



Lynette Lobban

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

Inside -

Out

When inmates and OU students take classes together inside prison walls, barriers of all kinds come tumbling down.

As a buzzer sounded, Brooke Maxey and her fellow University of Oklahoma students stepped through the gate into a small concrete canyon. Towering loops of razor wire stretched as far as they could see to their left and right. A second lock clicked, and the students entered the Mabel Bassett Correctional Center. It was time for class.

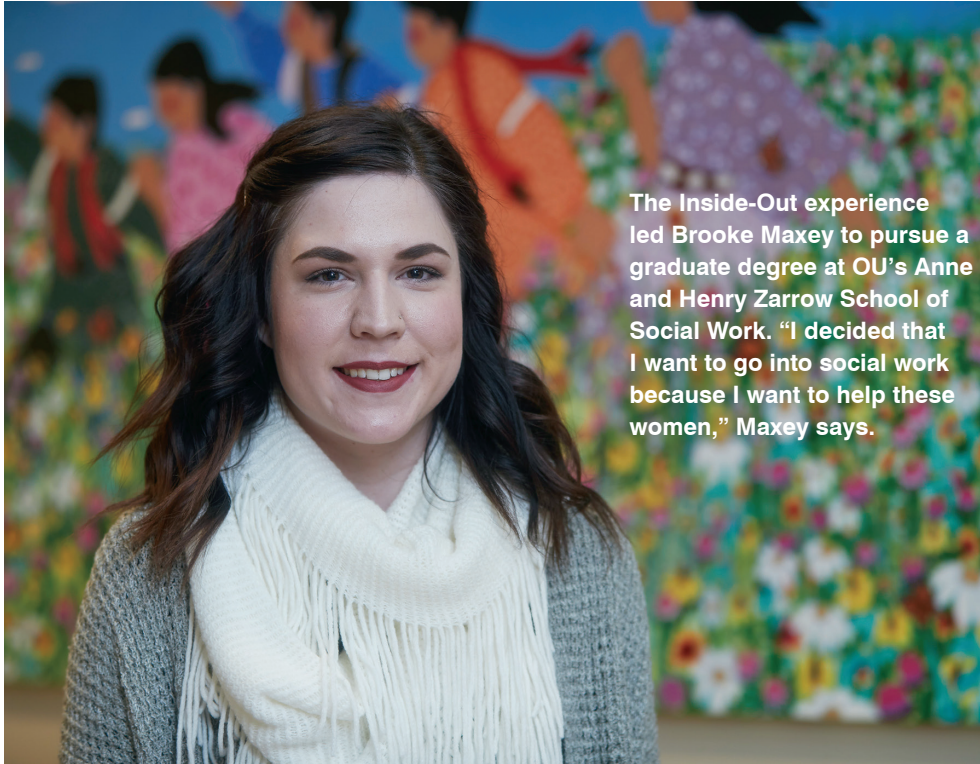
“I was absolutely terrified, to be honest,” Maxey says of her first time attending the “Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program,” which brings prisoners and college students together for a transformative learning experience. “I had never been to a prison, not to mention having interacted with inmates.”

Inside-Out allows 15 OU students to take a college course alongside incarcerated women at Mabel Bassett each spring. The program started at OU under David Ross Boyd Professor Emeritus of Sociology Susan Sharp nearly a decade ago; today,

OU is among 100 partners worldwide to offer Inside-Out.

The program has unique and life-changing potential for students on both sides of the prison’s walls, says OU Assistant Professor John Carl, who has headed Inside-Out for two years and spent most of his academic career studying U.S. incarceration.

“About 95 percent of prisoners will eventually be released back into society,” he says. “And how do they get out? Angry and rejected and with the same skill set that we sent them in there with. College education requires you to develop critical



The Inside-Out experience led Brooke Maxey to pursue a graduate degree at OU's Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work. "I decided that I want to go into social work because I want to help these women," Maxey says.

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Inside-Out coordinator and OU Assistant Professor of Sociology John Carl gathers last spring's Inside students to discuss how the class impacted their lives. "If you look at the data, college education is the only variable that's universally accepted as an anti-reoffense program," he says.

thinking and, ideally, should stretch you to think more broadly about the world. If you look at the data, college education is the only variable that's universally accepted as an anti-reoffense program. And the dynamic of people who are incarcerated

ated learning with people who aren't creates a human-to-human interaction that we can't duplicate any other way."

Spots in the program are highly competitive. Last spring, 100 prisoners were rigorously screened for background and behavior to select 16 "Inside" students. More than 50 "Outside" students applied from OU.

Alyssa Erwin enrolled twice in Inside-Out as an OU criminology undergraduate. The daughter of a defense attorney, she had few fears about encountering prisoners. But by the time the OU students approached the gray walls of Mabel Bassett and were screened by prison security – an experience similar to that of a thorough TSA pat-down – Erwin's nerves were jangling in anticipation of meeting her new classmates.

"We expected to be nervous," Erwin admits, "but it was definitely heightened by the time we were in our classroom."

Ann remembers

what it was like being on the other side of the locked door. Excitement mingled with fear as she and her Inside classmates waited in the community room, with its two-way phones and a window overlooking a playground for inmates' visiting children that is bordered by razor-topped walls. A part of her was wor-

ried for the Outside students.

