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“THE IRON TOWER”

by: Laura Bult

Clyde Meikle grew up in a Jamaican family in a poor neighborhood of Hartford, Connecticut. His mother worked the night shift as a janitor at the University of Hartford and would bring Clyde encyclopedias and childrens' books before they got thrown out.

Clyde was smart and loved to read as a boy, but he never liked school. He didn't like the rules and the rigidity and never felt like he fit in.

“I didn't like anything that had the 20 rules,” he said. He budded into the class clown in order to find his social niche.

By his first semester of high school Clyde would get kicked out of school for the first time. He said that he came to the rescue of a classmate named Arthur who was getting bullied. He had a hammer in his backpack at school that day--because he heard you could steal cars with it--and he propped it up like it was a gun to send the bullies running. School officials found the hammer in his locker and swiftly expelled him.

He was sent to a string of alternative schools, but he would never graduate high school.

“I never had a coach, never had a teacher that pulled me by the collar and said ‘try harder,’” he said.

Clyde would make it to college, though, by untraditional means. Over 20 years after he dropped out of high school, Clyde is receiving a Wesleyan education at Cheshire State Prison in Connecticut. Clyde is one of 54 students at Cheshire enrolled in Wesleyan's Center for Prison Education, one of a few liberal arts programs that sprung out of a lack of political will for publicly funded higher education in prisons in the U.S. and that are challenging our country's notions of the purpose of education.

The CPE program is a replica of a liberal arts education on Wesleyan's campus. With a few exceptions, they have the same coursework and the same professors. The program is designed in a way that professors should treat their prison course as just another section of their regular class, the director of CPE, Dara Young, explained to me.

I went to Cheshire State Prison one summer afternoon to meet the students enrolled in CPE. Cheshire has a reputation for having the poorest prison conditions in Connecticut. Some CPE students transferred there anyway to participate in the program.

I visited during a creative writing workshop. The eleven men in the class--six were black, 4 were white and one was hispanic--dressed in identical khaki scrubs, shuffled in single-filed and

politely shook hands with the instructor before they found a desk along the periphery of the classroom and took a seat.

They squeezed their large bodies into the small desks in the room and sat expectantly. There was a buoyancy to the room that reflected the two hours that day that they would do something a little different than the rigid prison routine.

They had pencils--an old winding sharpener was affixed to the front wall of the classroom--and looseleaf paper provided by the instructor. Instead of books, their coursework was all contained in a stapled paper packet. Photocopies of short stories, poetry and images adorned the pages inside.

That day the students flipped to one of the images in the packet; it was photojournalist Sam Nzima's 1976 photograph of a black South African teenager running with the body of a dying boy in his arms. They were fleeing an anti-apartheid protest in Soweto, South Africa after police officers open fired on the student protesters. The face of the fleeing boy is visibly fear-stricken as the other boy's body dangles tenuously from his arms. The image now stands as a symbol of resistance.

The instructor, a young graduate student studying English Literature at Yale, told the class to do a 10-minute free-writing exercise about the photograph. Each student gazed down at the photo, took in the image and wrote furiously.

The sound of scratching pencils was barely audible above the prison ambience. There was a constant din of slamming doors and static from the corrections officers' walkie-talkies. Guards poked their heads inside the classroom occasionally, doing a head count, and moved on.

The students, presumably adapted to the constant distractions, continued writing, well past the 10 minute mark. The instructor, noticing that they needed more time, gave them 5 extra minutes to finish.

Clyde, whose tall, lanky body was emphasized by his baggy prison scrubs, volunteered to read first.

"When we forget about the well-being of a child, we forget what it means to be human," he read. The classroom froze in deference as he spoke, a sign, I would later realize, of Clyde's power.

He nearly rapped as he read, his words were so rhythmic. He gestured his spindly hands and used the full range of his mouth muscles to articulate himself. But, yet, he spoke softly, like watching someone speak on television on low volume.

He related the image of black struggle in South Africa with United States's own torrid history of violence towards blacks.

"What about America? Did anyone say anything to them when they were hanging their blacks from trees?" he implored.

