



BRIDGES

FALL 2011

BRIDGES: THE “WE” STORY

“Education is all a matter of building bridges.”

-Ralph Ellison

What does this mean in the context of your life, and in the world?

This is the essential question we ask all of our contributing writers to speak to. Having a unified thread helps to cultivate a connection free of physical boundaries and distances, and hopefully start a conversation that may not have been possible otherwise.

“BRIDGES” is a community action project by students from Anke Wessel’s AEM 3380: Social Entrepreneurship class. We began working with the Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP) in early October 2011 in order to design a project that would apply the concepts learned in class to real life, and thereby create positive change in our community. One of the concepts highlighted in class is the “We Story”, which is the idea of understanding the lives of others through a lens of “we” rather than “us” and “them”. This publication is meant to bring together the opinions of individuals from differing backgrounds, communities, and circumstances in an effort to learn from one another. By asking our contributing writers to speak to the same question and publishing it in a journal that is accessible to all, we hope to create a “bridge” between all sorts of people from all walks of life.

We were fortunate throughout the process to have the advice and support of Adina Rubin-Budick and Writer’s Bloc, a university sanctioned student organization collaborating with CPEP to promote incarcerated people’s self-expression. We could not have done this without them. We would also like to thank Jim Schechter and the Cornell Prison Education Program for funding this endeavor and believing in its mission. We are incredibly thankful to our Professor, Anke Wessels, for giving us the unique opportunity to embark on this project. Finally, we would like to thank all of contributing writers for sharing their voices and participating in this important conversation. This sort of conversation, in this sort of medium, has never been attempted at Cornell before and we thank all who are involved for helping to pioneer this initiative.

We hope you enjoy reading these works, and we hope you will consider joining the conversation and being part of this “We Story” in the future.

Thank You,

Rebecca Kaplan
Fathi Abdelsalem
Arsi Qajar
OreOluwa Badaki

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STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

By OreOluwa Badaki, *Cornell University*

Why come up with this prompt? We thought of universality. What could connect people from all different backgrounds and life experiences...

Let's take a step back, let's take a few. Imagine the toddler version of yourself...

Wait, metaphorically speaking, can a bridge be round? As in can it connect things on a non-linear plane, bringing together aspects of our lives so that they come full circle? Yeah that sounds about right.

SO back to the toddler version of myself: first day of school, crazy 90's patterned dress and my afro in pig tails. Education building bridges? Building an education through bridges? Which comes first? And why did it all of a sudden have to be *institutionalized*? What have I been doing for the past 5 years of my life then, if not learning? Now it's a separate entity: I go to school to learn, a part of my life but somehow apart from my life. Does that make sense?

Fast-forward to college. Oh wait, all this knowledge matters in real life? It's not all about grades or doing it because you know you should...mind blown.

...so universality. Why come up with this prompt? Education makes us who we are, period. We are what we learn, and as adults, hopefully, we have a better understanding of this than we did as kids. Education means that even if we can't change where we've been, we can decide where we go from here.

Flashback to senior year of high school, graduation quote: "What you still feel to be truth today you will recognise even tomorrow as error, in which, however, you will later again discover grains of truth! For the manifestations also change their forms. Thus your seeking continues, yet amid these changes you mature!" Abd ru shin, *The Grail Message*. Check it out, good read.

I chose it because it sounded profound...I'm not sure I actually knew what it meant. Education doesn't bridge us to knowledge; it is the bridge itself, helping us understand the process of "knowing". This bridge can be built from bricks of common ground, we learn about each other and all of a sudden we're not strangers.

Universality...full-circle. It all makes...sense?

LIKE A BRIDGE

By E. Paris Whitfield, *Auburn Correctional Facility*

Raging waters of education flow for those that are untaught and unaware, or just want to know. There is a prison's bus that transports guilt/innocence/defendants into an underground Manhattan court/jail. There is where many heavy souls disembark having shackles on so tight it paralyzes one's walk. I remember it so clearly.

Just after receiving a sentence of 25 years to life, I remember my ears were ringing from the screams of disbelief; those moans and murmurs of my mothers . . . pure discord. In a zombie-like state, I boarded the bus, too stunned to cry, too numb to even realize, that a slamming gavel, words that took seconds had transpired, had transformed my life. Oh, I remember so vividly.

The bus drove out of that dark, dank basement parking lot, like a eulogy, into a blinding sun. All around, there seemed so much living/life, except in my mind. I felt buried alive. The bus crept across the mall; unsuspecting on-lookers enjoying the golden rays.

My mother sat, staring blankly into the deep gorgeous blue heavens . . . all alone. She and I bridged to the sightless fingers of time. We were four feet away. Yet, we remained miles apart. I touched the gated window, just as she brought her hand over her heart.

She didn't even know it was me, her son on that bus. We passed each other like strangers on the street. That's when a single tear broke from a place deep inside of me; just one of thousands that would later be released.

Today, as I walk Robert Frost's path of least resistance, I reminisce of a not so distant past. I'm fueling my future and uninhibited mind with these un-caged ideas/words of great scholarly wisdom, such as those bridges built by Ralph Ellison's visions.

I'm building bridges I'll need tomorrow, instead of crossing those wretched, rickety ones I once borrowed . . . making education the mortar, making it the ligament that matters. My mind is unshackled, I'm finally free. Barb wires, high concrete walls, nor the tentacles of yesteryear's poor choices can contain me. My mind is finally free, floating where the clouds are hung. Education is my bridge. I'm over the troubled waters . . . and now I'm free.

BALANCE POINT

By David Bendezu, *Auburn Correctional Facility*

The first thing that prison does to someone is that it challenges a person in every way possible that a human can be challenged. And in order to survive, we must create a balance or have a common ground with something. Some choose to lead the lifestyle that put them in prison, and others choose the law libraries, religion, self-rehabilitation, or whatever seems to give them hope. For me—and I'm guessing the rest of the students in the Cornell program—I see education as hope, or rather a balance point in order to keep my sanity.

Education is how we see over a 40 foot wall, and put our minds in places that we have never been to. It is why we stay open-minded, and, believe it or not, how we give back to our communities. From my experience, people whose choose education are always quick to remind loved ones back home that staying in school is our best option of getting out of bad neighborhoods, or even making them safer. That small dose of contribution leads kids back home to think twice of the errors we made, and also leads them to start taking life a lot more seriously.

Most of us had no father figures growing up, so education then becomes our substitute, or teacher for that matter. Education helps us learn about our roots, how the world functions, and our place in it. Education connects us to the world and not even steel bars, walls, nor labels could prevent that. Education gives us our freedom.

