

HOPE INSIDE/OUT



THE TEXAS HOPE LITERACY PROJECT AT DAWSON STATE JAIL

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Introduction

Life in prison is loud. It is stressful. It is dehumanizing. It is what Erving Goffman calls “a total institution. That is, “A place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time together, lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.” According to Goffman’s theoretical framework, the prison itself is but one type of “total institution,” this one “organised to protect the community against what are felt to be intentional dangers to it, with the welfare of the persons thus sequestered not the immediate issue” For the women at Dawson State Jail in Downtown Dallas, all of life takes place—with few exceptions-- in the very same room with the very same women—7 days a week, 24 hours a day, week-after-week, month-after-month, and—in some cases—year-after-year.

During the spring of 2007, I had the privilege of facilitating a writing group within the walls of this “total institution.” The writers in this group were several of the women who serve as both inmates and tutors in the Texas HOPE Literacy Project (“Helping Others Pursue Education”). At Dawson, these students and tutors live, work, eat, and sleep in the same room, leaving only for “pill call,” trips to the commissary, classes, and the rare visit with friends and family from the free world. Seven toilets, four showers, and fifty-four bunks line the perimeter of each dorm. Tutoring takes place at a series of tables in the middle of the room—the same tables upon which they eat their meals, write letters to their families, and worry about the future. It is monotonous. It is institutionalized. It is institutionalizing. It is a “Total Institution.”

Among this group of writers, however, there is a tremendous sense of HOPE, accomplishment, and pride. In fact, Texas HOPE Literacy offers a powerful argument for the benefits of collaborative learning and similar, reciprocal relationships with one another and one’s community. Through HOPE, inmates at five correctional facilities in Texas are trained to work one-on-one with their incarcerated peers using a curricula designed especially for students who have had life-long academic struggles and others who have learning disabilities developing new literacies, as well as some materials the tutors develop themselves.

I met with these writers twice a month for about three hours each visit. They worked hard. They wrote, read, learned, revised, reviewed one another’s work, revised again. They wrote many essays beyond what you see here. I asked them to write about their own literacy histories, to interview a student and write a profile, to take fieldnotes and to become ethnographers of their own communities (see http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/commerce_hope_class.htm for some of our materials and assignments). They tell me they learned a lot, but I learned so much more: about grace, about hope, about kindness, about reciprocity.

The work included in this collection offers an inside look at the benefits and power of the work they do—helping one another, helping themselves. Texas HOPE Literacy, it seems, gives them hope on the inside that they then carry with them as they live and work and thrive on the outside.

It is amazing. These women are amazing. Texas HOPE Literacy is amazing.

--Shannon Carter, Texas A&M University-Commerce

From the Window, Through the Bars

By Deidre Bradshaw

Part I: Dawson State Jail, 2007

My bed in the dorm I now call home is directly under a 6x6 concrete and steel window. I sleep on the top bunk and out my window I see downtown Dallas, Interstate 35, Commerce Street. The rain splashes on the thick, steel reinforced glass and I look down on the street below at the people moving about in the rain.

Perched on my same bed, I look the other direction towards the dorm. Small clusters of women in white TDC uniforms speak in quiet murmurs. Some are laughing; most drink from white plastic mugs bought off commissary--instant coffee or hot chocolate because this is all that is available to us, purchased at the commissary as well ("Wall-Mart," "Con-Mart"). The fluorescent lights overhead are very bright. They never turn them off completely but at night they are dim. At Dawson no one ever goes outside and very little natural light enters the room. The floors are grey, concrete slabs. The tables and benches are bolted to the floor. Toilets and the showers are off in one quarter of the room. Nearby there is a concrete and glass box where an officer sits at all times, opening and closing the automatic door, dispensing mail and Tylenol, and communicating by phone to floor control and medical.

Daily standard operations are routine here. Repetition and boredom are mixed with the moods and personalities of 54 women together in one room, 24 hours a day, day in, day out. These women do not "look" like criminals except for the white uniforms that bind them together.

Here on the 10th floor we also learn together in a unique, faith-based educational program called Texas HOPE. Literacy. HOPE. stands for "Helping Others Pursue Education." I am a "tutor" and then there are those ladies who are "students." Many have fallen through the cracks of the American educational system for various reasons, yet those without their high school diploma pursue a G.E.D. or high school equivalency exam while incarcerated here.

My student and I are bound by our experience in HOPE Literacy. Prison, drugs, criminal activity, and starting over have been a revolving door for the both of us. She is 36 years old and I am 52. She is black and I am white. She fell out of high school, having finished the 11th grade. I passed the 9th grade and, with a G.E.D., graduated from college. She is the mother of seven children and retains custody of all seven. I am the mother of three; two of my sons will graduate from high school soon.

Part II: Life Before H.O.P.E.

I am not the same person I was when I came here. In fact, in those years before my most recent incarceration there were many times I should have been dead. I have been robbed, raped, beaten, overdosed, and in the hospital with double pneumonia 3 times, barely able to sustain the breath needed to stay alive.

My student and I have been long term drug users and in and out of the system for many years. In 1971, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the first Civil Rights Act in the United States. Both my student and I grew up and attended school during a time of great transition in American schools and culture. Both my student and I have unique educational experiences. Tragically, we have sacrificed our

freedom, gone to jail, and served prison time more than once due to our involvement with drugs. As everyone knows, drugs and the crimes associated with them have consumed our country. Drugs make no distinction between race or economic status and both my student and I are presently incarcerated for crimes committed to obtain and supply long term drug addictions.

Like most of the women here, I was raised in a dysfunctional family [in which education was always important but forced sacrifices]. Because my mother was a single parent and worked all the time to support us, there was little if any structure or discipline in my childhood. Although she taught me right from wrong, she was absent most of the time. Raised in Austin, Texas, I attended St. Austin's Catholic School while my mother pursued her Masters Degree in Social Work at the University of Texas. There just wasn't much time for me.

I began reading and writing at an early age but was never interested in school. At the age of eight, I was molested by a family member and began struggling with depression and a lack of self worth and shame. By the age of ten, I began drinking and experimenting with drugs. This was about 1965. I grew up fast. There was Vietnam, Civil Rights, the Women's Movement, protest and demonstrations. There was also a vast supply of illegal drugs in our country and in Austin, Texas, in particular. Drugs were everywhere and easily available.

I left home at 14, was raped, and began using intravenous (I.V.) drugs, marijuana, and mind altering LSD. By the time I was sixteen I was addicted to heroin and entered my first drug-rehab to try and clean up. By this time my mother had been promoted in her job and relocated to Los Angeles, California.