The rest of the students took turns to read their essays aloud and the class discussed issues of race, history, perspective and power struggle. The discussion was self-aware; the students repeatedly brought the conversation back to their own circumstances as prisoners. A liberal arts class indeed.

After the class is over, Clyde tells me he has spent nearly half of his life in prison and, if he continues to lose his appeals for resentencing, he will spend another 30. This has awarded him the label of "lifer" which, I learn, earns him respect from both his fellow inmates and the corrections officers. "Lifers," they say, have learned how to do their time.

Clyde has also been in the program the longest of any of the CPE students. He was in the first CPE class in 2005 and has been enrolled in the program ever since. He has earned enough college credits to graduate in a year, if measured in prison time.

Clyde found out about the program through a flyer hanging on a school bulletin board at Cheshire.

Like all his fellow inmates, Clyde has very little choice in life. He is 42-years-old and he doesn't choose when to eat; He doesn't choose when to sleep or when to wake up. He doesn't choose when to shower; He doesn't choose when to speak with his family or who he lives with. He doesn't have privacy.

Formerly incarcerated men and women I've spoken with describe prison time as devoid of meaning and stimulation, with nothing to focus on but the possibility of returning home. The time in "doing time" is measured differently, they say.

So when Clyde saw the flyer, he applied to CPE without hesitation.

In the past five years he has taken courses in Sociology, Biology, Cultural Mathematics, Philosophy, Anthropology, Calculus, Economics, Greek Mythology, and Literature. He has earned the equivalent of six semesters if he was on a normal college pace, just two semesters shy of a degree. CPE is not yet accredited, however, and the program administrators are racing alongside Clyde to get the program degree-eligible by the time he reaches that point.

Once he has a Wesleyan degree, Clyde might not ever get a job or an internship or have access to more education. He might not ever have the opportunity to make a contribution back to his community with his schooling.

But, he says, it is the only thing that makes him feel free.

"Being in prison now, it's like I feel like there's nothing I can do for myself. But the possibilities seem almost infinite," Clyde told me.

For the first time in his life, the program has offered Clyde self-esteem and identity. It has assuaged some of the powerlessness that comes with living in prison.

Beads of sweat collected on his closely shaved head and rolled down his cheeks as he explained this to me while we talked after class, despite the cold temperature in the room we were in. He confessed to me that he was nervous.

He said, "Learning that I am a person once I get out is important."

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Cheshire State Prison sits atop a grassy hill in the town of Cheshire, Connecticut, situated so that it is visible from a quiet street. The facility is collegiate, built of red brick and regal pillars. As you approach the building, a chain link fence crowned with spirals of barb wire serves as a reminder that it is not a fortress of education, but of security.

The facility was built just after the turn of the century by inmates from a nearby prison. They were brought in to lay the red bricks; Connecticut Department of Corrections purchased cells left over from the construction of Sing Sing prison in New York. This interstate effort laid the groundwork for what was to come: a multiplying prison population over the next century.

Inmates filled Cheshire's cells and those of other prisons in the U.S. at rates like no other country in the world. There are now over 2 million prisoners in the United States and 7 million Americans involved in the penal system in some way. The way things stand, the European Union would not allow the United States entry for our punitive habits.

A lot of times, too, it is the same people who keep going back. Statistics show that imprisonment has very little to do with "corrections," as it turns out. Almost half of the 700,000 Americans who walk out of prison every year will violate the terms of their release within three years, turn around and go back in.

Jack Henry Abbott says in a letter to Norman Mailer, published in the 1981 book *In the Belly of the Beast*, in explanation for why he murders someone again just weeks after being released from prison:

"No one has ever come out of prison a better man," he justifies to him.

But that's not always true.

Incarcerated men and women who receive the most basic education while in prison have a greater chance of never returning. In ways that are more difficult to measure than recidivism

rates, prison education improves the lives and minds of the thousands of warehoused men and women deprived of any other intellectual stimulation.

There's been quiet rumblings in the political world recently about the need to address our country's legacy of mass incarceration, but there has been silence on the need to acknowledge the conditions inside.

