No Exit?

by

Anthony Paul Farley

The Dorchester players include Judges Sydney Hanlon and Thomas May; Probation Officers John Christopher, Deirdre Kennedy, Yvonne Nelson, John Owens, Theresa Owens, and James "Bobby" Spencer; along with English Professor Ann Murphy of Assumption College and Taylor Stoech of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, and myself. In addition, a number of Boston College Law School students like Gretchen Hunt '99 have distinguished themselves as program facilitators over the years.

The program has been an outstanding success.

Most of the participants experienced the program as the first time they ever read a book from cover to cover. Many have confessed to me their late realization that reading could be liberating and enjoyable. They speak of joy in discovering the pleasures of the written word and of anger that the doorway to the world's imagination, the book, was hidden from them in school. They look back in anger at the ways in which they both failed in school and were failed by their schools. They realize ways their schools succeeded in causing them to fail themselves. They realize, more importantly, that they can read and that they have ideas about great literature. And this causes them to look forward with hope.

At the end of each term we hold a graduation ceremony in the district court. The graduates invite their families and friends. Most years, one or more of the graduates gives a short valedictory speech to the audience. Each graduate is named in court and presented with a diploma. Afterwards, everyone joins the judges in chambers for tea.

A literature program is just the beginning. Dorchester is just the beginning. If a university-level literature course can be taught at probation, then anything can be taught anywhere. Probation officers all over the nation can be transformed into schools. Prisons too can be transformed, utterly, into places of elementary, secondary, and university education. And with success in the transformation of our failed prisons into successful schools must come success in our failed schools. Our schools have become prisons. Our prisons, all of them, must be transformed into schools. If this seems like a dream, it is no less real than the collective nightmare we have made of our schools and prisons. If this seems like a dream, it is no less real than the nightmare we will live if our nation remains half-slave and half-free. One program is not enough. All our prisons need to become schools. All our schools need to become limitless palaces worthy of the boundless imaginations of youth. To break the colorline, to save our bodies and souls from the nightmare to come, to renounce the past and create a decent society at long last, we must join the liberation movement and fight for literacy and emancipation, as for bread and roses. Which side are you on?

Associate Professor Anthony Farley was an Assistant US Attorney for the District of Columbia before joining Boston College Law School in 1992.