REAL EDUCATION

By Fathi Abdelsalam, *Cornell University*

Education comes from many sources, school being one. But, in my estimation, this form of education is not nearly as bountiful as that which we receive through our daily experience and self-reflection. Life is a continual lesson. I don't mean to diminish the role of institutional learning, or the profound privilege that school endows, but I have always viewed school as a means of achieving worldly success as opposed to a real source of discovering one's inner self. In order to truly understand ourselves, we must first build bridges. Bridges symbolizing the harmonious connection that our heart and mind make when we perceive the world as it truly is, i.e., a state in which perception and reality are in agreement. I like to call this type of perception "true vision."

True vision, however, can only be learned through the lens of a pure heart. It is my personal belief that through the world, God constantly teaches us lessons in order to purify our hearts, thus granting wisdom to those who heed His call and successfully temper their soul. Indeed, according to my faith tradition, God speaks of knowledge as a reward for the righteous: "Now when [Moses] reached full manhood and had become mature [of mind]. We bestowed upon him the ability to judge [between right and wrong] as well as [innate] knowledge; for thus do We reward the doers of good" (28:14, English Translation of the Qur'an).

I believe the truest form of education comes from divine inspiration, and therefore God is our ultimate teacher. Indeed, the first revelation to come down to the final prophet informed us of this special relationship: "Proclaim! [or read!] in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created-Created man, out of a [mere] clot of congealed blood; Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful, He Who taught [the use of] the pen, taught man that which he knew not" (96:1, English Translation of the Qur'an).

LIFE AT CORNELL

By Danie Banks, *Cornell University*

I think going to college is one way that education can build bridges. For some people, going to their local college or university basically means a continuation of high school. If everyone in your town goes to the same college then you'll basically know everyone. For the more adventurous, going to an out-of-state school means exposure to a new group of people. Schools like Cornell University attract gifted minds from all over the world. In any one class you could meet someone from every continent it seems. Walking down the Arts quad, you could hear a conversation in Mandarin or Swahili.

A lot of the freshman orientation programming makes use of this great opportunity. Programming tends to focus on helping new students get to know each other and find things they have in common. When I give young people advice about going to college, I always mention the importance of networking. Large universities like Cornell have the ability to bring people from all over the world together and expose everyone to new worldviews. If you only stick with the people you know or are comfortable with, then you are doing yourself a disservice. College is an opportunity to learn new things in the classroom as well as in the dining halls. No matter what school you go to, meet everyone you can. You never know who's sitting next to you.

EDUCATION THAT BUILDS

By Maurice Cotton, *Auburn Correctional Facility*

The First Amendment may be a stage of education that builds bridges by communication. The First Amendment protects all communication.

Violent language should not be protected. Threats to take life, liberty, or property away from someone should not be protected-- this offender should have no right. Threats to damage life or someone's property should not be protected-- no person should have the authority to reasonably do so. It puts people on defense or apprehends. Slander can cause long-term repercussions in society beyond a person's defamatory communication. Society must be able to edit those who write this way.

Violent language is free-styling. Free-styling is the cool way of distributing inaccurate information.

When a person has been miseducated with this inaccuracy, re-education is a must. S/he will be going around communicating what is false. S/he will adopt the notorious charisma of the source of the lies. S/he will be subjected to the same repercussions. Accurate communication in education builds bridges by preventing this faulty distribution.

Violent language is the words that have the opposite effect of freeing the body and spirit or soul. There may be charges of perjury. Credibility or charisma is destroyed. No one can believe anything published. There are trials that end in innocent verdicts after months of publicity. There are exonerations after years of turbulence. Publicity can be false.

Accurate communication builds bridges.

BRIDGES OF EDUCATION

By Ryan Austin, *Cayuga Correctional Facility*

Built from all the minds of past ages
That bring us knowledge
discovered centuries ago
By prophets, professors, and sages.

Bridges that endure all time
Through scrolls, letter, and scripture
Enabling us to think as one
And paint a bigger picture

Every question already answered
Through this holistic bond
Called infinite intelligence
To a knowledge and wisdom beyond

A catwalk or an overpass
A highway of all thought
Without a bridge built to connect
It's impossible to learn; to be taught

The geniuses are not the mentors
The gurus or the gods
But the one who knows which
bridge to travel
To even out the odds

They bring the information
That civilization will never forget
And lessons from great teachers
Of whom we've never met.

Through our ability to use these bridges
All solutions are on call
Because I know nothing of the sort
You may know it all.

The roadways bring the answers
To all we'd like to know
That makes our voyage possible
Wherever we'd like to go

A bridge beyond the prison walls
That keeps me free to dream
A life based on what I know
Where seeing is unseen.

Blocking thought natural flow
Reaching out to all the islands
Dismissing the unknown

Where we as Laureates explore
Beyond any valley any ridge
Where the dead end leads to a ledge
And education is the bridge

FRUITFUL CONVERSATION

By Caitlin Parker, *Cornell University*

Ellison refers to building bridges when he defines education, and for me this means two things. Building a bridge is like communication; while a bridge typically connects two land masses, communication connects two or more people. While textbooks, final exams, and term papers are critical tools for learning, it amazes me how a conversation between two people at a café often turns into a swapping of ideas. Whether it's two professors discussing their research of an exotic plant which has the potential to cure cancer or two eager friends entertaining the idea of starting up a business—education is all around us and it begins with fruitful conversation. The great thing is that we're all different; we have different childhoods, hobbies, relationships, etc. and this means that even just one person has the ability to use his/her different perspective as a method of granting someone else an alternative way of viewing the world. Education should not always mean memorizing a doctrine and regurgitating, but rather, sometimes it means communicating with others in an effort to simply understand one another a little better than if there was no conversation at all.

However, bridges are also tools for reaching your desired destination even if water or any other obstacle unwaveringly stands in your way. My grandparents were very poor immigrants when they reached America in the earlier 1900s, and my grandfather had only a second grade education to write down on his resume (but I'm pretty sure he did not have a resume). They managed to find jobs as laborers and devoted their lives toward ensuring that my mother and her siblings received a good education. Poverty was their obstacle, but they knew that education served as an equalizer. My mother's success in high school led to a scholarship which paid for her undergraduate schooling, helping her to pursue a career in nursing- a job she still holds to this day. Education was never taken for granted in my mother's family, but was seen as a priceless vehicle that could lift someone out of a seemingly hopeless condition.

UNTITLED

By Steven Grant, *Cornell University*

An effective education can only be obtained when individuals approach their pursuits with open minds and the desire to reach out to others. Frankly, no matter how innately intelligent one is, our minds are inherently limited – naturally constrained – by our environment and set of experiences. Education is more than a matter of reading books, learning history, obtaining mathematical knowledge, and learning critical thinking skills; education requires broader exposure to other peoples, locations, and ideas. How could I, a privileged product of suburban New York City, have any kind of perspective on what less fortunate urban young adults of Houston or Baltimore think? I could easily get through life without opening my mind to this trio of concepts, but in doing so I would deprive myself of a full, well-rounded learning experience.

