

Incarceration fails to stall education



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Jenn Arias Staff Reporter

Esley Stahl, president of Write to Release and CLC English Composition professor, is making a deep impact in the most unexpected place: a correctional facility.

Write to Release, founded in 2013, is an organization that strives to incorporate writing classes into jails around the Chicago area.

Stahl has successfully set up this program in Statesville and Lake County prisons.

Stahl said the inmates-day-to-day lives involve limited activity and programs offered.

There are three: Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous, and anger management. The inmates have limited ac-

cess to the scantily-stocked library, only getting to visit once every week or two.

"It's a lot of reality TV and playing cards all day," Stahl said.

Stahl visits the Lake County Jail once a week to teach an hour to hour and a half class in the men's Program Pod. Men submit a form indicating an interest in learning and from a pod of 25 men, usually 7 to 10 show up for class, Stahl said.

Their first goal has been finding their voices, and the second, to share them.

In a typical class, Stahl will bring in a reading to discuss with the students.

They will then work on a piece of their own, which is individually workshopped by the class. Though similar to a composition class at CLC, Stahl said the major difference is in the disposition of the inmates.

"Everybody is excited, engaged and wants to participate," Stahl said.

Since it's purely a volunteer program, there is no one in attendance that does not want to do the activities. The men are simply "happy to do something," Stahl said.

They are currently working towards publishing their own literary journal.

Working so closely with convicted prisoners would frighten some people, but

Stahl said she has "never been nervous about anything" in her classes with inmates.

"They're all well-behaved, respectful, polite, they're very kind," Stahl said. "They are the antithesis of how they're characterized."

Stahl initially became interested in working with prisoners at Roosevelt University while working on their literary magazine, "Oye Review." Receiving submissions from all over the country, one of them had a correctional facility return address. Some students didn't want to consider the piece for publication, Stahl said, simply based on where it came from.

"That really pissed me off," Stahl said. "I thought there was no reason for that. Just because someone is incarcerated, why is their voice not as important as the next person's?"

The piece was eventually published, but this instance fueled Stahl to search for a volunteer writing program in the Chicago area. Finding no programs for adults, she was encouraged by her father to start one of her own.

It was a two-year process from thinking stages to research to endless legal paperwork. In May 2014, Stahl taught her first class at

Lake County Jail, the closest jail in proximity to the CLC Lakeshore campus, where she teaches most of her classes.

"It was based on who returned my phone calls," Stahl said. "My multiple follow-up phone calls, my many phone calls, my stalk-er-esque phone calls. I was close to giving up several times."

She continues to encourage society to "re-calibrate" their thinking and treatment of inmates, urging people to give them another chance.

"If you continue to treat somebody like a person that doesn't matter, that is then something that you kind of internalize and think, 'I have no worth, I have no value,'" Stahl said. "You have not taken a chance on these people, you have not given them the tools, they have not had access to the kinds of things we have had access to. Why would we revoke access to those things and then try to convince ourselves or imagine that they should be better? It's taking the responsibility off of society and I have a problem with that."

Stahl is also a supporter of "ban the box," a movement that does not require convicted felons to disclose their criminal history. "It makes no sense for them to continue to pay for a crime

20 or 30 years later, she said. Though it was a long and difficult process, Stahl seems to have finally found her niche.

With an undergraduate degree in criminal justice and a Master's degree in creative writing, she seems to have found a perfect way to incorporate her love of writing and helping people.

"I didn't know when I went to graduate school to be a writer that I was ever going to teach," Stahl said. "I never imagined that this is where I would be. But I love it. That's why if you stick with what you love, that will lead to something else."

Expansion within Lake County Jail is planned for summer 2016, Stahl hopes to have more classes and more growth and training for the teachers.

As far as other aspiring writers, both incarcerated and otherwise, Stahl urges them to just keep writing and reading.

"Don't give up on it if it's something you're interested in and passionate about," Stahl said. "Continue to devote your time and energy on it, especially if you think, 'where is this really going to get me? I'm not going to be a famous writer.' Well, you're going to get a lot out of it. You don't know what you're going to get out of it."