

The letters sent to Peg Bortner's office were laced with fear and uncertainty.

Bortner works as the lead volunteer for the College Program for Incarcerated Women at Arizona State University, an education initiative at the Federal Prison Camp in Phoenix.

Since the start of the pandemic, she's thumbed through dozens of letters from students, each scribbled with a palpable sense of dread.

"Heartbreaking," she said. "It's heartbreaking."

The women write about falling ill, facing social isolation, fearing for their health and for the health of their children and families. They write about falling behind, flunking out and being unable to finish their education.

On top of navigating a carceral coronavirus infection rate nearly four times the national average, students enrolled in postsecondary prison education programs faced major interruptions to their education.

Many of the students enrolled in the program were slated to graduate with their associates degrees in 2022, but none did.

Bortner and her colleagues routinely dealt with all-out shutdowns. Outbreaks prevented educators from stepping foot in classrooms to teach or in the parking lot to drop off materials, leaving students without the consistent education that once served as an oasis.

"Sometimes the education building feels like an island in the prison," Bortner said. "In better times, they can be there and feel like a student."

Shutdowns and uncertainty

Bortner drove to the prison on March 18, 2020 prepared to proctor an exam.

She was sitting in the lobby, waiting to be let in when the director of education informed her the prison would be shutting down, and she would no longer be allowed inside.

Over the course of the next two years, Bortner and her colleagues would sporadically drop off and pick up assignments from students between outbreaks and shutdowns.

The students were often sequestered from their coursework, classmates and professors as coronavirus took hold of the population and sent many to quarantine.

Bortner tried to keep communication with students alive through letters. She sent postmarked envelopes to the prison as often as she could so students did not have to scrape together commissary money for stamps.

Students further along in their programs were able to navigate the flux in coursework, but those just starting off faced the most difficulty. Many dropped their degree programs.

“New students were writing and saying, ‘I just can’t do this. I so wanted to be a college student, but I just can’t complete this class.’” Bortner said.

Education as power

Antonio Espree, a student associate at the program, coordinates with students and professors to ensure all assignments are submitted and graded.

He spoke of the letters too.

“We have to keep in mind the mental state of enduring the tough times these women have had to face, the breakdowns they’ve had,” Espree said. “It’s more than an impediment. People have died from COVID. And that fear that has mentally and morally taken away the excitement about being a college student and obtaining a degree.”

Despite the continued presence of coronavirus, he said assignments are now rolling in more consistently as the program gets back on its feet. He hopes some sense of normalcy returns to the program sometime soon.

Espree knows the power and confidence an education can bring.

When Espree was 16, he was sentenced to natural life in prison. During the 29 years he spent incarcerated, he completed nine educational course work programs ranging from culinary arts to the art of the short story.

He was released in 2017 after two Supreme Court rulings found natural life without parole for juveniles was unconstitutional.

He enrolled at ASU shortly after his release and is now working toward a bachelors and eventual masters degree in justice studies.

“It allows you to grab hold of life,” Espree said. “To give it a purpose and meaning.”

Federal aid expands

On April 26, the U.S. Department of Education announced the expansion of the Second Chance Pell Experiment, a program extending federal Pell Grant money to incarcerated students.

Before its introduction in 2016, incarcerated individuals were barred from receiving federal financial aid under the 1994 crime bill, which was only recently repealed in 2020.

The pilot program has since grown from 67 participating colleges in 2016 to 130 colleges in 2020 and now reaches across 42 states, according to the Vera Institute of Justice.

Programs are continuing to gain momentum especially as success stories spring up across the country.

On a bright day in May at Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia, Michigan, Todd Cioffi, director of the Calvin Prison Initiative at Calvin University, addressed the 2020, 2021 and 2022 graduates at the first bachelors graduation ceremony within prison walls.

When the prison education program started at Handlon, it was a “very violent place,” earning it the nickname, “gladiator school,” according to Cioffi. Since the start of the CPI, violence within prison walls has declined 80%. CPI saw lower recidivism rates, too.

Cioffi hopes to expand the benefits of the program beyond Handlon. This summer, groups of graduates are headed to prisons around Michigan to instruct a pre-college program for other inmates.

“We’re extremely proud of them,” Cioffi said.

A second chance

Bortner sends her responses to students on cream-colored stationary stamped with the ASU seal. She tells them not to be discouraged, that their professors understand and have enormous confidence for the future.

Bortner sees it as an opportunity to put it in writing, to make it concrete. She sometimes sends multiple copies so the students can share with their children and families.

Now that program is veering closer to its original track, Bortner is focused on prepping as best she can for the extension of Pell Grants in the coming year so the students who dropped out get a second chance.

Her voice cracked as she reflected on students’ hardships.

“These women are stronger than anybody knows,” Bortner said. “They have demonstrated they can survive within the prison environment, and that they can be students. And they can be good students.”