I returned home for a very short time but by the time I decided to get back in school I was no longer your average 16-year old girl. I Being on the streets and indulging in crime had become comfortable to me. Going to school and accomplishing goals was not an easy transition to make. Looking back I believe my ability to read and write well allowed me to pass a GED at the age of 16. I lied on the application and passed it even though I was not officially old enough to take it. I learned how to obtain financial aid with grants, loans, and enrolled in Santa Monica City College. With my ninth grade education, I struggled to finish my first semester. I vacillated between college and the drug world until I could no longer maintain school and quickly spiraled down until in 1974, I was sent to prison for the first time for a drug related offense.

Upon my release I changed people, places, and things and moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Eventually I married and returned to college. For close to nine years, I remained a functioning member of society until a failed marriage led me into depression and drugs again.

By that point, my mother had returned to Texas and on a visit to see her I ended up staying and, in 1987, enrolled at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. I was then 33 years old, divorced, and working to pick up the pieces of my life. School became my refuge and after four full semesters and four summer sessions I graduated, in 1991, with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Political Science and Journalism.

You might think the ending to this story is one of happiness and success, but for me emotionally I was unable to move on. I applied to the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs and took the Graduate Records Exam to enter graduate school. Overcome by fear and depression, I began drinking daily and rapidly replaced drinking for cocaine then crack. I began shoplifting nice clothes to exchange for drugs. I resorted to prostitution and forgery—my return to addiction was with a vengeance. My decision to medicate myself and give up by choosing drugs and crime over moving to Austin and entering graduate school has had irreparable consequences on my life. From 1991 to the present time, June 2007, I

have been to prison three more times for Felony Theft. This means I am now a four-time loser in the eyes of the law. At this point I qualify for the Habitual Criminal Act, wherein a person may receive an automatic 25 year sentence for more than three felony convictions in Texas.

Prison is a mixture of races and personalities, as well as educational backgrounds. Out of 54 women in my dorm at Dawson State Jail, there are 10 Hispanics, 12 blacks, and the rest white because this is what is used in prison for the most part. You learn quickly here to never judge a person based on their appearance or race, especially when you eat, sleep, pray, and experience both joy and tragedy together.

There are so many stories here. So many lives broken, rebuilt, and broken again. The person I tutor has a story to tell as well. Hers begins in Fort Worth, Texas, where she was born in 1971 to a sixteen year old mother and a father who was never there. I sat down with her one day and here is what she told me about her life and her educational experience, which led her to prison and subsequently to obtaining a G.E.D. at 36 years of age. She said, "I changed schools a lot. I went to mostly 'white' schools until my grandmother decided I needed to go to the 'black' school in our neighborhood." At this time she was in sixth grade. The summer before entering her new school, she recalls being fearful of the change to come. When I asked her why, she told me, "The summer before I was [to enter that school], I was raped in my own neighborhood by four blacks near our house."

Soon after entering that new school, she gave up, began stealing and ditching school, and was removed from her grandmother's care and placed in the foster system and on probation. She was not yet thirteen years old. Because of an over crowded foster system in Texas that year she was placed in a group home in Oklahoma [rather than a single family home closer to her grandmother in Fort Worth]. She said she was okay there and did well enough in school. By the time she left the home she had completed the eleventh grade in part because she had been "home schooled" at the group home. Eleventh grade and she was then only 14 years old!

When she was sent back to her grandmother's in Fort Worth, she did not reenroll in school but began hanging out in the streets and at sixteen became pregnant with her first child, a girl. While pregnant, her mother enrolled her in the New Life Maternity School as an eleventh grader. She successfully completed the classes and delivered her daughter.

At 17 she was introduced to crack cocaine by the baby's father. Shortly after he was sent to prison, she continued using more and more. Following an arrest for stealing checks and credit cards, she was placed on probation again. Things went from bad to worse and, in 1991, heroin became her drug of choice and quickly landed her in re-hab and eventually, in 1994, the Texas Department of Corrections (the Hobby Unit in Gainesville). She served a two-year sentence and, while there, successfully completed an auto mechanics course. Within two weeks of her release, she began using heroin and crack again.

Over the next few years, she gave birth to three more children. Today she has seven children and, with the help of her family, remains a part of her children's lives—a rarity among many incarcerated mothers.

Part III: A HOPEful Life

At the present time, I am serving a 15 month sentence at Dawson State Jail in Dallas, Texas. I am 52 years old. I am the mother of three sons. Although I have custody of my two youngest, I have been incarcerated most of their lives due to my addiction and criminal activity. My oldest will graduate from

high school next year. He is an honor student and so is his brother. I have now served 14 of my 15 months, seven of those as a tutor in the HOPE Literacy Program. I am clean and sober and look forward to being back in society.

When I first met my student in January 2007, she had just been transferred here and requested to remain in the HOPE Literacy Program. I am blessed to be one of her tutors. We study grammar to prepare her for the GED test, which she will be taking very soon. She's a quick learner and excited about what she is doing to improve her life. She is one of three students I tutor. For myself it has been an excellent chance to review the basics of grammar as I have been out of school for a while.

But this experience is teaching us both much more than grammar. It is also teaching us responsibility. We must be on time for our sessions, even when we don't feel like showing up. For me, I have been forced to be more patient and understanding of someone else's needs other than my own. She and I begin each tutoring session with a prayer. This all takes place in the dayroom of the HOPE dorm. We sit at one of the 14 steel tables with other students and tutors together in the same room at the same time. People come into the dorm from other places and people leave. Other inmates are in their bunk areas while we study. Sometimes there are distractions, but she (my student) assures me she's learning. I am too.

Part IV: Now What?

As I sit at my table writing, my student has just returned from a Parenting Class. For the past two days, she has been testing to prepare for the GED she will take later this month. She is optimistic about the future and wants to go to college upon her release. She wants to be a positive role model for her children and she believes, "God has healed my wounds."

I will be released in 28 days and because of the resources I am utilizing in connection with the Texas HOPE Literacy Program, I will be going directly to a house for women re-entering society called Angel Recovery House. I am in the process of reestablishing my credit to reapply for financial aid to enter Graduate School. I plan to apply to Texas A&M to obtain my Masters. As of now, I am unsure what my Masters degree will be in but I am sure that, whatever it is, I will utilize my experience and talents to help other women that want to break the cycle of crime and prison and separation from their children and families.

