

Final Report: Podell Endowment Awards for Research and Scholarship (PEARS)

Title: Sharing and Archiving Voices of Cornell's Prison Education Program

Name and affiliation of applicants:

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Description and significance of the work: Participating in college education in prison is described as *life changing* by both the incarcerated students who learn and the Cornell faculty and students who teach. We have set a long-term goal to archive the now more-than-twenty-five-year history of prison education at Cornell. In the current project, we sought to use an oral history approach to document as well as disseminate understanding of the experience of college in prison. Our goals were to create recordings of interviews with members of the CPEP community, preserve them in the University Archive, and consult with experts about vehicles for bringing the conversations to public attention. Familiarity with the correctional system is limited in our society and few can appreciate or understand the positive impacts of education for incarcerated individuals. The overall goal of this project is to disseminate that understanding.

Progress January-October 2024: We have been joined in our efforts by two highly experienced CPEP faculty, Mary Katzenstein and Jan Zeserson, together with CPEP's Associate Director of Student Services, Betsye Violette. As proposed, we worked with videographer Peter Carroll to complete two recording sessions, one in June at the home of Mary Katzenstein and another in September in Kennedy Hall. At Peter's suggestion, most of the interviews were conducted with

one person on camera and the partner/questioner off camera. In Peter's experience, this format yields recordings that are more readily adapted for a variety of uses.

In order to address our goal of enriching the archive with the voices of CPEP *students*, we prioritized their recruitment. Approximately 9.5 hours of interviews were recorded with:

1. Formerly incarcerated CPEP students:

Five Points CF: Jon Amidon AA '18 , Jesse Johnston AA '18, Rich Paul AA'18,

Auburn CF: Jalaal Peoples 2020-, Michael Rhynes AA'12, Lucas Whaley AA'16 ,

Bryon Russ 2005-, together with his wife Jolene (pictured below),

Cayuga CF: Darryl Miller AA '22 with his daughter Hannah

2. Donor: Nick Groos, Cornell '84

3. Faculty Founders: Professors emeriti Pete Wetherbee, Ken McClane

4. Teaching Assistant: Neil Nadkarni, Cornell '09

5. CPEP staff: Program Coordinator at Auburn CF 2014-2020, Kyri Murdough

Review of the recordings reveals themes of considerable (sometimes unexpected) interest, including the influence of CPEP on prison life outside of the classroom; the motivation of students to enroll; the change in self-image that resulted; the impact of learning on relationships with family members. A 6 minute edited sample of the former student interviews can be viewed here <https://vimeo.com/1019492118/b6694f2652>.

Work left to be done: With completion of the second and last recording session last month, the videos and transcripts are being prepared for submission to the University Archive. Discussions

are ongoing regarding how the recordings might be used in the near term to advance the mission of CPEP.

Acknowledgements of support from PEARS: News of the grant award and its purpose were shared on the widely distributed CPEP newsletter of October 4, 2024 (1,890 recipients, opened by 1,139). We will continue to acknowledge the award in all our communications and in any products resulting from this project.

**Grant secured to Archive CPEP
Origins**

**CPEP Board Chair Judy
Appleton, alongside Mary
Katzenstein, Jan Zeserson,
Betsye Violette, and Maddie
Reynolds, has been awarded a
Podell Endowment Award for
Research and Scholarship to**



**conduct oral histories of the Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP). In
June and September, the team invited CPEP alumni, founders, former staff,
volunteers, and donors to share their memories of the program. Cornell
teamed up with long-time [PPTG](#) videographer Peter Carroll to record the
interviews (see video still above). The resulting videos will be preserved in
the CPEP Archive within the Rare and Manuscript Collections at Cornell
University Library.**

Other support: Most of the participants were not local to Ithaca and we rebudgeted some funds to support travel for former students. In addition, we were able to leverage resources of Cornell Reunion, when several key interviewees were traveling to Ithaca.