Governor Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, is one of the most active politicians in the effort to imprison fewer people in his own state. He has already closed seven prisons in upstate New York and plans to close four more in the next year.

"We are reducing the madness of a mass incarceration society and ending a system of unnecessary human and financial waste," he said in a state of the state speech in January of this year.

Deincarceration isn't just a Democratic ideal, either. Officials from all over the political spectrum are getting on board. Republicans, like Governor Rick Perry, have realized the burden of high incarceration rates in his state of Texas, the current prize-holder for housing the most prisoners in the country. Perry passed a law in 2003 that made it possible to send Texans caught with less than a gram of marijuana to probation instead of prison and he has put millions of dollars toward alternative to incarceration programs since then. Rand Paul has supported similar legislation and programs in Kentucky.

But, what happens inside prisons isn't part of this conversation. The barriers to providing higher education to inmates reflects how difficult it is for the most powerful people in our country to consider what happens to the most powerless people living inside prison walls.

Justice Kennedy addressed the American Bar Association in 2003 on the mass apathy about prison conditions. "When the door is locked against the prisoner, we do not think about what is behind it," and "As a profession and as a people, we should know what happens after the prisoner is taken away."

The reasons behind this shift are measured in dollars, not humanity. States stand to save at least \$30,000 and up to \$60,000 a prisoner annually by reducing the prison population, according to a 2012 Vera Institute Study. The local economies of towns that rely on the prison industry would be transformed, for better or for worse.

Bettering the conditions in prisons is another battle altogether. It's a battle that almost no politician has taken on because there is no cost-benefit analysis, there is no political will to improve the lives of criminals, some of whom might not ever be released or vote. Furthermore, we rarely see what goes on inside those walls--aside from the occasional dramatization--and prison populations are overwhelmingly poor and minority.

This was most evident in 1994 when the leader of the free world, then President Bill Clinton, passed crime laws that took freedom away from more men and women than any other president. Despite our liberal optimism in Clinton, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 created harsher sentencing for low-level drug crimes and helped build up the prison infrastructure that we are working so hard now to dismantle.

It did something else, too. The bill not only set in motion a multiplying prison population but diminished the opportunities of those inside. In a provision to the crime bill--arguing that it was unjustifiable to give higher education to prisoners when low-income families struggled to pay for education--Clinton made prisoners ineligible for Pell grants for higher education.

Prior to Clinton's 1994 legislative ban there were hundreds of higher education programs in prison. That number dropped to a small handful. According to one estimate, there were 350 post-secondary education programs in prisons in the United States. After 1994, all but eight closed.

The decline in prison education programs hinged on the elimination of Pell Grants, but it started happening even before that. In 1988, those with drug convictions were excluded from the grants ; in 1992 those sentenced to death or life without parole were denied educational support.

More recently, Andrew Cuomo, the very same governor who seeks to deincarcerate New York, quietly excluded funding for college programs for 10 prisons this fiscal year after he boasted that it would be included. He caved under pressure from State Senate Republicans who subscribe to the "kids before cons" mentality--that families struggling to pay for education for their own kids shouldn't have to pay for the education of criminals.

"It was a feeling primarily in the Senate that we should not be using public funds to provide college courses in prison," Cuomo said in a press conference after his budget passed in April of this year.

"The Governor's latest plan to fund college educations for convicted criminals using taxpayer dollars is an insult to law abiding citizens all across our state," State Senator Chris Collins said in support of his "Kids Before Cons" Act in response to Cuomo's plan to fund college programs in New York prisons.

"The fact of the matter is that it is not a zero sum game between a prisoner and non-prisoner." refutes Ellen Lagemann, who was a professor of History of American Education at Harvard before going to Bard to be on the board of the Bard Prison Initiative, after which Wesleyan's CPE is modelled.

"The fact is that our spending on corrections has gone up steadily and the spending on education has gone down steadily," said Lagemann.

Daniel Karpowitz, another board member of the Bard Prison Initiative points out that the very same politicians who argue against the moral imperative of providing education to prisoners have also done nothing to assuage the high cost of education to low-income American families.