My time spent in the Texas HOPE Literacy Program working with others has shown me how important an impact I can have in a positive way on another woman's life by opening doors to education. Most of us are mothers and what we teach our children really does make a difference. Without support and encouragement, no one could succeed in life. I have given and received both here in HOPE Literacy. The rest is up to us.

Prisons are full of tragic stories, wasted lives, families destroyed by drugs and crime. I am continually amazed at the power and beauty of the human spirit. This spirit can only be filled by the world of God. All we can do as survivors of any tragedy is pick ourselves up and ask God to forgive us and move on. I believe we in HOPE are doing so.



Visual representation of Deidre's writing process (by Deidre, 5/2007)

Lucky

By Debbie Furrh

My name is Debbie. I am a thirty-one year old mother of three. I am currently serving an eighteen month sentence in Dawson State Jail. This is the first time I have ever been to jail. And it will be the last.

In that I'm not here on a drug charge, I'm actually one of the lucky ones. But it is only by chance that it wasn't drugs that put me here. I was an addict for many years. Instead of drugs, however, I am here for two checks I wrote on my ex-husband's account. Back in 2001, I got mad at him two weeks after our divorce and took those checks and wrote them. I served three years on probation but did not pay all my fines. So I ended up here in Dawson for 18 months. Six years later. I am lucky I got clean in 2003. I got my life on track before I turned myself in.

Part I: The Lost Cause

Before I got clean most people would say I was a lost cause. I grew up with drugs. My uncles are addicts. And I got really deep into the drug world. I was lost. Till one day I got sick of it. I tried to take my own life. Not once but three times. And the last time woke me up. I put an eight-ball of ice into my veins. With two needles. I was lucky my live-in man knew what to do. I knew right then that that was the last time I would ever use drugs. I went back home to my kids and my family and got right. I could not imagine where I would be if I did not quit. I will say this, I am glad God put me in this prison. I know most of you are saying, "What?!" Well where else could I be? I think this is the better choice.

My time in Dawson State Jail has been a learning experience from day one. I arrived here on September 1, 2006. There were twenty of us that came from Woodman State Jail, and Dawson was already so crowded they had a hard time getting us all beds. Some of us ended up in seg and some in dorms. I was one of the "lucky" ones to get into a dorm. I was housed on the ninth floor, D dorm. This dorm was crazy from the start. We eat, sleep, and live in these dorms. This dorm was loud 24/7. You learn to live with ear plugs in your ears at all times.

The first week I was here was the scariest time for me. I just sat on my bunk and cried and watched. I saw things I never want to see again. I saw a woman come out of the shower with her face cut. Her girlfriend got mad at her for looking at someone else. So she cut her. I thought stories like this were just made up to scare you not to come to prison. But I quickly found out they were true.

I spent til the first of the year in that dorm scared and mostly on my bunk. I dropped forms, called I-60s, one after another for a job, any job. On the third of January, Srg. came in and told me to pack up. I was moving to the tenth floor.

The tenth floor in Dawson houses a program called HOPE Literacy (Helping Others Pursue Education). This program is all about education. I was to be a tutor. I am lucky, see. I got my high school diploma. Where a lot of people in here don't have that.

Part II: A Case for HOPE

Texas HOPE Literacy makes a difference in so many lives. One-on-one tutoring makes you really take a look at different people, different lives, different educations. All put together for different reasons to try to make a difference in lives. You get kind of floored to realize you are not only making a difference in the life across the table from you but you are making a difference to that woman's family too. That makes you very humble. You don't want to make even the smallest of mistakes. You see children with that woman's eyes and realize she will be teaching them what she has learned from you and you want to cry because of that responsibility.

To me being a tutor to my sisters behind bars is not only helping them, but it is also helping me. Yes, they are learning to get their GED, and in this program most make it. As for me, I am learning to be patient and responsible. I am also learning my limitations.

Before I got in trouble and came to be incarcerated, I never thought about a thirty year old with a third grade education. Now I see this tragedy all the time. Our education system let these people slip through the cracks. Some dropped out. Some were just passed. Some of these students are so smart that it puts us as tutors to shame. Some are so thirsty for knowledge that the little bit this program does for them means the world to them.

Today a friend was told she can take her GED test this week. You would have thought she was given the greatest gift ever. Just to have the opportunity to take the test lit her up and made her shine. She will pass that test and go on to become a tutor so she can help another just the way she was helped.

At the Dawson State Jail HOPE Literacy Program, our success rate is pretty high. I believe there are a lot of reasons for that.

I went around my dorm today asking a question. I thought about only asking the tutors, but the students answered also and their answers really touched my heart. The question you ask, well I asked, "What does this program mean to you? What does one-on-one tutoring mean to you?" Here are a few of those answers.

Becky (a tutor in HOPE for a year): "Everybody has something to teach; everybody has something to learn. No matter their education levels.

Donna (a tutor for in HOPE for 11 months): "The more I learned the more I realized I didn't know."

Duckie (a tutor in HOPE for 11 months): "This program has taught me patience and structure. It has taught me fellowship."

Ava (a tutor in HOPE for three months): "This program has taught me to get along with women. It has taught me to give people a chance, something that I was too busy to do in the world."

Sarah (a student in HOPE): "It has helped me get my GED. It has helped teach me a better away.

Christine (a student in HOPE): “Patience and endurance and self-control are just a tough on what I have learned. It has also taught me to think before I speak.”

Bridget: (a student in HOPE): “It has helped me to learn and it will help me to be able to help others.

Why HOPE Works: The Tutors

I think one of the examples of how this program works would be when I asked Becky how many of her students (she is a math tutor) have gotten their GEDs. She tells me she has had six students get them while they were here and three more that left Dawson State Jail ready to get their GEDs. That is an awesome amount for one person.

Becky is a 34 year old mom of three. “In the world,” she was a substitute teacher Today on the inside and making plans to rejoin “the world,” she still hopes to be a teacher. Now she will not be able to. See one night, Becky got drunk, a stupid mistake. She let her underage daughter drive her car and her daughter, showing off for friends, got into an accident. Luckily no one was hurt. However, the context is important here. In small town Texas, you learn to drive quite young. In this small town, Becky’s choice to hand her underage daughter her keys was not that uncommon, but. the police came the next morning and arrested Becky on child endangerment charges. Three counts.

So now Becky will never be an elementary teacher, unless she can get her record wiped clean. Her whole town went to bat for her with the judge, but that did not help. Becky got 15 months state jail time. Becky will be leaving us really soon and, as a friend and as a tutor, she will be missed.

