

Three incarcerated YPEI student authors make history in the Yale Daily News: November 8, 2019

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OPINION

EDITOR'S NOTE

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MATTEI: Light, where it is darkest

THE YALE DAILY NEWS 11:52 PM, NOV 07, 2019

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Since May of last year, I have been a student of the Yale Prison Education Initiative (YPEI), when the program first began offering classes to students incarcerated at MacDougall-Walker Correctional Institution through Yale Summer Session. Throughout my 17 years of incarceration, I have been afforded few meaningful educational opportunities — none of which offered credit for my work. I had become accustomed to the status quo of independent study and various volunteer workshops, all of which provided me with knowledge and

experience, but not much else to show for it. That is, until I met Dr. Zelda Roland, founder and director of YPEI.

At first, I was a bit skeptical (as my experiences have taught me to be) about what she offered. Why would Yale University be willing to offer me college credit, and a Yale transcript? Would the courses truly uphold the Yale standard? I'd already taken enough shortcuts in my life; if the program's pedagogy was built on patronizing us intellectually, I wanted nothing to do with it. After my interview (a requirement for admission into the program), I was cautiously optimistic.

Over the past year, I have been stretched to intellectual lengths I had not previously known. Through YPEI and its partnership with Yale Summer Session, I have enrolled in five Yale courses: "Reading and Writing the Modern Essay" (ENGL S120), "Readings in American Literature" (ENGL S127), "Introduction to Latin Grammar" (Latin S110), "Visual Thinking" (Art S111) and "Foundations of Modern Social Theory" (SOCY S151). It may surprise you that prison academia is a highly competitive environment. The instructors who have worked with us have seen that we can excel and achieve equal if not greater success in these courses than some of their students on campus. The men in my cohort have also helped in this effort, challenging me to become a more nuanced and critical thinker — I pray that I have done the same for them. The professors YPEI has brought into the prison have exposed us to close reading techniques that have

sharpened our analytical skills and made us better, more informed students. In turn, they've also made us more equipped and active fathers, as well as the prepared leaders our communities need.

Our educational journey, however, has not been without its challenges. When encountering sensitive subjects such as race, democracy and American exceptionalism, our experiences have given us a different worldview than that of the average Yale student. This has, at times, been a point of contention. As students, we challenge the racist views espoused by many works in the "classical" literary canon, as well as the philosophies that have shaped the minds of our leaders for centuries. We are not easily impressed by the names of laureates and "all-time greats;" I believe we provide to the academy an honest view of these antiquated ideals.

Yale University is a place of prestige. But with that prestige comes a sense of exclusivity and elitism. YPEI has served to dispel that notion by offering society's forgotten citizens two things that many of us have never had: opportunity and exposure. This has allowed us to flourish in ways we previously thought were impossible. Our encounters and experiences with Yale faculty, undergraduates and graduate students have also helped us better understand and navigate the rigors of the University standard. In the process, we have become more efficient readers and more effective writers.

We live in a time when social justice issues are at the forefront of our nation's collective conscience. Zelda, through her work with YPEI, is positioning Yale as a leader in providing quality education to the incarcerated. It would be unjust and myopic for her tireless efforts to go unsupported. As an established, highly accomplished educational institution, Yale has a reputation for discovering and molding great minds. Some of the most brilliantly creative and analytical thinkers I have ever encountered are the men here in YPEI. Yes, we have made some costly mistakes in our lives. But should that relegate our minds to dormant complacency? I believe not. Brilliance has no boundaries — why not continue venturing where few others would go?

It is time for Yale to step outside the box of its own traditions to discover what more can be done for the underserved. Our University motto is "Lux et Veritas" — Light and Truth. Light has a duty to shine where it is darkest; truth must govern our principles and policies. YPEI has built a solid foundation for that important work.

Will you add to it?

LUIS MATTEI JR. *is an incarcerated student at the MacDougall-Walker Correctional Institution in Suffield, Connecticut, and a participant in the Yale Prison Education Initiative at Dwight Hall.*

PETE: Saplings of knowledge

THE YALE DAILY NEWS 10:51 PM, NOV 07, 2019

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"This is jail, not Yale," a correctional officer remarked the first time he observed me studying in the prison dayroom. His statement of the obvious conveyed a general sentiment that this place — MacDougall-Walker Correctional Institution — is a place of retribution, rather than rehabilitation. Over my many years in prison, I've heard this mantra echoed countless times. Choosing to agree with it, however, is a choice.

We all make countless decisions each and every day. While many seem trivial, others can greatly impact the course of our

lives. The most pertinent decision, one regarding my education, was made while standing in front of a judge. As the prosecutor listed a litany of facts, crafting a narrative that reduced my entire life to my worst moment, he cited my abysmal academic record. While I knew that I had not applied myself in high school, I was shocked to hear that I had graduated at the very bottom of my class. In that very moment, I realized the stark connection between education and all other facets of life. I was faced with a choice of continuing upon that same trajectory — confirming this narrative — or changing it and redefining my life. I fully committed to change and embraced education as a crucial element of the person that I wanted to become. I continued on this path until reaching my apex this summer through the Yale Prison Education Initiative.

