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Study of great literature offers refuge to Homeless

By Tamara Henry November 23, 1999

SOUTH BEND, Ind. -- Fear and disbelief battled for attention from Thomas Ray as he read Sophocles' *Antigone* in the Great Books course at the University of Notre Dame recently. The 44-year-old, who graduated from high school more than two decades ago, is homeless, living in a downtown shelter after a run of bad luck and serious health problems. He found it hard to believe that someone like him would be sitting for 90 minutes each week at a huge conference table within a paneled classroom at the prestigious university.

"You're in a homeless center, going to a class at Notre Dame. It just blows you away when you think about things like that," Ray says. "I was petrified the first day, walking into that classroom. Two professors, Going to college."

Ray and about a dozen other guests from the Center for the Homeless take advantage of a partnership between the center and the Catholic school. Three eight-week seminars on such masterpieces as Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Augustine's *Confessions* are offered free each semester to the center residents on a pass/fail basis.

Why the classics for the homeless? Shouldn't they be more worried about shelter and other necessities?

Notre Dame professors F. Clark Power and Stephen M. Fallon say the homeless profit in tangible and intangible ways. Through the

stories, they say, adults come to terms with their personal problems, see errors in their choices and search for solutions. The course is one way to help the dispossessed begin to participate in the life of the community.

Often, people working with the homeless get bogged down providing services for addiction, mental health, abuse, behavioral issues and employment, says Louis Nanni, former director of the homeless center.

What gets ignored is "helping people rediscover, and in some cases discover for the first time, their giftedness."

"It is so critical," Nanni says. "Where people find hope, where their soul and their spirit are resuscitated, it's in being able to give expression to their gifts."

Ray agrees. "A lot of times, when we talk about the readings, we compare it to our own lives, and we can understand" to a greater extent the author's meaning. "Whereas, if you're just a student, you're guessing at what the author is talking about."

"We're not just dumb," says Carmen Ware, 50, who has been in and out of the center since 1994 but now rents an apartment with the center's help. "We have brains. Even though we're homeless, we still want to know. We just feel so good."

The insights of the center students excite Power and Fallon, who use a seminar discussion approach instead of lectures. Fallon, a literary critic, and Power, a developmental psychologist, last year developed the course with the notion that "the privilege of elite university education should not be limited to economically privileged members of society." When they raised the idea with Nanni, he leapt at the opportunity.

Students stress that professors are not condescending and seem to

appreciate comments.

The professors note the adults' attention to details and the fact their textbooks are well-worn, with marks from yellow and pink highlighters on key passages and words.

"They learn very quickly to use the text to support an argument or to raise a question," Power says. "Often you hear them say, 'On Page 43, take a look.' We don't have a BS discussion, where the book raises the question and then we go off and talk off the top of our head. They tend to be focused in the text."

Students in the Great Books course must write essays based on the material to get college credit. About a dozen have completed the course as it begins its second year, but only about a half-dozen have earned credits.

Nanni says the program dashes stereotypes, particularly the one that "these people can't read."

"There are people within the homeless population who are very bright, very intelligent," says Nanni, a graduate of Notre Dame's Program of Liberal Studies who now is assistant to the university's president.

"The whole vision for the center is to take the best resources the community has to offer and make them inclusive of our neediest citizens -- the best for the neediest."

Fallon says he and Power enjoy teaching Notre Dame students in the Program of Liberal Studies -- most of whom are from the middle and upper classes.

But, he adds, "we thought these books really are too good to be kept to a certain segment of society."

Power learned "you can take a Great Books approach and make it work with a segment of the population that people tend to write off. Also, this is a form of political education, an empowering experience."

To generate interest in the course at the homeless center, Power and Fallon chat up the course at a meeting of all 100 or so residents, provide a brief background on a Greek tragedy such as *Antigone*, then present a videotape of a selected scene from the work.

They stop the video at the height of the drama, to the moans and protests of the audience. Then the professors ask a thought-provoking question that sparks a heated discussion. They end with a request to join the course.

Notre Dame students not only provide transportation, but also babysitting services. W.W. Norton & Co. donated more than 200 sets of its two-volume *Anthology of World Masterpieces*.

Psyched up by the video and the animated discussion that follows, as many as 50 people sign up for the course, says Ware, the former center resident. The numbers drop off significantly once the first assignment is given.

When the biblical story of Job was assigned, Ware says, she mumbled that "there are too many . . . pages."

But once into the story, Ware says, her years of struggle with addiction paled in comparison with Job's troubles.

She's a veteran of the Great Books course now.

"I remember sleeping on a sidewalk, with the lining of a trash can covering me and rain coming down. But I ain't been through nothing compared to what Job has gone through.

"It inspires you to come home."