“I have yet to see where they’ve been out hustling and busting their ass and spending political capital to improve the education system,” said Karpowitz.

Karpowitz has taken on a dogged mission of colleges throughout the country to develop privately funded prison curriculum after Bard’s liberal arts model. So far, he’s had some success. There are nine other liberal arts programs of its kind in New York and seven other programs throughout the country, including Wesleyan’s.

There are nearly 200 general higher education programs, according to Harvard’s Prison Studies Project. These programs run the gamut of what’s available to people outside of prison: vocational schools, community colleges, arts schools and university programs. Liberal arts programs, like the ones at Bard and Wesleyan, are entirely funded through private grants and foundations, in an attempt to fill in the public funding holes.

The precarious existence of education programs in prison is clear when I tour the prison’s school at Cheshire State Prison.

Bob Strawson--whose generous gut, conservative sweaters, white spiky hair and ruddy skin tone make him look a bit like a high school basketball coach--is the principal of Cheshire’s school. He has worked in prison academics in Connecticut for 24 years. He met me on the steps of Cheshire on my second visit and escorted me through security and inside.

“Programs come and go,” he tells me as he shepherds me through the prison and back to his office. We walk in a designated “non-prisoners” lane through the halls, demarcated by a white line that bisects the concrete floors, and to the prison’s school.

The school’s decor is condescendingly juvenile. Images of false positivity are painted on the walls: rainbows, trees and inspirational idioms.

He explains to me that staff has been cut dramatically. They lost 70 teachers in the last 5 years.

“Rarely is it a line item in the budget,” Strawson said of prison education. The money goes instead to hiring more corrections officers and to support the imperative of “safety and security.” He repeats the mantra “safety and security” at least 5 times during our conversation.

Cheshire’s school is only tangentially affiliated with Wesleyan’s Center for Prison Education. CPE uses the school’s facilities but has a fair amount of autonomy. The curriculum has to be approved by Strawson, though, to make sure it’s not too divisive. A year ago he nixed a Wesleyan course on Black Nationalism, for one.

“It’s galvanizing. It’s incendiary,” he said, as justification.

Strawson, the spokesman for prison academics at Cheshire was, at best, indifferent towards the existence of a progressive liberal arts program, in spite of their admittance that it improved morale and recidivism rates.

“How do you feel about having CPE here at Cheshire?” I ask him.

“Fine,” he said with little enthusiasm and a blank face, “I think they’re filling a mission that we can’t provide through state funding.”

Andrius Banevicius, the Communications Director for the Connecticut Department of Corrections, accompanied me during all of my visits and conversations. At this point, he interjected.

“This is a prison first and foremost,” he interrupted. “Decisions are made first on *safety and security*, everything else is a distant second.”

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After my visit, I sat at a picnic table in a small park across the street from Cheshire with Dara Young, the director of CPE. It’s a serene street. A group of people played pick-up basketball nearby and a man napped in his ice cream truck, no customer in sight.

Dara is a young idealist with a law degree and is outspoken about the need to reform prisons. She has the worn down attitude of someone who works tirelessly against a system that won’t budge.

People like Dara will tout the fact prison education programs lower recidivism rates in public and to funders. This has worked well for them. CPE secured a \$300,000 private donation from the Ford Foundation earlier this year.

But, in private, Dara will admit that recidivism isn’t why she does the tireless and emotional work. Improving prison conditions is her motive.

“Why education, then? Is that the solution?” I ask her.

“If you had asked me to make a list of all the things that are most important for the prison reform agenda I would not have put education on top of that list,” Dara admits, “I have come to see it in a very different light. And as much more powerful than I thought that it could be.”

“Why the change?”

"I mean I guess, like, it was watching the ability of the students to create a world outside the prison inside the prison. That room, even though it's just one room, even though it's hot in there sometimes and it gets really loud. That room is a different world than every place else. If I could, I would want to free every one of my students, but I can't. But, I can give them the room. So that's what I do, or try to do."

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Clyde Meikle grew up in a Jamaican community in the post-industrial city of Hartford, Connecticut.

