

Professional Notes: Social Justice Matters

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Penny Prince and students rehearsing her original musical, *When I Get to Where I'm Going*, at Lehman College, City University of New York. Photo by Eduardo Resendiz

“Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done,” says lawyer and author Bryan Stevenson.¹ However, the stigma and the practical consequences one faces after being released from prison typically result in sharply diminished opportunities in housing, jobs, civil rights (many states do not permit folks with criminal convictions to vote), school admissions, and professional certifications.

For years, many college applications included the question, “Have you been convicted of a crime?” An affirmative response would effectively eliminate the candidate from consideration. Happily, due to the “Ban the Box” movement, that question is now gone from many college applications. Still, colleges have a long way to go in knowing how to meet the needs of reentering students (who generally do not wish to self-identify as having a criminal record) and helping them succeed. These new students often arrive with no computer skills and no financial credit or bank account. In fact, they may be released having accrued thousands of dollars in debt (alimony, child support debt, and loan interest continue to amass while a person is incarcerated). They are recovering from trauma, may have little confidence or self-esteem, and are accustomed to the very regimented, institutionalized lifestyle of prison. And yet, by the accounts of professors across the board, these students are characteristically the most motivated, self-aware, and eager to succeed once given the chance. In the words of my colleague Anne Rice, an assistant professor in the African and African American Studies Department, “[f]ormerly incarcerated students, especially those who were able to take courses while behind bars, feel deeply the power of education to transform lives.”

At Lehman College, City University of New York, we began a Reentry Committee in fall 2017. When I proposed the idea to our faculty senate, there were a couple of fearful comments but an overwhelming number of positive, encouraging responses. To date, we have more than 35 regular members on our committee and have created a Reentry Task Force, as well. We examine, discuss, and disseminate information about fair-practice regulations and ways to support students, and we honor the voices of the reentering students themselves. We have hosted two events each attended by more than 200 people. For our first event, we invited Rehabilitation through the Arts (RTA), an organization that sends artists into prisons to mount theatrical productions,² and viewed a documentary about RTA’s impressive production of the Aaron Sorkin play *A Few Good Men*. This was followed by a panel discussion with several of the actors/former inmates who are now teaching artists, themselves. Our second event featured Gilda Brasch’s moving documentary *Let My People Vote*, about the difficulties formerly incarcerated people face in voter registration.³ Our Reentry Committee has members from every department of the

college and includes students, staff, faculty, and administration, and our events attract families and community members, as well.

Lessons for the Classroom

In my classes for future music educators, the curriculum places substantial emphasis on sensitivity to the students they will teach. Nearly one in five New York City students, for example, has some history of criminal justice involvement. Indeed, we teach children who are homeless, are living below the poverty line, or are children of undocumented parents. We have students who are hungry, bullied, and marginalized.

As teachers, we must acknowledge the lives our students are living and provide supports and focused strategies in our lessons whenever possible. For example, when celebrating Mother's Day, can we tailor the song/activity for children whose mothers are deceased or incarcerated, who live in foster homes, or who have two mommies or daddies? How do we help children whose mother or father may have been recently deported, who may be living with fear and trauma? Music is terrific that way: Children can devise their own lyrics and scenarios, and we've all seen the rich bonding that occurs when we learn about each other through creating, singing, and performing together.

Our teaching, whether at the preK–12 or the college level, or in a private studio, must include acknowledgment and support for all our pupils. This awareness and responsiveness can only help stem a cycle too tragic to perpetuate. We can make a difference that will change the future of all the students whose lives we touch through music.

Notes

1. Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2014), 17–18.

2. Rehabilitation through the Arts: <https://www.rta-arts.org>.

3. Gilda Brasch, producer and director: www.letmypeoplevotemovie.com.

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