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FRONT PAGE

N.D. BRINGS LITERATURE TO HOMELESS

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SOUTH BEND--Texts of Herman Melville's "Billy Budd" lay spread on the table, as the students eagerly offer their opinions about the nature of goodness and depravity.

"It seems to me that Claggart was the embodiment of evil," says a student named Dennis, who refused to give his last name. Claggart is the master-at-arms in the novel who brings about his own death and the death of the title character.

Michael, another student who refused to give his last name, isn't buying the argument that the much-loved Billy Budd was a complete innocent. "People-pleasers find themselves in all kinds of trouble," he says.

The conversation bounces around the room of O'Shaughnessy Hall at the University of Notre Dame, with each of the seven men and three women students offering his or her take on the novel.

The students in this class are not the usual undergraduates. They are present and former residents of the Center for the Homeless in South Bend.

This is Great Books, a free college course started last fall for homeless center residents by Clark Power and Stephen Fallon, professors in the university's Program of Liberal Studies.

During eight-week sessions, participants read a series of assigned great works of philosophy and literature. Then they come to campus for two hours a week on Monday evenings and discuss that week's reading in a seminar-style class. A student earns one college credit for completing a session and a final written exam.

This session's reading list includes the Melville novel, Plato's "Apology of Socrates," Shakespeare's "The Tempest," selections from Charles Darwin, readings from the Bible, selected poems of Wallace Stevens and stories by such authors as Virginia Woolf and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Last fall's sessions included works by Thomas Aquinas, Machiavelli, Martin Luther King, Alexis de Tocqueville, Homer, Sigmund Freud and Frederick Douglass.

The students range in age from 20 to about 60 years old. They come from greatly varied life experiences--some have previously attended college, while others ended their formal education at high school.

Many of them have faced the challenge of substance addictions, and all have experienced the trauma of homelessness.

When planning the class, Fallon and Power encountered some skepticism from colleagues.

"People told us, 'These are difficult books. They won't be up to it,' which we didn't buy. Schools don't have a monopoly on brains," says Fallon. "I've always thought of education as a privilege, but I never thought it should be limited to the privileged."

"I love this class. It's a return to certain intellectual faculties I had forgotten I had," said Michael, a man of about 50 who moved out

of the homeless center last August but shows up each week for the Great Books class.

The class focuses on large themes, such as justice and tyranny, self-discovery or God and nature.

"Billy Budd," the topic of a recent seminar, is about the tragedy of a young sailor forced into service aboard a British naval vessel in 1797.

The two professors get the discussion rolling by posing a question to the group about the reading.

The atmosphere around the table is informal, with some joking, but the students are eager to offer their comments and reflections.

Participants take the class seriously. All arrive with the material read, and sometimes reread. They often have underlined passages in their texts.

"I would have done the same thing," declares student Ellen Shore, a 41-year-old mother of two, referring to Billy Budd striking the master-at-arms dead after the man unjustly accuses him of plotting mutiny.

A few of the students suspect the master-at-arms may have been in love with Billy, although they acknowledge Melville included no overt references to homosexuality.

Noting the book's Christ imagery, Dennis is convinced the main character was faultless: "He was an absolute lamb led to the slaughter."

Carmen Ware, a middle-age woman, agrees. "Billy was doing the best he could," she says.

Fallon and Power guide the discussion, posing questions such as whether the ship's captain did the right thing by allowing Billy to face death by hanging.

There are references to Plato and Calvinism as the students debate the meaning of natural depravity.

Sometimes participants draw parallels between the classic works and their own experiences.

Student Tim Ferguson, 43, feels a link with the Billy Budd character, who is described in the book as a foundling.

"When I was told I was adopted, a chain of events happened that brought me to where I am now, because I couldn't deal with it," says Ferguson, who has lived at the homeless center since January.

Ferguson describes to his classmates how he found his birth parents seven years ago. It turned out not to be a happy event, because he discovered that his own struggle with substance addiction likely is rooted in heredity.

The professors got the idea for the course from writings by Earl Shorris. Shorris was a student in a rigorous Great Books curriculum at the University of Chicago in the 1950s. He and others later started a Great Books course in New York City to provide education as a remedy for poverty.

Power and Fallon contacted Lou Nanni, director of the Center for the Homeless and a Notre Dame graduate who majored in liberal studies. In the Program of Liberal Studies, students focus on classic writings and study them extensively in seminar-style classes.

The goal of the course is not just to expand the minds of participants, but to show them they have a stake in wider society, says Fallon. The class is designed to give a voice to the homeless and to help lead them further on their passage of self-discovery.

"I wouldn't pick up these books on my own, but I'm interested in expanding my knowledge," says Karyn Tanis, a 29-year-old participant.

Tanis lived at the homeless center for more than a year. She now lives and works in Highland, Ind., traveling three hours round-trip each week to participate in the class.

Tanis says the class has strengthened her self-confidence and knowledge of herself.

"It can get intense, but you leave feeling good about yourself and the other people in the class. It's kind of like group therapy," says Ferguson.

"I've always been an avid reader. It's a great opportunity to be able to participate in a class like this for free," says student Ted West, 38, who has been living at the homeless center for three months. His favorite text so far is Euripides' "Medea." " "The Tempest" was a real challenge," says West, who admits to not being partial to Shakespeare.

"The class has given me an appreciation for Plato and things I've never read before," says Ware. "It's given me a broader view. I'm not used to discussing things like that."

Teaching the homeless center residents is different from teaching traditional undergraduates, says Power.

The homeless center residents "bring to the seminar life experiences our (undergraduate) students don't have," he says. "Books become a means for them to interpret their own past lives and help them look to the future."

Notre Dame students assist the program by providing transportation for participants and child care.

Each session is limited to about 15 students. There is a waiting list of center residents who hope to participate in the future.

Most center residents who enroll complete the course. A few participants move away, some get jobs that don't allow them to continue, others find they don't have time to do the readings.

The professors have found the experience educational, as well. They discovered they enjoy rereading the great works of philosophy and literature and discussing them with adults of extensive life experience.

There are plans to expand the Great Books program next fall, recruiting other professors so several seminars can be offered simultaneously.

"This really is learning for learning's sake," says Power. "That's what they are teaching us."