program c/o PEN America, 588 Broadway Suite 303, New York, NY 10012.