Why HOPE Works: Faith and Friends

The next reason this program works would probably be this program is faith based and we have Bible study and devotionals three times a day. It not only builds faith in God but also faith in world as a whole. From the Bible study that is a regular part of our daily routine, we grow to a better understanding of God as whole.

We also gain a better understanding of friendship.

When I first got locked up I told myself and anyone who asked that I would not be making friends up in here. After just a short time in this program, my plans went by the wayside. I have met people up in here that now mean the world to me. One thing I keep hearing is that you really don’t know the people here because it’s not “the world,” but I disagree with that statement. Even here you can meet people that are real. You learn who they are by their words and their actions. I have learned that no one can pull you down in here or in the world if you learn to choose your relationships wisely. Friends can actually pull you up. In HOPE I have a few of those friends. They are ladies that want to change. That want to be better people. They will be going home with me.

Part III: The Hard Part

Living here “in the box” is rough sometimes. I call it a box because we live in a ten story building in Downtown Dallas, Texas that we don’t leave—even once—for the entire length of our sentence. We drive up to this building the day we get here and that will be the last time you see or be outside until you walk out that door. What I would do to sit in the grass. Oh, you would not imagine.

Life in the Box. Twenty-seven metal bunk beds with a gym mat for a mattress. Fifty four seats at fourteen tables. A glassed in ground post that sits by the restroom. Seven toilets and four shower heads. Each day the same four walls.

We live out of a box that is mounted under the bottom bunk, a container that is about a twin side bed in width and about two sheets of paper in length. We keep everything inside these boxes, from our clothes to our books, and everything in between. Our lives are in those boxes. Letters from home. Soaps and shampoo. Toilet paper to food. Oh, food.

The food stored in our box is purchased at the commissary with money sent in from loved ones. Choices are limited, but they are our own choices. As opposed to the food provided by the TDC. Generations of inmates have gotten pretty creative with their recipes, given the lack of variety in ingredients, availability of kitchenware. It also requires creative options for heat sources, given that no “kitchen” exists. Lots of things are heated with hot water from the tap. Some of the things we live off of in here may sound a little crazy, but are not that bad. Try these simple recipes and you will be in for a surprise.

SPREAD

4 servings

2 packs of roman noodles

½ bag of cheese puffs

1 cup dill pickles (cut in small pieces)

An empty chip bag

Break up the noodles into small pieces. Make the cheese puffs into dust. Put all of this in a chip bag with enough hot, hot water to cover about half of the food. Mix this all by “working” the outside of the bag. Put somewhere warm for 15 minutes. Enjoy.

COOKIE CAKE

1 pack of sandwich cookies

½ cup peanut butter

½ cup hot chocolate mix

Take icing out of cookies. Put into a cup. In a large bowl, use the peanut butter jar to smash the cookies into a dust. Add a little water to make a hard dough. Set aside. Take the cup, add peanut butter and hot chocolate mix. Add enough water to make a thick icing. Add to dough. Let set for 10-15 mins. You can add candy or graham cracker crumbs to top. Enjoy.

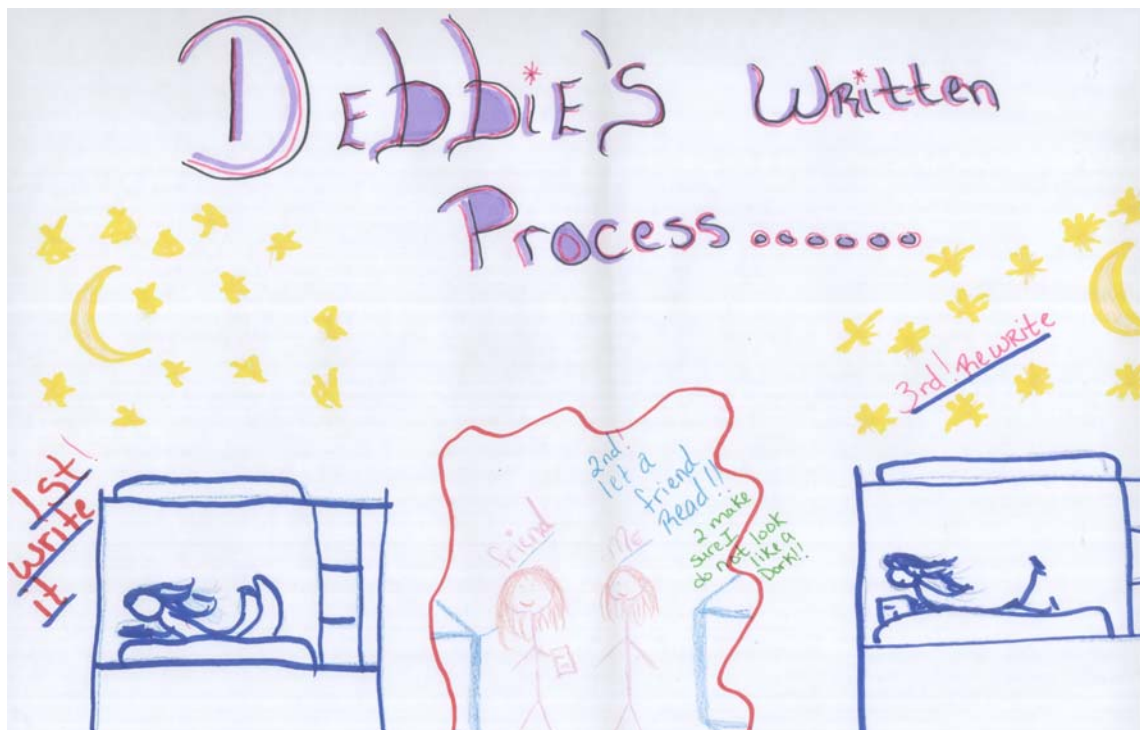
These are just two of the things we make here. Our “cooking” is done with just a hot pot water spigot. I will have to say it has been a learning experience.

The other thing in that box that means the world to an inmate is mail. Even if its just a card with just your name inside. It means so much to a person behind bars. You miss your family so much here that any written word is something. An “I love you” will brighten the day and pictures will brighten the week. I know this time has taught me how important my family really is. We get to call home every thirty days. A collect call to say, “Hey!” Five minutes every month that will bring tears to the eyes. Hearing those voices 51/2 hours away kicks you in the guts, the mistakes you have made. I write home every week. I don’t get much mail, but each letter I write tells my kids how sorry I am for making this mistake. I got a letter from my fourteen year old son last month that will always be in my heart. He made me cry. Here’s is what he wrote, “Thank you for always being there for me and for all the things you have taught me, thank you for forgiving me for all my wrongs.” Those words told me my oldest son, first off, has become a man. They also told me he has forgiven me, for me to forgive myself. They also told me I did the right thing turning myself in to right my past wrongs.