To gain this full set of experiences, people must actively put themselves in a position to meet others and exchange thoughts. Universities perform a vital function in this regard, serving as a nexus for people to come together and share their experiences and as a breeding ground for the development of new ideas. Universities, to me, are the quintessential bridges in our society. Making connections and fostering open and free exchange, two of the fundamental charges of any institution of higher learning, are crucial to the operation of any effective bridge. Bridges literally bring people together in spite of barriers. Whether it is water or educational chasms, bridges, to me, make our world a smaller, more informed place: one in which problem solving comes easier; one in which working together in groups as teams is simplified; and one in which the collective potential of humankind can be achieved.

IVY LEAVES AMONGST POISON WEEDS

By Joshua J. Keppen, *Auburn Correctional Facility*

Not all bridges are meant to be walked upon, but all bridges connect. In this context, how is education like a bridge?

Cornell University holds some of the world's brightest minds, and is a member of the Ivy League – a group of the Nation's most distinguished halls of learning.

Auburn Correctional Facility is America's oldest prison. It houses only what society casts away, exiles...bad seeds. Its reputation only distinguished by infamy.

Can bad seeds still grow? Even here in the soil of prison, fertile minds reach up from the muck like tender shoots. Auburn's plants have to stretch farther to overcome the darkness and it makes our stems spindly. Education is like the post that braces over stalks...it helps us to span the gulf.

Education can also be like a bridge that stretches across the river of ignorance. Much too often, I've seen brave souls try to wade through its eddies and currents, only to be swept away.

I've never had much in the way of a formal education. Like most prisoners, I'm self-taught. I've come to see now that for years I've stood upon a bridge only half built, connected to nothing, trying to make half an arch stand. Teetering, swaying...trying to add bricks while balancing, all the while, not knowing that my foundations are built upon pillars of sand.

Cornell, by extending its hand to us, has given me an anchor to connect with, so that I can finally reach to a shore. Education through Cornell is leading me to new discoveries about the world outside of these shadowy walls, and most importantly about myself.

The most important lessons with Cornell's staff are not on the curriculum. I've never seen inspiration on any syllabus to date...nor tolerance and understanding. These magnanimous qualities don't appear in any of the textbooks I've seen, but are instead taught by example...

Like minds connect, education is our common bond...to horizons anew, it provides our shared journey!

AN EDUCATION

By Jie Min, *Cornell University*

In my years at Cornell, I've almost forgotten what it's like to forge a student-teacher connection. It's a shocking transition: going from a class size of no more than thirty students to a class size of 700-800 students. The teacher stands in front of an auditorium-size lecture hall, facing a room filled with sleeping, Facebooking, and generally nonchalant students. But who's to blame in a class that's only based on four test grades? A class where it almost seems pointless to raise your hand and ask a question (who are you in a sea of 800 faceless students?). What happened to learning for the sake of learning? It's an inevitable pitfall of a society that stratifies professions by monetary gradients. 1) Pick a career 2) Go to college 3) Take requirements for grad school, maintain a high GPA 4) Finish grad school and get a job. Lather, rinse, repeat.

I remember really struggling my first year at Cornell. My professors didn't know who I was and I didn't know who they were. The grading policy for the class was spelled out on the very first day: 10% of you will get As, 30% Bs and so on. Everyone in the class had been in the top ranks at their high school. Thrust into an environment where half the class had to be below the mean, we all thought: well it sure as hell isn't going to be me. Those who wanted to stay above the mean learned to adapt, consequently reducing learning to rote memorization and calculating grades. Just a bunch of critical eyed vultures heckling the teachers, "What's the mean?" "What's the standard deviation?" "What is the median grade in this class?" "This question is ambiguous! We should get points back." It's not uncommon to see students in tears after getting prelim grades back. I even recall a student being taken out of the final exam testing room on a stretcher by the EMT during my freshman year. The pressure is literally too much. And for what? A perfect GPA to get into a perfect graduate/professional school to get into a perfect job. There is a lack of passion, a lack of heart, in what we do at Cornell.

Education is about building bridges. And it takes two to build that bridge: the teacher and the student. Both parties are to blame at many higher institutions like Cornell. The avaricious student, lusting after that A plus. The indifferent professor, teaching only because it is required. Bridges hastily built with rotten wood from the start can't sustain too much. I recently received an email from a professor congratulating me on receiving one of the top five scores on an exam in a class of about 300 students. I was genuinely

surprised at the personal email and the acknowledgement. Is it not sad that students have come to accept indifference and professors statistical breakdowns as the norm? We are so focused on finishing and getting to the next step. It's always the next step. The next goal. What happens when we run out of goals? Will you be happy with what you've accomplished? Will you understand why you did it?

Entering the Cornell Prison Education Program at Auburn is like entering another world. A world where students want to learn. I mean, really learn. Instead of the silent lecture hall with 700 glaring computer screens, the Auburn classroom is a social environment where students are constantly raising their hands to contribute thoughts and questions. The bridge, carefully forged from the very start, is strengthened over time as professors and students reach out to each other. The professor, rather than being a lone authority figure dictating to the class, is instead an equal. "If you find something I say to be wrong, I urge you to raise your hand and correct me." How often do you hear a professor say that in a Cornell classroom? Education at higher institutions has turned into a precarious ladder, stratifying the students and the professor.

I know the students at Auburn are grateful for the opportunity that CPEP provides, but I mean it sincerely when I say that I am grateful for the opportunities that they have provided me. The opportunity to see genuine passion and heart behind learning. The opportunity to critically examine my own motivations and goals. As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote in *Le Petit Prince*, "On ne voit bien qu'avec le cœur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux."

"One sees clearly only with the heart. What is essential is invisible to the eye."

GETTING BETTER

By Andre Cates, *Cayuga Correctional Facility*

I am getting better, and changing like the weathered seasons,
I have reasons to change my lot.

I am tired of this called a bed; instead, it feels like steel, for real!

My intentions are real, I am tired of being caged in by steel, and this is the reality of my ordeal.

My purpose is strong, I've always been away too long, and everyday seems the same, except: my brain has captured the heart of my mind, I'm steady grinding, climbing mountains like Moses, getting exposed to the light for better insight.

It took just one night to disrupt my life, spent more than half in prison for committing the worst sin, now I have to fight within for the opportunity to repent for my sin, will my apologies be accepted by those I have subjected to my misdeeds?

I pray God is forgiving, because I need his blessings for my past transgressions, and my future insight to a completely new life, where I have learned to conform to the norm of a righteous reality.

This time I plan on winning, I am not thinking about quitting, or giving in to the sun that was my origin, or this hell of a life within.

So tired of living like this, the lord knows I cannot go on like this, damn I miss everything I dismissed and took for granted.

I'm going to re-plant my life beside a tree, so I can see what will become of me, should I pray to Thee, or is Thee a He, that really is me? I have learned to refrain and let the element that is rain resurrect my brain and wash away the disdain I feel for myself, and make that my wealth, so I can become rich in deeds, and help those in needs, do you hear my pleas?

