**CREATIVE WRITING CLASS AT**

**MOBILE METRO JAIL**

**Goals:** The creative writing class at Mobile Metro Jail is currently structured as an eight-week course of reading and writing, taught once a week for two hours for an average of twelve students. The goal is to teach reading and writing as life skills that not only enrich intellectually, but provide coping techniques and lead to better decision-making. Ultimately, finding one’s voice through writing is deeply empowering. Students succeed in enhancing their self-esteem through the restorative and rehabilitative power of writing and literature.

**Writing:** Students engage in freewriting exercises several times a week to begin examining their lives and choices. They also write exercises in fictional techniques, such as dialogue, and point of view, and try their hand at complete stories.

Freewriting is a technique in which students write without stopping or editing, for timed periods on a given topic, such as describing their childhood homes, or simply, the color blue. Freewriting is a powerful therapeutic tool, which the students quickly discover for themselves. After a freewriting session they sometimes report feeling at peace. Others weep at accessing painful memories, and find comfort in the class. One student reported freewriting for the entire three hours he was locked down in the psychiatric ward after an outburst in his unit. Another discovered that writing letters to his girlfriend instead of having lengthy phone conversations avoided fights and opened up a new level of communication (the re-invention of correspondence).

Freewriting exercises are private unless the students choose to share them. Students are not graded on their writing, so as not to inhibit their output, but each class includes a section on grammar points derived from the previous week’s writing assignment. A “word of the week” game focuses on vocabulary skills.

**Mentoring:** The writing exercises allow the students to begin to till the soil of their experiences, to reflect on their lives. They generate questions of an existential nature: why am I here, what is my purpose, and why do I suffer so much? A portion of each class is set aside to address the issues that students write about, with an effort to respond first at a literary level, with a poem or story that treats the same issue. As almost all of the students have substance abuse problems, principles of Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous are discussed where suggested by the students’ writing, and AA literature is made available to those who request it. Towards the end of the course, discussions include healthy relationships and the importance of planning for life after release. For this reason, the course might optimally be targeted at inmates who will be released within a short period of completion of class, as part of preparation for re-entry.

**Reading:** Students receive weekly reading assignments of two-three short stories, which are discussed in class. Each student receives a copy of a novel to be read collectively and discussed throughout the course. The first class, of men, received the graphic novel **Maus** by Art Spiegelman. The women’s class received **I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings** by Maya Angelou. Students also have the opportunity to earn books by extra writing, and receive books of their choice for graduation. These range from **The Plague** by Albert Camus, to books of fairy tales.

The reading assignments are designed to initially capture the students’ interest with stories close to their own experience, including stories set in prison. The goal is to create readers, to make the world of books available as guide, comfort and occupation for people whose days are empty. The subject matter then expands to include stories about polar exploration, fairy tales, rap lyrics and the Odyssey, among others. A map of the world is used to track the places that the class reads about or discusses, revealing a larger world and choices beyond those that the students have experienced.

Readings are adjusted from week to week according to the students’ reading levels and interests. One student reported that instead of playing card games in his cell, he now read, requesting a new book each week. Another, after reading **To Kill a Mockingbird**, came to class caught up in the story, demanding to know whether Boo Radley or Jem killed Mr. Ewell.