

Every Wednesday

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Aaron was an inside student in the course “Imprisonment and the Realities of Reentry,” an Inside-Out course with students from the State Correctional Institution Smithfield and Juniata College.

First and foremost, on behalf of my classmates, I would like to say thank you for this opportunity. I approached this class, this experience, with the understanding I was going to give my very best effort. That mindset stayed consistent throughout. Having been ten plus years removed from any higher education, I needed to know if my best was still good enough. The validation I received through my class participation and reflective writing allowed me to open some personal doors I had closed a long time ago. Being able to identify and address a character flaw that has plagued me was an added bonus. I stand before you today a better version than I was four months ago. It is my hope all my classmates feel the same way.

“Every Wednesday.”

The first Wednesday, I walked into a classroom confident and anxious, not really knowing what to expect. At that point, I don’t think any of us did. Who would have thought the “Wagon Wheel” would start our ship’s journey into uncharted waters!

All aboard!

Welcome Anna, April, Bryant, Danieh, Deanna, Demarco, Griff, Harry, Jeremy, Jules, Kevin, Kian, Kaitlyn, Kirwin, Maggie, Mara, Mallory, Oscar, Paul, Ray and Juniata’s very own historian Dr. Alison Fletcher. These names represent superfluousness, to exceed what is sufficient or necessary. These names represent excellence in process as well as several stories yet to be told. As an individual, I had the pleasure of finding the value in your words while bearing witness to the educational nourishment that collectively assisted in our growth. On Wednesdays, there were no stereotypes. Convict, citizen, race, or sex were of no consequence; they just offered perspectives. Age was not a barrier or wall placed for obstruction; it was a bridge that shortened the distance between us all. Similarities and differences made our conversation.

Remember our very first Wednesday. I walked out of class and knew without a doubt that I was a part of something special! There was this energy that felt contagious and tangible. You could actually reach out and feel it. The classroom was alive. Dr. Fletcher provided us with a structured, but open, forum

that inspired meaningful interaction and progressive discussions. What I took away from that particular class was the uniqueness, authenticity, and level of intellect each of my classmates possessed.

At the risk of sounding redundant, once upon a time on a Wednesday, two women I had only known for six weeks shared their emotional testimony with the class. Let me put into perspective how important that moment was for our class. Mallory and Kaitlyn shared with us that they had advocated on behalf of inside students to their peers whose views on this experience were less than favorable. There was an acknowledgment and appreciation we experienced together as a class. The dynamics of our class were changing. We had evolved into something else. At that point, we had become connected emotionally and intellectually. The aftermath of such a powerful academic moment made me care about how you all felt and what you all were thinking. When class was over that night, I had a revelation. I had figured out why the class was so important.

This class model can be replicated and should be applied to other mandatory DOC prescribed programs. This format breeds cognitive thinking, active and engaged listening, public speaking, and respect for yourself and for others. All of these are skills and traits synonymous with a successful reentry. I strongly encourage those of you in a position to facilitate change to consider this. If not you, then who? Who will set the standards for education and re-entry? Let us move towards a future where the Department of Corrections can begin coaching inmates to play this game of life, not to lose but to win! There is a very distinct difference. When will these standards be set? Time is a resource we do not have in abundance, and, with lives at stake, a sense of urgency is required.

As a social experiment, the inside-out class model works, and this curriculum in particular is thought provoking and requires soul-searching self-reflection. In an inhumane environment, every Wednesday I felt a little more human. Credit goes to an exceptional group of students that looked at us inside students not as inmates but as their peers. Your acceptance confirmed what I had already believed—opportunity was the only thing missing from our equation. My success in this class validated a piece of me I had forgotten about.

As a community, if the goal is to succeed at meeting the minimum requirements needed for reentry, then congratulations are in order. However, if that is not the case, then, raise the bar! In spite of our residence! Where we are now does not mandate who we are! Challenge us to be great...I dare you!!

To my fellow students, this is our last Wednesday together. I choose my words carefully. I suggest you do the same. The significance of what you say next will leave a lasting impression.

If our paths never cross again, know this: on any given Wednesday, you will have a friend rooting for you. Whatever our future holds, keep a tight grip on the one day out of the week we all have in common. Do not lose sight of what we have accomplished. Years from now on a Wednesday, you will be stuck in traffic on your way home from work, and you will think to yourself, “I wonder how Ray, Paul,

Oscar, Mara, Mallory, Maggie, Kirwin, Kian, Kevin, Kaitlyn, Jules, Jeremy, Harry, Griff, Demarco, Deanna, Danieh, Bryant, April, Anna, Aaron and Dr. Fletcher are doing.” What do you say to a friend you may never speak to or see again? What is understood doesn’t need to be explained. Simply put, if you won’t forget, then neither will I.