I pray this lesson serves us all.

Taking HOPE with Us

This program Texas HOPE Literacy is such an awesome program. I pray it moves to other prisons and jails. Maybe with a better education inmates might make it out there. See this program is not just about education, even though that’s the reason we are here. This program is about growing, about learning to help others, not just yourself. It’s about getting out of the system and into the world.



Visual Representation of Debbie’s writing process (by Debbie, 5/2007)

Interlude

By Jessica Foster

She smiles almost all the time. Sometimes it almost makes you worry if it is real or not. When I first began tutoring her, my student really got on my nerves. I wasn't sure how this was going to work out. She smiled and I worried.

But before I knew it, things started to change. I started to change. Or did she? Perhaps we both did.

I grew up with my grandparents. They did the best they could with me. My dad has been in prison most of my life and my mom was on drugs and living that life. Somehow I always knew that I was loved. But I needed more.

Love Conquers All

I have always loved love! I have always dreamed of love and being loved. But I didn't know quite what that meant to be loved.

My relationships throughout life never lasted long. The long ones lasting only a year or so. I didn't really know why after a year or two we would pretty much hate each other. That also included friendships.

Being here at Dawson State Jail, I have learned quite a bit about love. Also quite a bit about being loved. Let me tell you all about it.

God is love! 1 Corinthians 13 tells us how and what love should be. This explains why none of my relationships ever lasted—they didn't have God in them. I have always dreamed of this divine love that I could never find in anyone, but I didn't know why. Now I see that I couldn't find it because I wasn't searching in the right place. Divine love is found only in one place and no one else can take that place and make you feel the same. God is the only one who is perfect enough, faithful, loving, caring, merciful, and loyal. In 1 Corinthians, we read "Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not want what belongs to others, it does not brag, it is not proud. It is not rude. It does not look out for its own interest. It does not easily become angry. It does not keep track of other peoples' wrongs. Love is not happy with evil but it is full of joy when the truth is spoken. It always protects, it always trusts, it always hopes but never gives up. Love never fails. The three most important things to have are faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of them is love."

I did well in school, when I tried. When I was about 10 years old, I loved to play school with my neighbors. I would even make tests and books for them to read.

I dropped out of school in the ninth grade. I did well in school, but I wanted to do other things. I always picked friends that got me into trouble. I got my GED within a year of quitting school. I went to college for a while, but I wasn't ready to settle down yet. I got married at 18 and had my first child at 20. I was forced to settle down then. But not for long. I found myself running off with some loser that caught me a charge for possession of a controlled substance. Over a gram. Luckily I got five years probation. I settled down for a while, but years later I found myself with another loser. This time I got pregnant. I had a beautiful baby boy, but I was now addicted to methamphetamine. I stopped long enough to have my son but within a week I was back on it and it was worse than before. I ended up stealing from a house I was cleaning, caught a new charge, failed a drug test at probation, and went to prison.

The best thing that has ever happened to me.

I spent six months in TDC (Texas Department of Corrections) on the "Hoe Squad," getting broke down to what they wanted me to be. They humiliated me, screamed at me for everything. I was scared to death, then strip searched in front of 20-30 people, all of us lined up naked and waiting to "squat and cough," then rinse off and go eat. Everyday. Then I got to "roll over" and do my State Jail time. Coming to Dawson scared me to death! But I found my way to Hope Literacy. Thank God!

My first day in HOPE. I walk into this dorm that is painted up (none of the other dorms are anything but white) with Big Bird and other things all around the room. A large room, 54 bunks, a row all the way around the room and one second row of bunks at the back of the room. Dayroom is open part of the room where the beds aren't. Tables seat four, except for one big table in the middle on the front row. That seats 12. That's my table. All my friends can sit with me.

Books and binders on tables. Pencils, dry erase boards, coffee mugs, and water bottles. Women sitting around quietly at tables. They are tutoring. Trying to be respectful of the other's tutoring. I hear the words, "I don't understand. Are you ready? Do you see?" Then there is a guard yelling for a certain bunk number to go to medical. Toilets are flushing. Showers are running. People are walking out of the restroom area (7 toilets in a row, covered by one long metal wall) with cups of coffee in their hands (the hot water spout is at the last toilet on top of the sink). I sit down on the floor by the bunks and look around. I feel like I'm sitting in a cold warehouse. There is a wall that holds a bookshelf full of Christian books and some others. Next to the bookshelf is a stack of clear totes full of teaching materials. I'm definitely interested in getting into this! Not long until I'm tested to see if I'm able to teach these students. Then I'm off to tutoring!

I sit down to tutor. I'm a little nervous. What if I mess up? What if my student doesn't understand? I mean, it's got to be hard for them to sit down with someone "in white," just like they are, and admit that they don't know their ABCs or that they can't read. I soon find that I have compassion. That I have something to give.

Back to my student. I wasn't quite sure how this was going to work. Her personality and mine. We started off with a prayer and things went good from there. I found it hard to keep her attention. Her eyes would drift off to someone who might be making too much noise. Then she would get very frustrated because she could find something wrong with just about everyone. She would look over and say, "I just can't pay attention with all these people acting like this." I would try to calm her down and tell her to stay in the bubble with me and then continue on with tutoring.

The next day, there seemed to be tons of distractions. Then I finally decided to yell out, "Can we quiet down!" Come to find out, someone was having a seizure! I felt stupid!

We often discussed her problems and worked on issues with God and after we got through things that were bothering her, we could work much better.

Almost every day she tells me how she enjoys our time together and that she really learns a lot from our sessions. I see her growing continually and I am proud of her. I love working with her and I am excited about what all we can conquer together. Teaching these students who desperately want their GED and seeing them blossom like butterflies is an extraordinary experience!

Making Progress

All of us are works in progress, with a long way to go before we reach our full potential. The skill or area that I am still working on, trying to make progress in, is my relationship with God, my family, my children, friends, and anyone else that I come into contact with.

For a long time, my relationships with others seemed lacking. They would start out with a boom but end up blown-up. Coming to prison has helped me a lot in that area. I have learned to put God first and then all else falls into place. When I put God first, I read the Word more and try to do the right thing more. When I read the Word more, I find out how I should act, react, and be towards others and myself. When I pray, I develop a close relationship to God and therefore, I want to read His Word more. I find myself caring more about others when I pray for them, with God guiding and comforting me. Doing this helps me do the right thing more. When I do the right thing in any situation, this helps people to treat me better because I treat them well.