I am determined to fight back, like a fetus in a womb that has been subjected to his doom, by his mother's heirloom, which was a drug? Not a hug, there were none, I wasn't a son, not in that day and time, doesn't a son shine?

My addiction was predisposed, I suppose, I loved the streets more. In fact, the streets never loved me back, yet I'm trying to get back, so I can give back to my family who supported me throughout the years, and through the tears I cried from deep in my soul, before I learned my role, to become a better man, because what is a man but a grain of sand from this land that's been resurrected, and perfected, to rebuff all things that are wrong; a better father, I cannot harbor what was done to me, I have to let my child see, through me, that there is something better, if his mind is right and he has an insight; a better husband, to band, with a wife that deserves all fruits of my strife for life, yeah, that's right, because all wives deserve a life that is great with the presence of their husband.

OUTLET

By Eleni Konstantopoulos, *Cornell University*

I grew up in Athens, Greece where I attended a Greek public school. My high school had unfinished construction work in its courtyard and classrooms that were either too cold in the winter or unbearably hot during the summer. Our school mascot happened to be a living dog that chased soccer balls around our schoolyard, as opposed to a costumed individual. The women's bathrooms were always being "renovated", so finally the administration had them replaced with portable toilets. Greece was always financially troubled so the first place the government always went to for further cut downs was education.

During this period, I yearned for an outlet where I could voice my frustrations not only with my school but also my teachers, most of whom in typical Greek fashion washed their hands of any problem that didn't directly concern them, the education system that valued rote memorization over original thinking, and most of all me—for giving up on Greece.

Bridges provides the creative and expressive outlet that I always wished for but never had, to a group of individuals who are trying to build bridges from the learning they did in previous instances to a new educational setting. Crossing that bridge to America was not only the route to a better education through the better school systems, but it was the comparison of these two academic settings that ultimately taught me the value of my own education.

PUNCTUATION

By Adina Rubin-Budick, *Cornell University*

I was always bad with punctuation.

I had started reading at an early age, and I loved to write fantastical stories about childhood experiences such as climbing out of my window after bed time and finding my backyard had turned into a mythical forest. Yet in Ms. Dillon's first grade class, I struggled with learning the correct ways to use periods and commas. In my stories, I thought, there was no reason for sentences or that mythical forest to suddenly end or pause with an arbitrary curvature. My father, an English professor, hoped to encourage my reluctance and introduced me to the world of poetry where punctuation was only used if one desired to do so. He explained how the great poets used other literary devices as compensation, showing a 7-year old the meter in Shakespeare's sonnets, accent in Chaucer's old English verses, and the erratic format of E.E. Cumming's poems. He taught me how to understand poetry by indulging in and dissecting the many meanings behind each word. I can sincerely attribute my love for the English language to the many hours we spent analyzing literary texts at the dining room table, lingering long after my short homework assignments were meant to be finished.

While reading and writing have remained my most treasured hobbies throughout my adolescence, I hesitantly chose to primarily study Psychology as an undergraduate for it was too difficult to double major with English. Mourning the chance to be an English major, I specifically sought out the opportunity to TA a writing course with the Cornell Prison Education Program in order to partially satiate my cravings for literature. At Auburn, I feel as if I am in literary euphoria, devoting hours per week to discussions on poems and prose by the greats. Though my father passed away last Spring, it is in this classroom setting that I have found a community in which I am back at that dining room table again, mulling over the delicious sound of the written word. I think of him every time we delve deep into a poem or short story, remembering his enthusiasm with each squiggled underline, regular underline, circling, or highlighting of an important word.

At an after-school program this semester, I worked on reading with children who had recently immigrated to this country from Burma. As we practiced their English with reading books aloud, I found one of my students rushing through the story—ignoring the commas and periods. I felt tempted to tell him to slow down and I wanted to explain to him the importance of the markings...but instead I grabbed a pen, like my father had, and made him circle the words he liked. I have found that a teachable moment is not always the opportunity to teach someone a lesson, but rather the moment when the teacher can step back and allow the student to learn on his own. It is this personalized learning process that fuels creativity and a perpetual passion for education. The experience of exploring via the guidance of another impassioned individual is the ultimate way in which learning is associative in the way it connects people.

BRIDGES OF CONFIDENCE

By Leroy Taylor, *Auburn Correctional Facility*

Do students realize that they are teachers?
Perhaps they do, but most times they don't think much of
the fresh perspective they bring to old subjects.

In Cornell classes here at Auburn I hear instructors
often say, "I've never heard it interpreted that way", yet
to the student who interpreted the piece of literature it was clear
as day. Probably after some brainstorming and re-reading our
mind builds bridges from one source to the other, and back.

It's a real confidence builder to know that regardless of where
we're at and where we're from, our interpretation is heard
and respected - this goes for both prisoners and teachers.

In every class I've taken at CPEP, it has been
about making connections between different sources
or connections within a source. It mirrors what's happening
with both groups.

We're both building bridges of confidence while educating
each other, the instructors and TA's are gaining insight into
sides of prisoners that the outside world does not see,
while the prisoners are gaining insight into their own
abilities to do college level work. Confidence is being gained
on both sides as we come together week after week.
We didn't know how down to earth Cornell people could be.
And perhaps they feel the same about us.

MIRROR MIRROR ON THE WALL: AN IVY LEAGUE DILEMMA (TO HELP OR NOT TO HELP)

By Michael Shane Hale, *Auburn Correctional Facility*

Ah! The sweet irony of being invited to contribute to a long overdue dialogue that tick tocks across a bridge with a steep toll barring my kind from crossing over to the other side.

I considered coyly describing “my kind” as poor, from historically underserved communities, failing in a failing system with one lifeline that has the statistical power to elevate us: you would be outraged by the inaction – where are the policy makers? – a juicy emotional hook – yet it seems dishonest to manipulate your emotions.

Indeed, higher education initiatives have taken hold in Auburn; we have tasted the freedom in each delicious credit. Our reward will be an Associate’s Degree – hard won while doing hard time. Why not a Bachelor’s or Master’s? We must be stupid? Slow? Lazy? Unworthy? Right? The answer is found in this gilded framed mirror. Look deeply: Ivy League envy, apparently.

Aside from the incredibly hard work of meeting Cornell’s excellent educational standards without computers, internet, office hours, or “trust” funds, we work to support ourselves. Late 19th century wages in exchange for our labor to purchase cosmetics (so we won’t smell), a few eats and coffee (to manage doubtful sleep patterns) within a total institution that makes no distinction or environmental accommodations for our rehabilitative efforts.

So, we’re quite alike aren’t WE?

Aside from 6’x8’ cages and steel racks,

WE struggle and strive to better ourselves.

Aside from a felony (or two) and disenfranchisement,

WE want to change the world, make a positive contribution to society.

Aside from a lack of privacy and daily degradations,

WE struggle to understand ourselves, our world and our place in it.