His mother, he says, fled a job working for a Chinese woman in Jamaica and his father, ran off the sugar cane fields. They went together to the United States where they had Clyde and his three siblings. They lived in a house on Enfield Street and were one of the few homeowners in the their neighborhood.

Clyde went through the double-identity confusion that a lot of first generation immigrants do: he was American to the Hartford Jamaican community and he was Jamaican to his American friends. He also recalls getting teased. "There were a lot of 'banana boat' jokes," he said and would get in fights defending himself and his younger sister, Ilean.

Clyde was very close with his mother, who doted on him more than his other siblings with food and gifts and affection. But Ilean and Clyde recall how absent she was.

"We hardly saw our mom because he worked two jobs," Ilean remembers.

His mother would pick up part-time janitorial jobs on top of her full-time maintenance job at the University of Hartford. His father worked odd jobs at all hours and drank too much.

"He wasn't an abusive alcoholic. He was the kind of drunk that was happy when he was drunk. / was happy when he was drunk," he said.

Clyde recalls being a lonely child in an empty house. His father would leave the family when Clyde was 16.

"I've thought a lot about nothingness. It was just nothingness. I took to the streets to fill that nothingness," he said, in his beat-poet manner of speaking. He scanned the walls behind me as he spoke, as if working through his thoughts on that time in his life.

He continued running the streets and eventually started using cocaine to fill that void. Ilean remembers that their belongings would go missing in the house after Clyde would steal them and sell them for drugs. One day he confronted her and their mother and confessed he had a drug problem and needed to go to rehab.

Clyde continued to get into fights after rehab. "I think it came from us not being able to express our emotions. There was nobody for us to talk to or to verbalize what was going on in our lives. That was our outlet for letting our emotions out," Ilean, his sister, said. She, too, would get into fights and Clyde would often jump in to defend her.

"I had a lot of pain in me. I don't think I would've lived."

But it was not his life that would end. One night in November of 1994, Clyde and his cousin, Clifford Walker, got in a heated fight. Clifford wanted Clyde to move his car and Clyde refused. They were both under the influence of drugs and tensions were high. At the culmination of the dispute, Clyde went to his car. He retrieved a sawed off shotgun and drew it on his cousin, who was in the front seat of his car.

According to witness testimony in court documents, Clifford challenged Clyde:

"What are you doing to do? Shoot me?" he asked.

"Fuck you!" Clyde answered back. Then he delivered a single fatal shot to his head. Clyde hid out for two days in New Haven before he was caught by authorities when he returned to Hartford to retrieve money.

Our country's attitude about whether criminals are redeemable has evolved over time.

In the 1970's, a series of flawed studies on prison came to the conclusion that "nothing works" in prison corrections, according to an article called "Key Finding: Rehabilitation is Dead," which outlines the findings of the 1974 Martinson report. This conclusion, albeit faulty, solidified the purpose of imprisonment as a method of punishment as opposed to rehabilitation.

It's no surprise, then, that Michel Foucault would write *Discipline & Punish*, on the oppressiveness of the penal system, a year later in 1975.

Emblematic of this transition from rehabilitation to warehousing, state public policy gave up on prisoners as they decided to defund education programs across the country. The decline in academic programs between 1991 and 2004 affected every level of education, but college education in particular plummeted from a 14 percent to 7 percent participation rate by all inmates.

The U.S. is unique in that there are no constitutional entitlements to education on either the state or the federal level. The burdening costs of higher education for all students certainly reflects that.

This also provides a challenge for prison education advocates: they've tried claims under the US constitution's eighth--banning cruel and unusual punishment--and fourteenth amendments--guaranteeing equal protection of law--but with no success. Given these legal limitations, postsecondary prison education in the US depends on public and political attitudes. These have not been favorable, as we've already seen.

Education advocates in general, and especially prison education advocates make the argument that university based prison programs represent the affirmations of education as a human right in its purest form: the act of learning for redemption instead of employment in an academic institution that does not seek profit and corporate interests.

