

# bard at bayview

The pioneer students of Bayview are having an impact on that prison's general population. Other inmates are now striving to pass the GED Test so that they too can attend the Bard Prison Initiative program.

**I walk west** through Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood on my way to meet fellow Bardians. I won't be meeting them at some upscale gallery, however, but at Bayview Correctional Facility, a medium-security women's prison on the corner of 20th Street and 11th Avenue. I will hand over my cell phone to prison guards and lock my possessions in a locker in the visitor's lobby. I will be escorted through security checks and past the general inmate population to a colorful and orderly classroom where Bard's courses are taught.

In 2001, while an undergraduate at Bard, I was part of a group that taught a writing workshop at Beacon Correctional Facility, a minimum-security women's prison not far from the Annandale campus. We were planting the seeds of what was to become the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI). Approximately five years earlier, the U.S. Congress had eliminated public funding for college education in federal and state prisons. As students in a progressive college, we felt a responsibility to counteract these political trends and share our education with our incarcerated neighbors. BPI was formed with the goal of establishing satellite college campuses within New York prisons. Those satellite campuses would offer a range of courses across the liberal arts curriculum.

BPI has come a long way. In 2005, the first 15 students to successfully complete the BPI program graduated with associate of arts degrees from Bard College. As of September 2008, the number of incarcerated students acquiring degrees will have grown to 200, according to Max Kenner '01, director of BPI.

The program at Bayview, begun in September 2006, is the first college-credit program that BPI has established in a women's prison. The initial impetus was generated within Bayview, when a small group of women there banded together and approached professors on the outside about teaching noncredit courses. This venture ultimately turned into the Learning Center for Women in Prison from which money was raised to bring Bard's program into Bayview. Currently, nine women are enrolled; as with other BPI offerings, those who complete the program will obtain associate of arts degrees from Bard.

On the last day of the spring semester at Bayview, I sat in on Fundamentals of Written English Language, one of the BPI courses offered. Idra Novey, an adjunct professor in the Creative Writing Department at Columbia University, asked the members of the class to share their goals for the next semester. The students shuffled in their seats, and the first student began, "I need to carry a notepad with me while I am at work. That way I can scribble down my ideas while they are still fresh." This constraint did not correspond to my undergraduate experience. Bayview women usually work more than eight hours a day—doing anything from office (or kitchen) work to jobs that take them out of the prison daily. Many of them have children. Iris Bowen, a soft-spoken African American woman in her forties, said, "I have kids who are just attending college now. By my going to Bard, they are motivated, even more, to succeed in college."

The students in the Bayview program are required to have passed the high school equivalency exam, otherwise known as the General Education Development (GED) Test. One of the students, Erica Mateo, age 20, was an eighth-grade dropout and passed the GED at 16, while in prison. She said she grew up in what some people call the ghetto, and going to college has given her insights that she hopes to bring back to her community and make life a little better there. Mateo declared, "My eyes have never been so wide in my life."

Most of the Bayview women would not have had the opportunity to go to a college like Bard, were it not for their incarceration. However, as Mateo said, "The message isn't 'go to prison for an education.' We are people who want to return to society. This is the first step to becoming a better person."

Bayview's superintendent, Catherine Cook, who was instrumental in implementing the BPI program there, echoed Mateo's thoughts. "Eventually these people are going back out on the streets. Do we want embittered, uneducated people or do we want productive members of society?" Studies conducted by the United States Board of Education, National Institute of Justice, and Correctional Education Association all conclude that providing an education to people in prisons lowers recidivism rates.

Many of the students in Bard College's Bayview program want, upon their release from prison, to work as social workers in the low-income and working-class neighborhoods they come from. Marlene Tejada, a self-assured Hispanic woman in her late 20s, stated bluntly, "My life experience is an asset. I may not have wanted it, but I have it. When I get released I am going back to my community. A successful future was not a reality before Bard College." Tejada is the first in her family to attend college.

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These successes, in turn, fuel BPI. A plan is in motion to open the Bayview program to *all* of the medium-security prisons for women in New York, says Kenner. Women who are accepted and eligible will be moved, by the New York State Department of Correctional Services, to Bayview, where they will enroll in BPI.

—Molly Snyder-Fink '01