I am working on my relationships with others, and each day I make more and more progress.

I love this program and I feel like I've got somewhere to go with this. My students tell me that they love the way I teach. That makes me feel good and probably helps me teach even better! Ha ha! I can't wait to apply what I've learned to helping my kids. This program not only helps others get their GED but also helps me remember and learn while I teach.



Visual Representation of Jessica's writing process (by Jessica, 5/2007)

First Impressions

By Tracy Smith

I had been given two new students, one of whom I had very little interaction with. From my first impression, I was very nervous. She had tattoos on her neck (her area code of her home town—817). She's from Fort Worth. She also has a set of eyes tattooed between her shoulder blades. I suppose thus means she has eyes on the back of her “watching her back.”

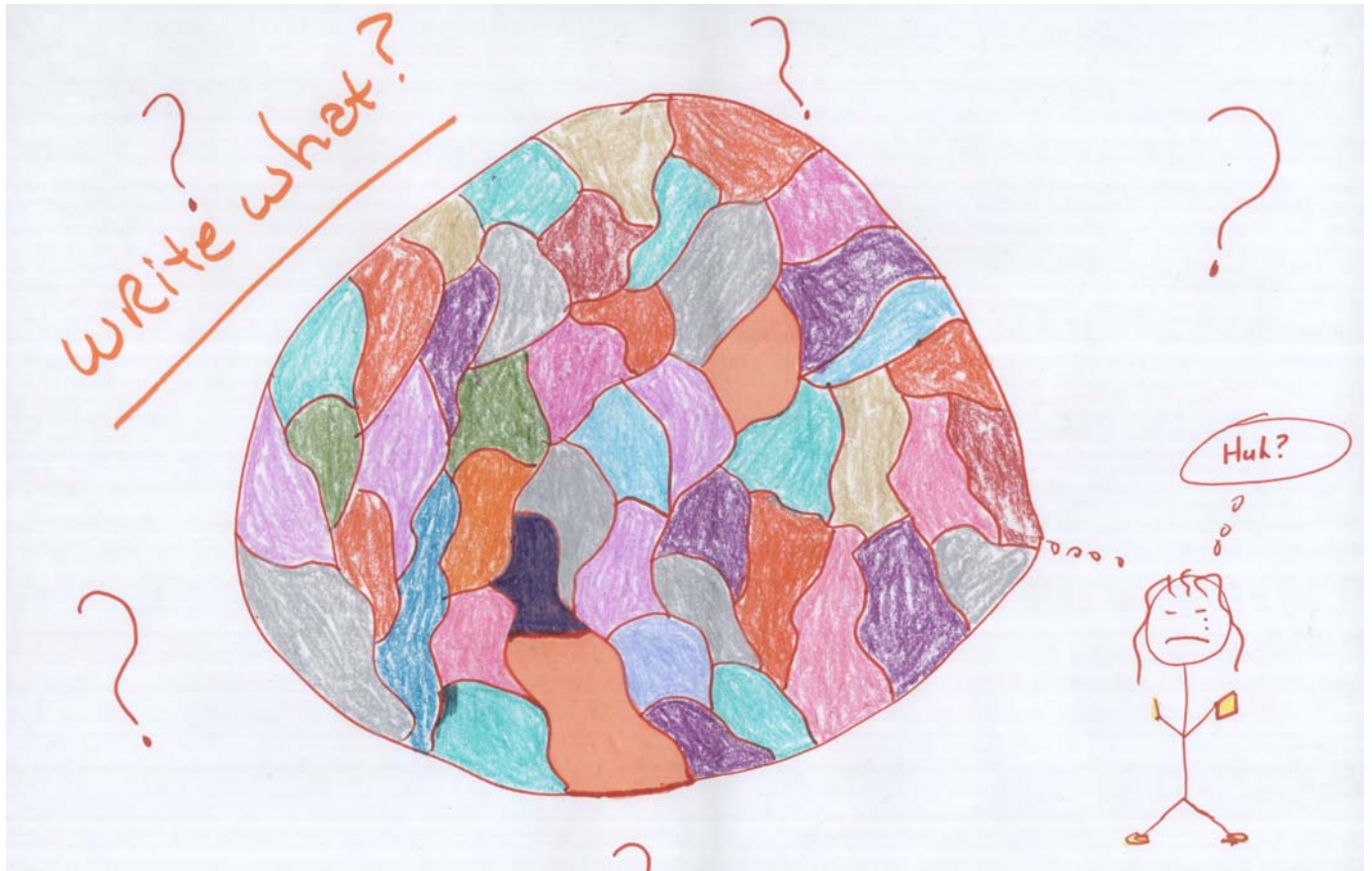
I listened to a story she was telling another inmate about why she was being moved from a top bunk to a bottom bunk. She had been the victim of a drive by shooting. It left her with bad headaches and she becomes dizzy often. Some bullets are still left in her head.

She has only one person she visits with. She's quiet and observant. I notice that she sits up at night reading her Bible and writing letters to her family. She was in a gang, and when she had a fight with a boy at school (the fight was thought of as being racial), the school expelled her and the neighboring schools were not allowing her to register for school with them. Soon after being expelled from school, she became pregnant. At the very young age of 16, she went from being a gang member, a teenager in high school, to a wife and a mother. She continued building her family for the next 10 years. Family is very important to her. Both her parents are still alive and married to each other. She has 4 children, and she also has raised her niece as her own child.

She's now 26 years old. Her parents have all of her children with them while she is incarcerated. The parents come visit frequently with her children and write weekly, sending current pictures of her children. Being a good mother is very important to her. When she was in high school, her favorite classes were math, woodshop, and carpentry.

When we began tutoring together, I was unsure of what I could teach this lady. My thoughts were that she would be too tough for me. That she would not want to learn from me. We began slowly, but I soon realized how incredibly smart she is. She began whizzing through the material, taking mastery check after mastery check. Passing them on the first try. Seeing how fast she learned I was able to incorporate other subjects along with our regular curriculum. One of these was a book called *Red Hot Root Words*. As we learned prefixes and suffixes, then put them together, I saw her become so excited about how things that we had learned months ago were coming together in these new words. That this time previously was not wasted time. That she had learned so much from these tutoring sessions.

Some important lessons that I have learned from her are that how someone looks or may talk won't tell us who they really are. My student also has an incredible ability at keeping me humble about myself as a tutor. And that I better be real with her about what we are learning. She has been an eye opener for me in so many ways. Her new goal for employment is to get a job as an auto mechanic. I enjoy her energy, background, and heart that she brings to whatever she gets involved in. The most important thing that I've learned is if a person's heart is in the right place, then the things that are to be learned will be learned.



