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For the Homeless, Rebirth Through Socrates

By Ethan Bronner

SOUTH BEND, Ind., March 2 - The students, mostly in sweat shirts and jeans, sit around a long table dotted with soda cans and cookies and consult their highlighted copies of Plato's "Apology." Two professors guide their debate over whether Socrates, on the verge of execution, was arrogant or humble. Outside, the sun sets on the neogothic campus.

There could hardly be a more archetypal college scene than this one in the University of Notre Dame's O'Shaughnessy Building, with its seven stained glass windows representing the seven liberal arts, ancient disciplines from rhetoric to astronomy. Yet the 10 students in this weekly seminar fit no typical profile for Notre Dame or any university. They are current or former residents of the South Bend Center for the Homeless, men and women with the weathered features and oblique emotional balances of those who have spent many nights in the streets.

It may seem quaint, if not useless, to bring philosophical literature to the homeless, an idea conceived in some pristine ivory tower. But that is not how the students view it.

"Those of us in the grip of addiction use this process to rethink our lives," said Michael A Newton, 50, originally of New York City, who has been homeless for 16 months. "Socrates makes clear that you have to have the courage to examine yourself and to stand up for something. A lot of us have justified our weaknesses for too

long a time."

This class, which includes works by Shakespeare, Montaigne and Melville, was inspired by Earl Shorris, a New York author, who created a humanities course for the poor, although not necessarily homeless, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan four years ago.

There are now seven such courses in the country and another 40 are planned in the next five years. Money is coming from various sources, including the Federal Department of Education, foundations and state commissions on the humanities. Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson in Dutchess County is taking a central role and offering credit to those who complete the courses that it is sponsoring.

"Martin Luther King Jr. said years ago that a man can't ride your back unless it is bent," said Louis M. Nanni, executive director of the South Bend Center for the Homeless. "This is just one more way for our guests to straighten their backs."

There is evidence that these courses have impact. Mr. Shorris said that the first course he offered at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center on 13th Street in 1994-95 began with 31 students. "Along the way," he said, "1 died of AIDS, 3 became pregnant, 2 seriously ill. We had 17 who completed the course. Of those, 14 earned six credits from Bard. Of those, 11 are enrolled today in a four-year college, 5 of them at Bard."

Students in the eight-week course here earn a Notre Dame credit if they do the reading, attend class regularly and pass the examination. One student, Karyn Tanis, a former heroin addict who has been something of a class star, has high hopes of starting Notre Dame next fall with financial assistance.

Other students say they love the feeling that coming to class at

Notre Dame gives them and the regimen of reading and discussion. Their personal stories often have the weight of classic tragedy - abuse, addiction, economic ruin - and their relationship to the texts can be deeply personal. For example, a recent class dealt with Melville's "Billy Budd," whose title character does not know his parents' identity. Timothy W. Ferguson, 43, a recovering crystal methamphetamine addict, who has lived at the homeless center since January, knows that feeling. He was adopted as a child. When he found his birth parents seven years ago, he discovered that they, too, were addicts. The experience set him reeling. He lost his job, his wife and his home, a story he shared in class.

Another student, Ted West, 39, from Goshen, Ind., with sunken cheeks and a handlebar mustache, explained the value of the course this way: "When you come out of the fog of the addiction, you thirst for knowledge. You feel there is so much you missed. For 20 years, I never had a goal beyond where my next glass of vodka was coming from. When Socrates talks about the pleasure of knowledge, I know exactly what he means."

He added by way of background: "My health was miserable, my life was failing. I was vomiting blood, I weighed 139 pounds. I was hanging around with crazy people. I couldn't even light a cigarette, I was so shaky. It took me a couple pints of vodka to go to sleep at night. Now I need structure in my life and reading these books has become an important form of structure."

For the course's two professors, F. Clark Power and Stephen M. Fallon, both in the program of liberal studies, teaching the homeless has been a revelation.

"It may sound odd but I feel grateful to have the chance to look at these texts through their eyes," said Professor Power, who is a developmental psychologist by training.

When the issue of mortality came up, one student said simply, "Anyone who has been an addict understands mortality." When "The Tempest" was discussed, Professor Fallon, a literary critic, recalled: "They grasped the mix of Man and Nature that Shakespeare meant. They have insights into the texts I had not heard."

The idea of teaching the great books beyond the traditional classroom dates at least to the 1920's, when Mortimer Adler, the psychologist who went on to become director of editorial planning for the Encyclopedia Britannica, began offering seminars in New York City to working adults. It was, he argued, a requirement of American democracy that all citizens become educated and articulate. Later, Robert Maynard Hutchins further developed the great books idea for the public at the University of Chicago.

Mr. Shorris went to Chicago in the Hutchins era and was deeply affected by his years there. But it was not until he was exploring the nature of American poverty for a 1997 book, "New American Blues" (Norton), that he had an insight into how the great books could help the poor. It occurred, epiphany-like, when he met Viniece Walker, a prisoner in the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in Westchester County.

"You've got to teach the moral life of downtown," she told him cryptically. It turned out she meant high culture: plays, museums, concerts, literature. The way out of poverty, Mr. Shorris said he believed, was politics. Ms. Walker was saying that to grasp politics, to enter the public world, the poor first had to learn to reflect. Art and the humanities were a gateway to reflection.

As Mr. Shorris put in his book and a September 1997 Harper's Magazine article derived from it: "The poor did not need anyone to release them; an escape route existed. But to open this avenue to reflection and politics a major distinction between the preparation

for the life of the rich and the life of the poor had to be eliminated."

Mr. Shorris has formed a non-profit organization, the Bard College Clemente course in the humanities, whose board includes former Mayor David N. Dinkins and Starling Lawrence, editor in chief at W.W. Norton, which has donated to the courses many copies of its books, including "World Masterpieces Anthology."

Martin Kempner, a philosopher, has been hired to direct the Bard College program and the five-year expansion to almost 50 sites. Of the existing seven courses, four are in New York City and one each in New Brunswick, N.J., Seattle and Anchorage, Alaska. Abroad, Mr. Shorris has started or is planning similar courses at the University of British Columbia and in Yucatan, Mexico and Marseilles, France.

This fall, Bard College hopes to start courses in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Oklahoma City, Tampa, Fla., Portland, Ore., Boston, Holyoke, Mass., and two or three in Connecticut.

The Bard courses all follow a rigorous pattern and are longer and more extensive than the one offered at Notre Dame. Classes meet twice a week for two semesters and cover a wider array of texts. The Notre Dame professors say they drew their inspiration from Mr. Shorris but have limited their courses to eight weeks because of the transitory nature of those living in the homeless center. But, they add, a number of students continue from session to session.

Denis Kazmierczak, 54, a former flower arranger and actor, is one of them. He says the course has been a "sanctuary, someplace I can go where people appreciate me for my mind."

Then, Mr. Kazmierczak elaborated: "It is hard to find beauty when you are in the situation we are in. But I have come to realize

through the reading that, in some ways, everybody is homeless. You can be sitting in your fancy penthouse apartment looking out at the world but your life can be hollow. Now my mind is active, I have picked up a lost thread. Who knows? Maybe one day I'll write the great American novel."

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