Aside from sacrificing a precious few hours of recreation in a concrete yard for “fresh air” (in order to study and rewrite),

WE strive to put our best academic foot forward, to test our and other’s ideas.

Sister, can you spare a B.A.? Will work for a Master’s! Does our academic accomplishment diminish yours? Seriously? We are made better by your educational transformation. And if you came to this side of the bridge, you would be made better taking a step or two in state boots that march towards rehabilitation and step in time to a melody that takes us two steps back for every one taken forward. Despite being shuffled about, due north points us to help ourselves, change agents that without higher education will be left with the status quo that recreates the villain no one else wants to deal with.

The frame has been enlarged, the unsupported mirror falls out and shatters into pieces at our feet. The face you see is mine mouthing help us help ourselves.

PROOF

By Emily Foreman, *Cornell University*

Every Tuesday evening throughout the spring semester of my sophomore year, I had a routine. I would rush home after finishing class, change into my “Tuesday outfit” of baggy pants (careful never to wear green clothing), gather my books, and walk into Collegetown Bagels at 4:30 pm for what I referred to as my early bird dinner. It was all for preparation of what lied ahead that evening - I was to meet with three other dedicated Cornellians for our hour and fifteen minute ride to Auburn Correctional Facility where we would teach a class together.

I served last semester as a teaching assistant for the Cornell Prison Education Program, and never before had the meaning of obtaining an education been so clear to me.

Education was always stressed in my household growing up. I come from a family of two highly education parents who always encouraged me to be devoted to my studies throughout my high school experience and to then attend a top university. But what did my education really mean to me? Why was it important that I pursued my studies in the fashion I did? Little did I know that I was to later discover the importance of education by working with the motivated and dedicated students of a maximum security prison.

I decided to work with CPEP because of the encouragement of a close friend – I saw how her work effected her, and I knew that I wanted to be a part of something larger than myself, where I could have a true impact.

However, I would say that I have continued my work with CPEP because I have recognized something significant, that “education [really] is all a matter of building bridges.” Education is the tool that connects us, that binds us all. Education allows us to span different parts of society. I had proof. I witnessed that education is a tool to help inmates, like those I worked with at Auburn, re-enter society, and re-enter society as hopefully an individual with a new perspective. I have come to realize that we all deserve the opportunity to have an education that allows us to achieve greater things, and in the case of those I have personally worked with, to bridge the societal gap that they hope to overcome in their future.

CHOICES

Rachel Harmon, *Cornell University*

“You know me, I always have to have bridges.” This is something I have heard my mom repeat time and again whether it was about buying more toothpaste before the tube we had in the house ran out, or if it was stocking away money for unexpected expenses – the woman was diligent about being prepared and looking ahead. Recently I had a conversation with my mom who is now equal part my mom and equal part my friend, where I recounted a story of a classmate who was really inconsiderate and acted inappropriately in a situation. This person was not malicious in his acts, rather he simply and clearly did not know any better. I said to my mom, “I don’t remember you and dad explicitly telling me that these types of behaviors were wrong or others were right (though they may have). I just remember that you both did the right thing all the time and I learned by watching.” By the ‘right thing’ I don’t mean the socially correct or proper thing. I mean if my mom was given 27 cents too much in change, she would turn around and return to the store to give the excess change to the cashier because the money did not rightfully belong to my mom.

Anytime we walked on a sidewalk, my dad *always* walked on the street side, with my mom on the inside edge. I asked him once when I saw him maneuver to be on the side nearest the passing cars, why he did this. He said, “If some fool swerves on to the sidewalk, I don’t want your mother to get hurt.” What I am amazed at is how over the years I have internalized many of these things; not just the acts themselves, but also the ethos behind them. I believe I am a good person who cares a great deal about the well being of others. I also believe that I owe much of who I am to my parents – not just what they taught me through example, but also the opportunities they afforded me by working long hours at often-thankless jobs to ensure that I had every opportunity to succeed.

How does this relate to education building bridges? Well, my mom’s often repeated and zealously pursued ‘bridges’ has over the years translated for me into the word ‘choices.’ I live a rather unpredictable life, but at the same time almost always have several options for what I might do next and have never had my back against a wall or felt stuck. There is absolutely some divine intervention from the Universe, or as my mom says, a few very tired angels watching out for me. But, I would also say a significant factor has been that I have always been a good student.

School came pretty easily to me (bar anything related to math). I was one of those freakish students who looked forward to report card day. My parents characterized school as my job and the work ethic they displayed embedded in me that when you have a job, you show up, you do your best, and you give it a 110%. Well, these things all combined to help propel me forward academically into advanced classes, special programs and afforded me some wonderful opportunities and a virtuous cycle was started. I never really decided I would go to college, rather, it was something that just became part of the trajectory I saw for myself. Over time though, a few things happened that moved college from a nebulous, but probable option to something I was laser focused on achieving and completing successfully. (And here folks, is where the bridge or choices comes in) When I was 13, I spent the summer cleaning houses. I scrubbed other people's toilets, floors, and ovens. I dusted, vacuumed, and washed other people's homes. And I pretty much hated it. That summer, I decided, absolutely, and with no room for debate, that I would go to college so I would have choices about my future. My bridge to freedom of choice would be education.

Several years later, when I was twenty, and the lessons of that house-cleaning summer had dulled, and the temptations of the party hard life of a college student were all around me; I was working at a \$.99 cent store. It was the worst job I've ever had (and I've had a few less than stellar jobs) and I was FIRED from it! But what I learned in my short time there was, I never wanted to need that job. I wanted choices about where I would work and what I would do to put bread on my table and a roof over my head. It reminded me of the lesson of the summer in my early teens – bridges – choices. Returning to pursue a graduate degree twelve years after completing my Bachelor's Degree is a continuance of the principle of wanting choices or bridges. I didn't want others saw as the limitations of my education to prescribe where my career would go. So here I am, back in school, building those bridges.

THE HIGH ROAD

By Corey Klase, *Cayuga Correctional Facility*

When it comes to my future, I feel like I am standing at the proverbial fork in the road. I could take the low road and continue on the self-destructive path that I am used to. However, I have decided I am due for a change. After all, to make my family proud of me for once would be nice. What could it hurt to earn my High School Equivalency Diploma? What harm would it do me to take a few college courses? I acknowledge the opinion that it might be a struggle, but in the end I know that I am trying to better myself for the future.

To me, education is understanding information today that I did not know yesterday and using that information to put myself in a better situation. I want to open doors to better opportunities instead of taking the path of least resistance. Therefore, it is time to take advantage of the tools that are being offered to me and make something of myself instead of relying on others to continually push me along. I am going to check out the high road. I wonder how far it will take me...