Visual representation of Tracy's writing process (by Tracy, 5/2007)

Katie: My Student, My Inspiration

By Cindy Rankin

Katie was born in 1970. The youngest of four, her mother divorced when Katie was but one. Her mother was never home due to working two jobs and her dad was a weekend dad. Her sister basically raised her, though she was really very mean to her. With her mother so busy, Katie was left alone with her sister at the ages of 4 and 8. They did what they pretty well pleased. Katie ran the street and got away with murder, as long as they were home by the time Mom got home.

It wasn't all bad, however. One thing Katie remembers fondly was winning the science fair. Unfortunately, very little else. When she was sixteen, Katie asked her mom if she could quit school and she went right up there to sign the papers. She said her mother couldn't have cared less. She always said school was a waste. Right away, Katie started working at a nursing home and making money.

At home, Katie remembers neither her mother nor anyone else reading or writing in front of her. Her family never read to her, though when her brother went into the army he wrote a bit. That was meaningful albeit isolated. Katie remembers teaching herself to read and write. She flunked first grade twice, though. She had a really tough time. Basically, she has no memories of any instruction other than what she gave herself.

When I first met Katie I thought she was just another person in this program here to take what she could get. But I was so wrong. On the contrary, she was, in fact, someone who wanted to learn and give what she could give. She has received a lot from Texas HOPE Literacy and she has given just as much. We watch her draw pictures from her heart, actually being able to study and read the Bible. It's really awesome to see someone come from the bottom up.

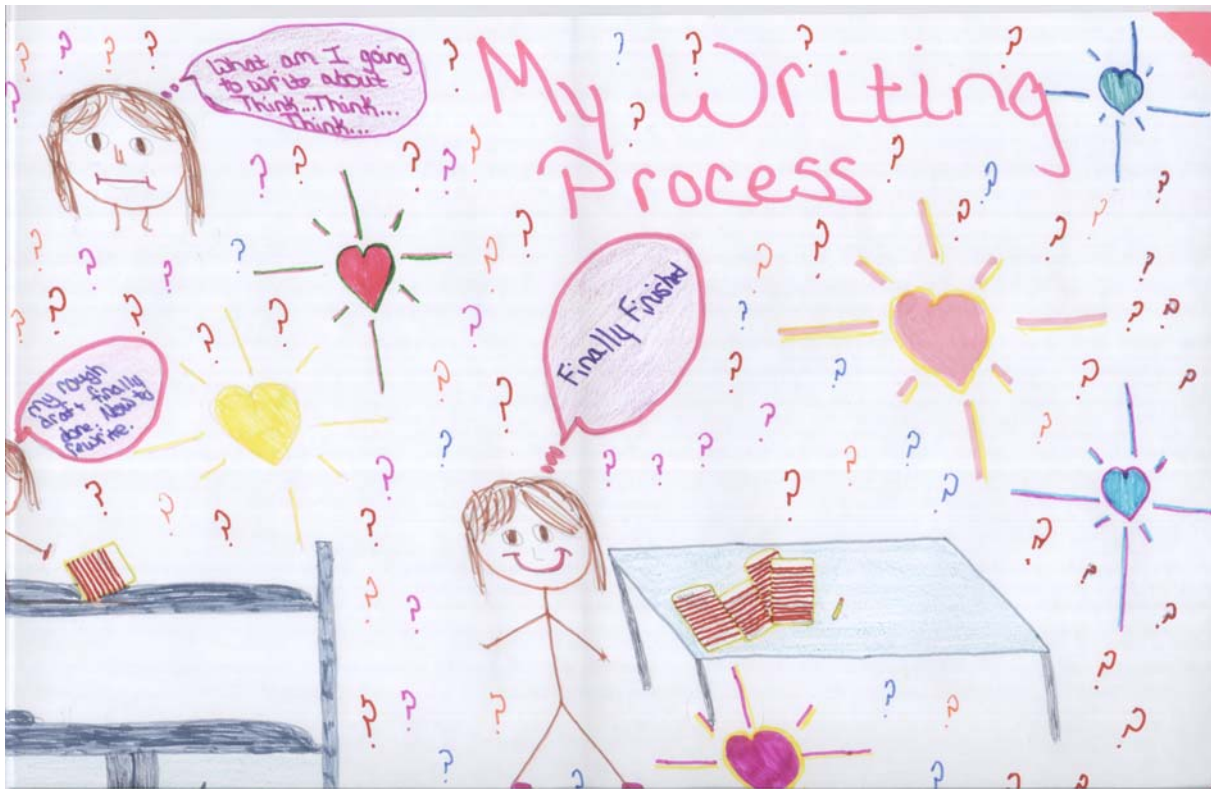
I have been tutoring Katie in literacy ever since July. She has been a big inspiration to me. When she first came into the HOPE program, she had just a third grade level, could barely read or write. But man she just took off and blossomed like someone gave her a dose of miracle grow. I've watched her grow so much. Every time you see her she would be reading, writing, just really doing what it took to build herself up.

Now she loves to read and write. She never read before because she couldn't pronounce the words or didn't understand the meaning. Now that she understands how to use a dictionary and to sound out the words, she sounds them out herself and then, if she doesn't understand, she uses a dictionary. She uses reading as a way to get away. She really had a rough childhood. Now her dream is to own her own craft shop and to write a book.

From Katie, I learned that no matter where you come from, if you want to change you will do whatever it takes to get where you need to be. Once we started tutoring, she always paid attention and did her very best. During our tutor sessions, she would ask questions and try so hard. She mastered the masteries one by one and every time we told her what she made on her masteries it would raise her self esteem up little by little.

As she just recently took her EAs, she is now a ninth grade level and almost ready to take her GED. She is reading big, thick books and writing like nobody's business. It is amazing how a grown woman who has low self esteem and can barely read or write can just take off and bloom like she has. I really feel when she leaves this place because she was in the HOPE program and had one-on-one teaching that she will take the GED in the world and succeed in life. I feel that she will never come back to a place like this.

As an adult, I never thought I could learn more. I guess I felt I was just too old. Watching Katie grow and learn made me have the desire to open my brain and when I leave here I want to go to college. So I feel Katie has had a big impact on my life now and my future.



