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Page 16

Destitute find a happy home on the campus

FROM Damian Whitworth in South Bend, Indiana

THE seminar on Machiavelli's *The Prince* is over and Michael Newton is among a group of students idling behind in the classroom. Suddenly he holds up his copy of the textbook for duplicitous and ruthless megalomaniacs. "I was watching Tony Blair's speech on cable the other day," he says. "I'm sure he's read this book."

Even within the panelled halls of the ivy-clad, Gothic towers of the exclusive Notre Dame University, it must be unusual to encounter someone chatting casually and knowledgeably about British politics - but then, Mr Newton is a very unusual student.

A former factory worker who lost his job when he suffered a back injury, Mr Newton is a 52-year-old black man who descended into a spiral of gambling addiction and poverty after the end of his 27-year marriage.

Now he is homeless, like the other dozen students in this class. They are part of a pioneering experiment, volunteers for a kind of "strength through philosophy" regime that has excited a nation that does not know what to do with the two million people who find themselves homeless every year.

Once, this Midwest town guaranteed work on the production line at the giant Studebaker car factory, but that has long gone. It now

sends those without homes, the most powerless, up to the university - to study a book that examines how to obtain and maintain ultimate power. Plato's Apology is also on the curriculum, along with the works of St Thomas Aquinas and a host of other greats from the Western philosophical canon.

It sounds like a gimmick. What do homeless people want with Socratic dialogue? Surely, this is about academics trying to make themselves feel better in their ivory tower? Clark Power and Stephen Fallon, the professors who dreamt up the course, admit to an element of that. "It's partly selfish. We want to do something and we can't build houses," Professor Fallon said.

However, they also say that the homeless come away from the weekly evening classes with something vital. "They feel they have demonstrated to themselves and to the world that they are able to read these books and understand them and participate in an intellectual programme that traditionally only open to students at an elite university," Professor Power said.

"It gives them self-confidence and self-worth. They rationalise that if they are able to discuss these texts in class, then they will certainly handle a job."

The course is in its second year and already word of the "graduates of the gutter" picking up Aristotle and aiming for college and the workplace has put the two academics in demand on the conference circuit. Thirty other colleges want to set up replica courses.

Clearly, the students enjoy themselves. The two-hour seminar is lively, often heated and punctuated by laughter. Professor Power rates a couple of them as highly as his best undergraduate.

There was also an extra edge to much of their analysis because of the personal experiences that they bring to the class, and a

refreshing lack of verbiage.

"I thought that was real interesting," one woman said dryly of Machiavelli's description of Fortune as a woman who needs to be beaten.

"Yeah! Crush, kill, destroy. There may be something in that," Ros Hampton, 35, said. Machiavelli's flattery of the Medici family was skewered with some choice expletives.

Many of the students return after classes to South Bend's Centre for the Homeless, an extraordinarily cheerful place that is run as a zero-tolerance, benign boot camp, complete with chores and barking Tannoys.

Privately funded, housed in a building leased by the university for \$1 a year and with an army of 500 student volunteers, it also gives philosophers time to think.

"Plato has taught me the importance of self-revelation and coming face to face with yourself," Mr Newton, who is one of those hoping to go to college full time, said.

"When you start using these texts, it helps you to begin to get rid of the cobwebs and see that there is a chance to have a new outlook and a look into yourself. And then you realise there's a kind of hope."