EDUCATION: IT'S ABOUT US

By Arsi Qajar, *Cornell University*

Education is about the relationship. In other words, it's not just the end goal or the place the relationship is going, but the journey...In this context, education does not create the bridge, for a bridge seems to imply that one is only meant to traverse it. Traverse it why? To get from point a, you're starting point, to point b, the end point. It's just the means to get you from where you are to where you're going. Enter as toddler sucking on thumb, leave as man with vocational training. End of story.

I am Cornellian and can tell you there's a problem with this picture. And it's this: Education doesn't create or build bridges. A bridge is static; it never moves, only crumbles over time. And, as mentioned before, is used to get from one point to another. It's a means to an end. Behind us is some distant past, before us our destination. But education isn't that. Sure, that's the way we teach it, that's the way it's imposed. But education certainly isn't that. Education is a relationship. Education reveals the bridge, it doesn't build it...

Education is a relationship in two senses of the term. In one sense, it's like any girlfriend you've ever had. In other words, show it respect, take care of it, value it, dedicate yourself to it and I promise you, you will have a "return on your investment", if I may be so blunt. In another sense, it's a relationship between the you then, the you now, and, maybe, the you who you are becoming (future you). It's a journey. And as the old adage goes, the journey is everything. Education is everything. It's the relationships you build, the way you think the thoughts you have, the way you feel and most importantly, the identity you create and discover throughout your life. Education is about you. It's not about facts or figures, or hours spent in the library, it's about who you are. It's about who we are. It is about understanding the greater relationship that humanity shares. Sure, some of us are scientists, others are poets, but nonetheless we are all human. And education enlightens us to the bond that we all share—the search for meaning.

IMAGES OF BRIDGES

By Shane Kalb, *Auburn Correctional Facility*

Metaphors like Ellison's are complex because they contain a hundred additional metaphors within them, a hundred different interpretations. I thought of only a single one that strays from the purely metaphorical: of the brain and neuroplasticity of the construction of neural pathways that connect to one another and facilitate improved sharing of information. But this wasn't the first to come to mind. Seeing "knowledge" as already existing bridges and "education" as the building of new ones, Ellison's words show me a vision I can't help but enjoy visiting. So let's go there:

Stretching into the beyond in all directions, a universe of islands and platforms large and small, from vast and bristling with architecture and trees too small and graceful with tiles and grass. An Escher-esque panorama of colossal proportions, every segment terraced or layered, it is all a solitary, massive and intricate structure interconnected with shining marble bridges of every shape and size. It is impossible to grasp with just one look or perspective, for its sole occupant or observer is virtually incapable or experiencing or perceiving it in only a single moment. It is their own mind...and if they could travel to its edges they would see but an unfathomable chasm, a dark and frightening abyss only occasionally punctured with bridges stretching into its depths. They only unfold as they are traversed, and education is the exploration of this ever-expanding frontier.

But other interpretations render this inadequate. For instance, what if we see education as bridges between other minds, bridges between each of us and connecting us all? Because education does involve more than a single mind, be it through words and books (the bridge and medium connecting us this very moment), demonstration and imitation, or constant discourse. Might the vision better represent education if it weren't a solitary mind but instead the interconnected universe of humanity's collective knowledge? Each person their own unique land, separate but connected with bridges by which exchange and intercourse take place, other minds being the guiding lamps on the other end of the next bridge? In either image education is a departure from one state to another, from unlearned to learning. And like anything new and unknown, such things can be awful, awe-inspiring, brilliant or terrible.

The ease of choosing not to take such a journey reminds me of a quote from Darwin's *Descent of Man*: "Ignorance more freely begets confidence than does knowledge". In the context of bridges, a person with a smaller realm has less to reckon with and endure, hence the Ignorant's confidence in their non-expanding world. Living in the stasis of their minds' comfortable boundaries, all the things feared are things already familiar. They can have faith in their own realm's adequacy in its representation of the world. They might be confident, but it takes bravery to cross bridges and face truth. Beginning education they would find that their realm is but a speck, a fragile and miniscule floating bubble hardly visible in the vastness that is the collective edifice of mankind, just as those already undergoing education see that even the collective edifice itself is but a shadowy molecule in the midst of the inconceivable cosmic monstrosity that makes up all of reality and imagination. It is better to know this, though, for there is, paradoxically, clarity in this uncertainty. Education is a matter of building bridges to travel farther, and the Bridge of Bridges is the one that leads to the ironic and simultaneous processes of accumulating knowledge and realizing more and more that there is more and more to learn.

By extending myself and expanding my scope, I've found a sanctuary in the desolation that is imprisonment, figurative and literal. By panning out and seeing there is more, I see the seemingly illimitable emptiness of resigned ignorance as a thing of the past; it was just a small closet, a tiny portion of Plato's Cave. But the bridges to be built through my education are truly illimitable, and it is a glorious, majestic, and illuminating journey exploring the infinity within and the infinity I find in the loved people who grant me passage across the bridges that are theirs.

HUMAN ALCHEMY

By Nathan Powell, *Auburn Correctional Facility*

It is said that a sorcerer cannot build a bridge to the “real” world; that one can only build a bridge to reach the sorcerer. Now, while life in prison is worlds apart from your reality, these worlds lie in the opposite direction from Disneyland. Constructing ramps out of prison is frowned upon and the only paths in are narrow, forbidding and watched over by men with guns. Cornell students and professors are coming into Auburn Prison. Why? Why leave their safe world and cross into this dark place? They sacrifice their time and energy to walk under triple barriers of twisted razor wire and over the vast amount of fear and shame that keeps most folks away. They walk across the asphalt and concrete yard where no green thing grows and many of the shadows underfoot are bloodstained reminders of man’s potential for violence. Why do they do this?

Speaking for myself, I am ashamed to admit that I did not have the courage and perception to make that leap when I was a free man. Like many who drive by the triple fenced human warehouses all over the country, I assumed whoever was in there deserved to be in there. Actually going in there? It would never have occurred to me. “This individual voluntarily consorted with known felons.” Ugh!! Once I was convicted and sentenced I was forced to confront a piece of reality I had never really thought about, I did not like what I learned.

Once you are inside the walls of a U.S. prison it is very hard to escape the feeling that there is a grave injustice happening here. I am not suggesting that everyone in here is innocent. A significant number earned their punishment and a fraction of these probably deserve worse. The overwhelming majority in prison, however, are there for two reasons: being ignorant and being poor. These conditions are cureable. Most of these men are young. Yet, without a face, this group is the focus of society’s hatred. Somewhere along the line convicted felons became the last group still socially acceptable to hate. I believe we need to change the way we see the problem of crime. I think this is one reason Cornell’s best and brightest are walking into Auburn Prison.

Being young, ignorant, and poor does not mean these men aren’t intelligent. In fact, they represent a tremendous potential energy unused. Cornell volunteers release this energy, turning hopelessness into hope by providing an opportunity for education these men never dreamed of having. Education, in turn, lets them learn how they really got here and makes them aware of new opportunities they would otherwise be blind to. Most important though, is that each person who bridges politics to enter this prison must have compassion to do so and it is this compassion which unlocks the human potential here.