Cindy's writing process (by Cindy, 5/2007)

Loss, Faith, and HOPE

By Melissa Bosquez

As a 34 year old woman, I am learning and getting better understanding of why and how I had lived the life the way I did. Growing up as a child was everything I could have ever dreamed of. I had both parents who worked very hard to give us everything we ever needed. But what I didn't realize was that I didn't have everything I ever needed.

Part I: Loss

My father shot and killed my mother with a 12 gauge shot got at close range, with me and my younger sister right next to her. I was 16 and she was barely 6 years old. Until this very day I believe it was the hand of God upon us that we were not hurt. It says in the Bible that "He orders his angels to protect us where ever we go." Ahh, now I understand.

So my father is given a life sentence for this crime and that made many people happy, except his daughters. Me and my six sisters were left alone.

Three months later, I married my high school sweetheart. I still think the world of this man. To this day, we are separated but legally married. I thought that would cover and fill in the empty holes in my heart. I was very lonely and confused. Angry at God and questioned him all the time.

After 13 years of marriage, I started to look elsewhere for comfort and happiness in all the wrong places. I start with drinking and men, then it goes deeper into doing drugs and lying and stealing. Leaving my three children with their father and up and down with my sisters because I couldn't emotionally and financially support them. I was still lost and in a state of confusion.

My addiction gets so out of control, I get on my knees and ask God why and to help me. So here's why I am locked up til this very day: because He knew I was tired of being tired and tells me in His word that "He knows the plans He has for me. Plans for good and not disaster. To give me a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11)

Part II: HOPE

So I get arrested for forgery and sent to state jail for 18 months. I hear many horrible rumors about Dawson State Jail, but they failed to tell me of the many church services and Bible studies they have going on every day. There I am told about HOPE Literacy. To be honest what caught my attention about this program was rack time, how it is very quiet because in the other dorms I couldn't get any sleep or concentrate enough to read my Bible. So I put an I-60 to Sgt. Lavallais and a month later I'm accepted.

One thing I did not mention was that it is an education dorm, meaning to be in the dorm I had to have a GED or diploma or be in the process of getting a GED. Since I have my GED, I would be a tutor.

So I'm being tested to see where my strengths are in my education. It turns out that I did excellent in spelling and reading.

A couple of months later I have my first student. I was so nervous! I didn't know the first step in tutoring, but the only thing that kept me going was my trust in the Lord to lead me and guide me. Sure enough, things started to work out. I now have a total of five students and every one of them has a different pace.

But the one student I am most overwhelmed by is a young lady named Angelica. She came into the program two months later and my first impression of her was her appearance. My first thoughts of her were, "She thinks she's too good or all that." But I truly believe that is what God is gonna work with me on is being judgmental and critical towards everyone. Even though I don't confess it with my mouth, my mind is constantly going in every direction. One day she sees me at the table with my Bible open and comes up to me, asking when I go to church.

From that moment on, I knew things were going to be different.

And they are.



Visual representation of Melissa's writing process (by Melissa, 5/07)

Living on the Inside: Recipes and the Art of Making Do

On the inside, supplies are limited on but ingenuity is not. A limited inventory of foodstuffs and personal items are available for purchase at the commissary. But there is, of course, no cookware, no stove, no cutlery. Laundry can be taken care of by the State, but everything is white cotton and items often come back yellowed, stained, or not at all. In this section, **Jessica Foster** includes some recipes quite common in her dorm, as well as some of her specialties. Also included here are some of the innovative ways they've found to cut pickles (when no knives are available), press clothes (when no irons are available), and dry sheets.

Part I: Recipes

Lunch

Spicy Bacon Sandwich—

1 bag hot pork skins

Salad dressing

Save bread slices from lunch tray

Spread salad dressing on bread slices. Cover bread with pork skins. Put bread together like sandwich and squash. Enjoy! Yum!

Dinner

Spam Spread—

Any Roman noodle, cooked with seasoning

Spam—cut in cubes

Cheese puffs—crushed

Salad dressing—spoonful

Cheese—2 spoons full

Pickles—cubed, 2 spoons full

Mix all ingredients together well. Put in large chip bag. Squash to make 1" layer. Fold end under. Cover with newspaper to keep warm. Done in 5 min.

Snacks

Chili Cheese Fries—

1 bag Hot Fries

1 bag chili—warmed

Cheese—3 spoons full

Mix all together. Enjoy. Add hot sauce if you like.

Spicy French Fries with Ketchup—

1 bag Zapps Jalapeño Potato Chips

Ketchup

Put Zapps in bowl. Squirt on ketchup. Enjoy.

Dessert

PB/Choc Cake

1 bag choc cream cookies

1 spoon of peanut butter

1 pk of regular oatmeal

1 nutty bar

1 oatmeal cream pie

Take each cookie and scrape icing off of cookie and into separate container. Crush cookies. Add oatmeal, oatmeal cream pie (crushed), nutty bar (crushed), and enough water to make dough-like substance. Mix well,. With icing in separate container, spread out cookie dough like a pie and add icing to top. Add rushed Chick-O-Stick if desired.

Part II: Cutting, Washing, Pressing

To cut pickles for adding to meals—

We use the blade in razors. Put the pickle into empty peanut butter jar. Add diced jalapeno or chili seasoning from Roman noodles, maybe even carrots from tray.

Washing Clothes—

Add toothpaste to stains until able to wash. Alternative: Laundry soap can be made with small pieces of soap supplied by the State. Put into jar. Add water or even cleaning chemicals (for cleaning dorm). Use a palm brush to scrub with (a brush without a handle for very short hair).

Pressing clothes—

Put flat or folded for crease under mat.

Drying clothes—

Lay out on tables between 10:00pm – 6am. Sheets: tie one end to bed and wave back and forth until dry.

Tampons—

State supplies pads. Tear open one side of pad. Tear down seam of sticky part. Pull out padding. Tear off 2" of padding. Layout outer later with sticky side up. Tear off inch on left side. Put padding at opposite end. Roll out to sticky side. Fold over excess. Pull off tab of sticky and roll up. Twist bottom. Put 1 inch sticky over to keep padding in.



HOPE ON THE OUTSIDE

Since we began writing together, several of the authors included in this collection have been released from prison and are now enjoying their lives on the outside. Here are just two of our writers, in their street clothes and enjoying one another at Thanksgiving celebration.



Deidre Bradshaw has been out since July 2007, has a job, and is starting classes at Eastfield College to work on her Master's Degree. She holds a BA in Political Science. A major accomplishment is she is rebuilding her relationship with her sons.



Tracy Smith, released in 2007, is employed and enjoying her new life. On January 13, 2008, she was baptized at North Pointe Baptist Church.