In 2018, YPEI began offering Yale Summer Session Courses at MacDougall-Walker. I was elated at the opportunity to not only assess my progress, but also to potentially take college classes. Moreover, this was not just any college; it was Yale. I applied and was interviewed, but I failed to get in to the program. This initial rejection sparked momentary doubt, which only served to fuel my drive. I spent the next year voraciously reading everything that I could get my hands on and taking college prep classes from a non-profit organization. When I applied again in the summer of 2019, I was accepted. I am proud to say that at almost 50 years of age and having been out of school for almost 30 years, I received As on my

first two credited classes from Yale. But my personal accomplishment pales in comparison to the collective shift it signifies.

Until recently, the educational opportunities provided within Connecticut's penal system were minimal and offered limited applicability. The grim reality was that most of us were confronted with a choice — of a menial job, post-incarceration or recidivism. As one of many autodidacts at MacDougall-Walker, I was not alone in my struggle to envision a future that held no such constraints.

But when Dr. Zelda Roland came to MacDougall-Walker to introduce YPEI, offering us the opportunity to reach our fullest potentials, she stated matter-of-factly, "when you are in this class, it is Yale." Whether she knew it, her words signaled a dramatic change. The arid landscape that had previously drained life from even the mere idea of any academic yield was now flourishing with saplings of knowledge reaching ever upward: the glass ceiling was raised to towering heights. YPEI brought confirmation and encouragement to those who had vision; it brought hope to those who had not previously considered hope plausible.

YPEI has changed the collective narrative moving forward, facilitating growth not only for those who have begun to study independently, but for all those within the scope of the system. YPEI has truly made this Yale rather than jail, and the impact of that fact is boundless. But the question remains: will

Yale continue to captain the rudder? Or will we be let heedlessly adrift?

PETE is an incarcerated student at the MacDougall-Walker Correctional Institution in Suffield, Connecticut, and a participant in the Yale Prison Education Initiative at Dwight Hall.

EVAN: No limits, no bounds

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In a short period of time, the Yale Prison Education Initiative has become a beacon of light in a place that perpetuates darkness. As a student in the program, I can attest to the array of transcendental qualities that Yale courses have bestowed upon students in MacDougall-Walker Correctional Institution.

For starters, YPEI has single-handedly changed the entire atmosphere within the prison. Before Yale's presence in the facility, there were hardly any opportunities to promote individual growth and learning. Sadly, this fact sent many

minds into mental darkness with no real means to jar them out of their rut. But with the emergence of YPEI came the desire for knowledge, for enlightenment. In an instant, the usual dredge of the day-to-day became an entire new world of opportunity, hope and, above all, redemption. I bore witness to the facility-wide dialogue, which quickly shifted from “fake news” and sports gossip to topics related to liberal arts education — all in one fell swoop. That type of conversation still reigns supreme today as those same minds continue to strive for more.

The chosen few who have been blessed with the YPEI experience have been awakened to the untapped potential that lies dormant within us all. Yale, in that respect, has given us the gift of new life. We are no longer subject to the limitations prison culture submerges its occupants under because now, we have the critical thinking skills necessary to surpass boundaries that have been set in stone for ages. We are no longer influenced by our toxic environments — for we have become the influence. As we continue to seek and aspire to higher ideas and goals, we have become motivation and inspiration for those who seek the same. None of it would have been possible without YPEI.

I touched on the positivity Yale has brought to MacDougall. I spoke to the intellectual aspects of the program, too. But the last transcendental quality I want to shed light on is love.

YPEI has provided all of us students with a sense of love that only family can provide. I assume that this is the natural order on campus, which may at times go underrated or overlooked, but in prison this sense of belonging, protection and security is rejuvenating. To me, what seems to be the most prominent feature of all the staff and Yale students I have encountered throughout my time with YPEI is that, when you are a part of Yale, you are a part of a family, and there is no limit to what they will do in the name of helping you become the best you can be.

For that feeling — for all the time, effort and resources spent — I am forever grateful. I beg you for your continued support of the Yale Prison Education Initiative.

EVAN *is an incarcerated student at the MacDougall-Walker Correctional Institution in Suffield, Connecticut, and a participant in the Yale Prison Education Initiative at Dwight Hall.*

An earlier version of this piece referred to the “McDougall-Walker Correctional Institution.” It is MacDougall, not McDougall.

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GUEST COLUMNIST EVAN

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I FULLY COMMITTED TO CHANGE AND EMBRACED EDUCATION AS A CRUCIAL ELEMENT OF THE PERSON THAT I WANTED TO BECOME. I CONTINUED ON THIS PATH UNTIL REACHING MY APEX THIS SUMMER THROUGH THE YALE PRISON EDUCATION INITIATIVE

We all make countless decisions each and every day. While many seem trivial, others can greatly impact the course of our

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