Sarah Mahurin, the dean of Yale's Timothy Dwight College, is one of those people. Mahurin taught African American Literature for Wesleyans's CPE program and sits on their admissions board. I met her and an alum of the CPE program, Roy Trotter, on Yale's campus. We strolled through the pastoral college grounds where some of the country's most privileged students laid in hammocks and sprawled out in the technicolor grass, their faces in books; a picture-perfect college scene.

Trotter had just been released from prison and met with Mahurin to talk about pursuing more college courses now that he's out. Mahurin took him to Shake Shack in downtown New Haven so they could talk about college applications and financial aid. I asked her why, as an educator, she got involved with CPE.

"The Cheshire program is an intense reflection of the liberal arts," she told me. "It's a model for learning for learning's sake. It's never preparing you for any kind of job."

In this way, CPE students and the other students at liberal arts prison education programs go through the same rationalization that many American students do about the value of a liberal arts education, measuring personal growth and interests against job prospects.

On the other hand, Mahurin comes from a very specific academic environment, one belonging to the most elite American and international students.

In 1989, the Council of Europe made a recommendation that education in prisons worldwide "...should be like the education provided for similar age groups in the outside world, and the range of learning opportunities for prisoners should be as wide as possible."

In some ways it promises more. Judging from the norms in access to education for poor black Americans, people like Clyde and Trotter and their classmates would likely never had ended up at a place like Wesleyan had they not been behind bars. Tragically, Clyde finally had access to quality education and an understanding of his own worth and intelligence in perhaps the most invisible environment possible.

But, in other ways, it *is* a reflection of the outside in its exclusivity. Private universities helped fill the void left by the depletion of publicly funded programs after Pell Grants were stripped away. The Bard Prison Initiative, for example, took over the empty classrooms deserted by SUNY's programs after their funding dried up. So, what's left for inmates is the kind of elite education that represents a social class that eluded them in their lives on the outside.

Programs like Wesleyan are exclusive, even more exclusive than admission rates on their traditional campus. Wesleyan's Center for Prison Education boasts its selectivity. Two years ago, it had an 8 percent acceptance rate, only accepting 18 of the 230 applicants.

Critics of liberal arts programs in prison say that this only perpetuates the kind of classism and exclusivity that oppressed individuals behind bars who are overwhelmingly poor and minority.

Daniel Karpowitz, from Bard's Prison Initiative recognizes the benefits of liberal arts programs in prison, but laments its downfalls: "One percent of Americans go to places like Penn or Bard; the idea that places like Bard are going to be the answer is nonsense. What I do think those programs can do, however, is that these programs do everything they can to change the public understanding or policy makers expectations of what should and do happen intellectually where great colleges are involved. That's something that places like Wesleyan can do."

When Clyde first arrived to prison, he lashed out. He got in fights with his cellmates and with corrections officers. He was put in solitary confinement for years at a time. He hadn't yet learned how to "do time."

His mother, with whom he remained close, visited him during those difficult first years.

"At what point will you make the decision to change?" He remembered her asking.

Clyde's family says that getting an education has changed him for the better.

"He is today what my mother always said that she wanted him to become; what she always envisioned him to become. He is so intelligent," Ilean said.

Clyde told me about repairing family relationships after the murder of his cousin. In the beginning, he had no contact. They were unwilling to forgive him.

Clyde continued to write, though, and slowly his extended family stopped throwing out his letters and opened them. They never responded but, one day, they told his mother and sister that they forgave him. Clyde buried his head in his hands and wept when he heard the news.

"It kind of adds a little light. You don't feel so isolated," he said of his repaired relationship with his family.

Clyde has appealed his case seven times and has now lost the ability for a court-assigned attorney. He now represents himself in court but is losing hope in the possibility of reducing his sentence and going home.

The time he spends in the classroom is the best distraction he has.

"It's the closest thing to feeling free," he told me.

After my final conversation with Clyde, I am escorted out of Cheshire by Andrius Banevicius, the public relations officer for the prison. We exchange the formal niceties of staying in touch and reaching out with follow-up questions.

He walks me to my car and before he leaves he says,

"There's just one thing I want to say. Remember that they're inmates. They've done some pretty horrible things."