...Cornell is leading by example. They are recognizing the untapped energy of an amazing human resources whose experiences to this point has been primarily negative, Alchemists use energy to transform matter. By bringing positive hopeful energy to a negative prison environment you activate and motivate each mind you touch. In turn, you yourselves are transformed by the powerful realization that your compassion in action can literally redefine what they “real world” means.

THE BRIDGES OF CAYUGA COUNTY

By Michael Rhynes, *Cayuga Correctional Facility*

Incarcerated people are isolated, lonely, and haunted bridges
suspended over the human chasm of indifference
where no local or tourist takes the scenic route

For a buck and 20 cents
we pay a medium to
connect us to family and friends
through the séance of technology

How dreadful it is to
love and be loved through
the proxy of memories long past

Buffeted by chilling and abandoned
winds, we sway back and forth
watching cars drive by with families
on their way to the beaches, wedding, sleepovers, and
just plain joyful riding

Maybe you've heard us
on sterile and impotent nights
maybe you've heard us
on frigid and sunny days
howling where no howling should be

Rolling up your windows
you curse Steve Jobs for creating apple
riddled with static
as you cruise by
the bridges of Cayuga county

THE BRIDGE THAT UNITES HUMANITY

By Jacob Russell, *Auburn Correctional Facility*

Education. It allows us to listen to past generations, provides us a voice in the present generation, and enables us to be heard by future generations. Education is the bridge that spans the human experience, linking past, present, and future together in a single fluid existence shared by all of mankind. Education, in its various forms, has propelled the human race forward, from our earliest ancestors who learned to harness fire and to forge the tools that gave them the advantages to beat the evolutionary odds, to their modern counterparts who invented the vaccine for polio and put humans on the moon. Education elevates us, not by teaching us what to think, but rather how to think.

William Ralph Inge was correct when he said, “the aim of education is not the knowledge of fact but the values.” The power of education is its ability to change perspectives by broadening minds, thus bridging races, cultures, and religions by eliminating philistinism. Access to education creates opportunity; exclusion from it denies opportunity. Education opens doors for those possessing it, and bars doors for those lacking it. For many, education is their only hope for a better life, not only for themselves, but also future generations. Upward social mobility is achieved through education.

The denial of education is often a tool of oppression, because education is also a weapon against oppression. Lord Broughman pointed out the dual nature of education and how it “makes people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern, but impossible to enslave.” Education establishes credibility, and such credibility can spur world changing social movements, like those of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi—both educated men. Equality, not elitism, should be the ultimate goal of education, for it was the oh-so wise Confucius who taught that “in education there should be no class distinction.”

Through education we are revealed the secrets of science, art, history, and ourselves. By becoming more educated about the world and people in it, we learn how, as individuals, we relate to the world and all those in it. Education is more than the ability to simply quote Inge, Broughman, and Confucius (that, in and of itself, is merely pretension); rather, education is the ability to comprehend the context of that which is being quoted, and the profoundness of the words’ applicability to the world and its people. It is through the understanding of others, gained through education, that we achieve true enlightenment. This allows us to unite all of humanity by seeing people as more than just Jews, Muslims, Christians, homosexuals, heterosexuals, blacks, whites, or even prisoners. Education should open not only our minds, but also our hearts to the value and potential of all individuals, the aggregate of which form the humanity that connects all our lives and bridge the gulfs created by ignorance and intolerance.

THE ARKADIDO BRIDGE

By Jack Newton, *Cornell University*

In my opinion, and in accordance with the formal definition of the Oxford English Dictionary, “education” carries two different meanings. The first meaning pertains to the degree, or level of schooling, one obtains from an accredited institution; while the second relates to the erudition one acquires from a knowledgeable source. Although I value the former, and would trade mine for nothing less than eternal happiness, I believe the latter is in many ways the more vital of the two.

An exemplification of the value of the latter is the Arkadiko, or Kazarma, Bridge. Mycenaean Greeks built the bridge around the 12th century BC with little to no formal education regarding pertinent subjects such as mechanical engineering. Even without formal educations, however, the Mycenaean Greeks were able to build a bridge with few defects and the ability to support chariots. This feat in construction was possible because of ancient peoples who gathered adeptness in building from expert constructors—constructors able to pass on wisdom without midterms, papers, or (dare I say it) grades.

The Arkadiko Bridge still functions today, which is further evidence that knowledge need not be shared in a classroom setting. Anybody can garner education in any setting, so long as they have a thirst for knowledge. People who have wisdom at their fingertips should use those same fingertips to build educational bridges that allow people to cross over and reap knowledge. To not share scholarship is to not utilize scholarship. Connective bridges of knowledge keep the world enlightened.

A BITTER CURE

By Christopher Shapard, *Auburn Correctional Facility*

If the “mental darkness” of slavery is like the uneducated masses in prison then the Education in our readings is like the Cornell Prison Education Program. I have been incarcerated in prison since 1991 when I was 18 years old. I entered prison while I was still nominally attending high school. I was in all the college preparatory classes and above average in my grades and in my social status. Unfortunately, my mother was on welfare and, despite having my own apartment, I realized I had no clue how to live on my own. I went to an Armed Services Recruiter and took my A.S.V.A.B (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery Test). The highest score required was for the Marines. You needed at least a 55 grade for them. I scored an 83. Despite my plans to go into the military, I wound up killing a man and going to prison.

Once in prison I was offered the chance to take the G.E.D test. Without any studying, I walked in, took the test and passed. If I had scored two points higher, I would have had honors. I wound up being forced to take the Pre-G.E.D. a few years later. After studying for 2 months, I took the test and only had one wrong answer. The teacher swore I stole the answers and I was kicked out of school.

I never saw a greater amount of uneducated or miseducated people before coming to prison. For me I always assumed that all schools were the same and that people were generally smart. I’ve always felt stupid around people. However, coming into prison was an eye opener. People in here really suffer from a lack of a proper education. In Frederick Douglass’ “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass”, he writes that “...what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty – to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement...”

Education, however, is not simply a matter of recitation of facts and dates. True education is a process of liberation and, once freed, it is impossible to contain. As I spent time in prison, I began to learn the history of this system. I began to learn the history of those around me. I began to learn the history of the nation I was once so bent on risking my life to defend. Frederick Douglass states, “What I got from Sheridan (mighty speeches on Catholic emancipation) was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved.”

As my mind and readings expanded to understand that my position was detestable, I also saw that my imprisonment is deplorable. The age of America has gone away from rehabilitation. Violent felons are seen as irredeemable. My lot has been designated incorrigible. In 1995, Governor Pataki took away the college programs here in New York. This followed on the heels of President Clinton’s (forced?) approval of the end of federal financing of college in prisons.

