

## Prison Education 101

by

Matthew Feeney

In the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC), human beings get reduced to a number and placed in a numbered cell on a numbered unit where we count the days 'til we're released. One day I responded to a simple notice for the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop<sup>1</sup> (mnprisonwriting.org) that changed my life. Upon arrival, I was surprised to discover an active group of talented inmate writers and a cadre of dedicated volunteers. By the end of the quarter I wrote a poem and a short story. A fellow inmate slipped me a torn-piece of paper with three hand-scribbled addresses, of places I had never heard of, for me to submit my work to. I sent a copy of my one and only story to all three places. *The Journal of Prisoners on Prison*<sup>2</sup> responded to say they didn't accept fiction, and I felt ignorant for not knowing the rules. A week later PEN America<sup>3</sup> awarded the same story a 2<sup>nd</sup> place, which included a check for \$75. A month after that, *The Beat Within*<sup>4</sup> published the same story. I was smitten, and over the next four years MPWW paired me with remarkable writing mentors on the outside who provided valuable feedback, critiques and encouragement to develop my voice and become a stronger writer. I realized that while most people don't ever go to prison, by being published I had accomplished something in prison that most people on the outside never do. I embraced

---

<sup>1</sup> MPWW, MS-A1730, 1536 Hewitt Ave., Saint Paul, MN 55104

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of Prisoners on Prison*, University of Ottawa Press, 120 University, Ottawa Ontario, K1N-6N5 CANADA

<sup>3</sup> PEN America Prison and Justice Writing, ATTN: Annual Contest Entry, 588 Broadway, Suite 303, New York NY 10012

<sup>4</sup> *The Beat Within*, PO Box 34310, San Francisco, CA 94134

College.<sup>6</sup> As a writer taking an accounting class, I felt like a fish out of water, but I passed and I'm proud to say several others have followed in my footsteps and taken college classes.

I also started focusing my creative writing skills on the myriad of serious problems at this facility which the administration adamantly refused to address. *The Journal of Prisoners on Prison*, the place that had rejected my first fiction story, now published my entire 3,000 word essay entitled "MSOP's COVID response was a Disaster" which was subsequently cited in the Mitchell-Hamline Law School SOLPRC newsletter and quoted in the Minnesota Star Tribune newspaper. *Spotlight on Recovery*<sup>7</sup> published my "Open Letter to Governor Walz" in full-color, and the Governor's office actually responded by reaching out to me with a phone call. Instead of writing fiction, I was learning I could write about real issues experienced by real people, and the outside world was reading and caring enough to respond.

After learning that recidivism rates drop to 0% for those who earn a Master's degree<sup>8</sup> while incarcerated, I realized that education may literally be the key to my release. It took several years to find the right program, but as of January 2025, I am two classes away from earning my Master's in Humanities from California State University's special HUX program<sup>9</sup> designed for incarcerated people. In my required graduate readings, I learned California spends more on prisons than it does on higher education<sup>10</sup> and about shared experiences of people like

---

<sup>6</sup> Rio Salado College, 2323 West 14th Street, Tempe, AZ 85281, tel.: 800-729-1197

<sup>7</sup> *Spotlight on Recovery*, Robin Graham Publishing Company, 10201 Flatlands Avenue #360111, Brooklyn NY 11236

<sup>8</sup> Stevens, D.J. and C. S. Ward. "College Education & Recidivism: Educating Criminals is Meritorious." *Journal of Correctional Education* 48.3 (1997): 106-111.

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Matt Lockett, HUX Program Director, California State University – DH, College of Continuing & Professional Education, 1000 E. Victoria Street, Carson CA 90747 tel.: 310-243-3744

<sup>10</sup> Goldberg, Eve and Linda Evans. *The Prison Industrial Complex and the Global Economy*. Berkeley: Agit Press, 1998.