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CORRECTIONS CONNECTIONS: CRIMINOLOGY CLASS CORRESPONDS, VISITS WITH INMATES

MANHATTAN -- Criminology students at Kansas State University are not only learning about crime in the classroom -- they are witnessing its effects firsthand.

Students in L. Susan Williams' criminology class are corresponding with inmates at the Topeka Correctional Facility and Ellsworth Correctional Facility for the 14th consecutive year. Each student is paired by gender with an inmate at one of the facilities. The students and inmates correspond via email and visit once at the end of the semester.

The idea stemmed from a project that Williams, associate professor of sociology, led at the University of Connecticut. Williams took her students to many of the state's prisons. The state's women's prison had conducted an essay project focusing on the influence a simple twist of fate would have had on their lives. Her students wrote letters of appreciation to the prisoners for sharing those essays. The Connecting with Corrections project was born from there.

"Somehow, it clicked that students and inmates really connected and that more could be possible," she said.

Topeka and Ellsworth have been the only facilities used for the project. The key is each prison's administration.

"Both these facilities have fine administrators who care about their people and their jobs," Williams said. "They make it all possible."

Williams, associate professor of sociology, anthropology and social work; coordinates the project with the help of two assistants and administration from both correctional facilities. Letters are screened and scanned prior to transmission. Extensive recordkeeping and monitoring on both ends are other components of the labor-intensive effort. Students are able to visit their partners at the end of the semester. The visits include a tour of the specific facility and other close interactions with the inmates.

Many connections do not cease after the semester ends.

"I have witnessed so many positive interactions through this project that never would have happened otherwise," Williams said. "It is a true blessing, inspired by others. I sometimes tell my students that statistics are people with the tears washed away; this project connects faces to numbers."

The connections can be life changing. One of Williams' students had a sister who was a drug addict. Her family had tried to help her for many years with no success and decided to give up. The student wrote about this in her weekly letter. Her pen pal responded saying that she had a similar experience and encouraged the student to call her sister and to not give up. The family decided to try helping once more. That evening the student's sister unexpectedly showed up at her house and said she was ready to go to a treatment facility. The family took her there that night.

The scheduled tour of Topeka Correctional Facility was the next day. Because of a work conflict, the pen pal was not scheduled to meet with the student. But Williams and the liaison at the facility arranged for the pen pal to meet with the student.

"The student explained that the inmate's words had saved her sister's life and quite possibly their family," Williams said. "The student went into the project thinking she would give something of herself and ended up receiving so much more. The two women shared the story with everyone on the tour. Not a dry eye in the room, even from the big tough men."

Williams has expanded the project to several of her distance education courses. This has not deterred some students from fully participating in the project.

"I had one male student who drove in one day from Amarillo to Topeka and back again, just to visit with the inmate/partner he had been writing," she said.

It is a profound illustration of the project's scope.

"Not a single semester goes by that I do not thank my stars that I have this opportunity," Williams said. "I have witnessed so many positive interactions through this project that never would have happened otherwise. It is a true blessing, inspired by others."

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