Now, after being in prison for twenty years, I'm given the chance to attend college. And what do I see? I see my life wasted and I see my hopes of being free again as a great delusion. As Douglass said, "I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed".

There is a motto called, "Ignorance is bliss", but I see its cost. Ignorance is what I see in the yard. The endless repetitive cycle of people who keep coming back because they know nothing else. The insanity of watching a man go free, who doesn't even know what his freedom means, kills me. What I wouldn't give for a chance to be free!! And when I see that fool returned to prison, I feel the knife twist in my heart and wish I were ignorant or dead.

Prison education is necessary. Necessary for people who will be freed and for those who won't. Yes, even as the truth sears my soul, I say that education is necessary. For without it, I would never have changed from the emotion driven teenager I was. I would never have stripped myself of the lies, racism and inane parroting of American propaganda. I was asked by a guard, "Why do you bother? I thought you weren't going home." And I had to wonder if there was a truth there. But as I've read the stories thus far, I see the reason why I continue to learn. I am defining myself by myself. Attending Cornell classes isn't about the learning so much as it is about the fact that I CAN learn. It requires my discipline and commitment. It requires me to accept things openly even when I feel it is futile. It requires me to engage in life.

This prison education program may never be applied in the free world by me. However, it has been applied here in prison. I tell others about it. I try to open their eyes and make them see. I ask them to question their own reality and demand better of themselves. There is a bitter cure for me. For I see it not in how it helps me but how it can help others. And that is a sad reality; most people in here WANT to be ignorant. With knowledge comes responsibility, responsibility requires dedication and sacrifice. Most people came here by following the path of least resistance, getting the quick and easy dollar. Asking them to change is hard, especially when America wants this.

Prisons are a growing industry in America. By turning the marginalized into profit-making chattel, America encourages the continuance of crimes that got people here. Once incarcerated, there is little or no move to change the offender. Why would they? It feeds the system and keeps the industry secure.

The latest move is the introduction of televisions into the prison. This small 8" television stupefies the prisoners to idiocy. No more are the self-taught radicals to be found. No more the call for prisoner solidarity and prison reform. Like a slave's holiday, televisions are the source of idleness and entertainment. Luckily we don't have televisions in our cells at Auburn. But they are coming. When they do, I expect there will be a clear line drawn between the masses and the "talented tenth" referred to by W.E.B. DuBois.

TOP SPIN

By Ian Greene, *Cayuga Correctional Facility*

I have had a large amount of memorable people in my life but none of them stand out in the way that this man does. Not only is this person one of my first heroes, but he is also a teacher that I will never forget. He has no idea that I wrote this essay involving him, but Doug Francis has inspired me through his teachings in the art of table tennis or “ping-pong” if you will, in a way that I will carry with me for life.

Doug Francis, a sixty something man Newark, New York, has been a friend of mine for more than a decade now. As a boy, I played in the youth baseball league around my way, where Doug ran the concession stand. Dough worked for the local Recreation Center and dished out slush puppies to all of the attendants at Hoffman Field as part of his job. Our friendship started there. What nine-year-old boy does not consider the slushy man a friend?

I would attend the recreation center in my town frequently from Elementary School all the way through High School, talking sports and shooting the breeze with Dough the whole way. Around my Sophomore year of High School, I became quite skilled at table tennis and eventually I was good enough to beat most of my peers with ease. I had my own table tennis racket, the Derrick May pro-model, with the black and birds egg blue, checkered handle, and the red, double-cushioned paddle. I was the real deal, so I thought.

When I was playing a friend one day, after a few games of basketball, Doug approached me and said, “I’ve been watching you Greene, you’re pretty good.” Me being the cocky fifteen-year-old at that point I responded, “I know, you wanna get spanked too old man?”

“I show no mercy kid,” was all that he said in his reply. That day I signed my own death warrant. The sixty something year old, wrinkly skinned, prosthetic hipped Doug Francis kicked my can up and down that ping-pong table just like he said he would, “with no mercy.” Out of all the games that Doug and I played, I may have scored five points, mind you, a table tennis game is played to twenty one. That day my life changed and from then on, I was the Karate Kid, and Doug was Mr. Miagi.

By this time, I was playing Doug at the Recreation Center few nights out of the evening every week. We would play for hours. Doug would drill me on ball placement, demonstrating that if you return the ball to your opponents back hand as often as possible, you have exposed his weakness and therefore, you have improved your chance of victory. Also, we would practice putting spin on the ball, applying velocity, smashing (hitting the ball very hard and at a tight angle), returning smashes, serving, and paddle precision.

My skill level increased threefold by playing with Doug and at that point, those guys that used to give me a run for my money had become no challenge whatsoever. The only contender in my eyes was Old Man Doug. Now you would think that Doug would eventually slip up and lose a couple of games. It never happened. Doug beat me every game. I have played sports all of my life and I pride myself on being an athlete, so you could imagine the shots that my ego took while playing and losing to a senior citizen. I got over it.

Eventually, Doug's hip began to bother him more than usual and he had trouble standing for more than two games at a time. I felt sorry for him, almost feeling as though it was my fault that he had been hurt. After all, playing ping-pong with me was the reason why he was standing up and putting all of that strain on his hip. It was not my fault at all really; the injury was only a product of the inevitable. Doug was getting too old. I eventually graduated from High School and move on with things in my life but every once in a while I would still see Doug around town and say hello. Thinking back on it now, Doug has really been a positive influence on me. I sincerely believe that Doug is my hero because the lessons that he has taught me at the Recreation Center go much deeper than just playing ping-pong. They have carried over as life skills. Things like never giving up, staying confident in your abilities and never underestimating your opponents are a few points that I can recall from Doug's teachings that I still rely on in everyday life. To this man I am thankful.

I have had a large quantity of memorable people in my life whether it has been coaches, employees, classmates, or professors, but not one of them has taught me the unique lessons that I learned at the Recreation Center. Doug never really got any recognition throughout his life for the way that he helped others, especially our youth. He has been a positive influence in my life as well as the lives of so many others, so I believe that it is only right for his influence to be known. I am proud to pay my tribute to my hero, my teacher and my friend, Doug Francis.

“Can bad seeds still grow? Even here in the soil of prison, fertile minds reach up from the muck like tender shoots. Auburn’s plants have to stretch farther to overcome the darkness and it makes our stems spindly. Education is like the post that braces over stalks...it helps us to span the gulf.”

-Joshua J. Keppen

*“A highway of all thought
Without a bridge built to connect
It’s impossible to learn; to be taught”*

- Ryan Austin

“Each person who bridges the politics to enter this prison must have compassion to do so, and it is this compassion which unlocks the human potential here.”

- Nathan Powell

“I see the reason why I continue to learn. I am defining myself by myself. Attending Cornell classes isn’t about the learning so much as it is about the fact that I can learn. It requires my discipline and commitment. It requires me to accept things openly even when I feel it is futile. It requires me to engage in life.”

-Christopher Shapard