"I was thinking of them," says the 32-year-old mother of two teens, whose warm and lively nature makes it easy to believe that she was once a home health aide and volunteer soft-



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“I’m on the road to making something out of my life,” says Inside student Jennifer, a former U.S. military member and lifelong musician. “I learned that my opinion and education matter no matter where I am.”

ball coach before addiction led to a 20-year drug possession sentence. “They don’t know what we’re here for or if we’re violent or not.”

“The first week the prisoners are afraid of the OU students, and the OU students are afraid of the prisoners,” Carl says. “The prisoners are afraid of being judged and not being able to do college work. The first two weeks I’m mostly trying to break the ice and give everyone opportunities to be human.

“Three weeks later, it’s just like walking into Dale Hall,” he adds. “All of a sudden, the fact that you’re wearing a jumpsuit and I’m not has become completely irrelevant. Now you’re not just ‘what you did,’ you’re this other person who I’m working with.”

Brooke Maxey, who was “terrified” upon entering the prison, remembers Carl asking Outside students to learn something about an inmate before introducing them to the class. “I asked one of the women what she was most proud of. She had kids, and I thought about my mom. She told me that she was

almost finished with her degree, which I could understand because I was in my senior year. In that moment I realized these women were just like me. They were just people.”

Inside students choose whether to share why they are incarcerated. Many do, aware that Outside students can research their legal history with the swipe of a phone screen. “We took a risk doing this class,” Ann says. “They could look if they wanted to and form an opinion about us. But it didn’t seem like that went on; it seemed like everyone was there to truly learn. The trust was incredible.”

Each week the class met in a circle, with Inside and Outside students alternating seats. Lectures were kept brief. Outside readings and essay assignments were given weekly

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and brought back to class for discussion and debate during group work. “The format of how you teach in a prison has to be different. There’s no Power Point or computers,” Carl says, detailing that his Inside-Out teaching toolkit contains a large sticky pad, pencils and photocopied articles.

“I wasn’t sure how the inmates would react to taking a college-level course, to readings and lectures,” says Erwin, a current first-year OU Law student. “They definitely wiped away that preconceived notion, because they were always so happy to do the reading and they came to class prepared, ready for questions and to engage in conversation.

“We’ve studied the social system and we’ve studied crime, but these women have actually been through it,” she says. “That’s what I would always leave class with – this perspective that a professor could never give us.”

“I was going in thinking I was the ‘smart college student,’” Maxey, now an OU social work graduate student, confesses with chagrin. “They’re incredibly smart and capable women. The thing that struck me most is that these women made poor choices, but they have so much to offer.”

Watching Inside students embrace that reality is one of the program’s best gifts. “You see this powerful change that happens to these women throughout the course of the semester,” Carl says. “Many of them have had no academic success in their life. You get them in this classroom where they’re sitting next to a student with a 3.9 GPA and they’re able to hold their own. That’s a great experience. It has the potential to stimulate



“Inside-Out is so different from any other class you can take at OU,” says Alyssa Erwin, a first-year OU Law student. “We were really excited, but at the same time we were really nervous.”

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according to data collected by *Reveal* from the Center for Investigative Reporting.

The course illuminated facts that astonished even those who have lived through the reality of addiction. “It opened our eyes and drew me in,” Ann says, adding that one class session on sentencing – and its broad disparities – was a personal epiphany.

“Just because we’re in prison doesn’t mean we don’t believe in people being punished for the crimes they commit. We do,” she stresses. “I know that I deserve to be punished for why I am here. Do I agree with my sentencing? I don’t know.”

Also among those students convicted for drug use was

all kinds of possible positives.

“One student reported that she’d never made an A in a class and she cried when she was talking about how exciting that was to her,” he says. “She earned that grade; I didn’t give her anything.”

Inside students take special pride in performing on a level playing field with their Outside classmates. “I think the OU students were more surprised than anything that there are actually people capable of intellectual conversation in a place like this,” says Jennifer, an animated and charismatic 34-year-old U.S. Army veteran and lifelong musician who is serving 20 years on a drug-possession charge.

They also face daily realities that would challenge the most devoted student. “Once we leave these doors, it’s a whole other ballgame,” Jennifer explains. “There are a lot of things you can walk into straight from being in class – somebody fighting, somebody going to the hospital, somebody just stole all of your stuff. That’s how I knew this was a powerful class, because if you’re not driven and you don’t have the desire to do it after you leave here, you won’t.”

Last semester’s Inside-Out course,

Alcohol and Drugs in Society, was powerful for many reasons, including its gut-punch relevance. Oklahoma has led the nation in incarcerating women for 25 years at more than twice the national average. Most convictions are related to drugs,

Laura, 56, who looks like a cherubic grandmother and talks about OU’s Outside students as proudly as if they were part of her own brood. “Inside-Out opened up a whole other world for me. I loved the program, and I loved interacting with the kids. They gave me hope for the future,” she says.

Some Outside students also gave their classmates a window unto a mirror world where the same, dark experiences of family addiction or violence had vastly different outcomes. “When you really listen to the OU students’ stories, there were so many similarities with ours, except that their choices were different,” reflects Jennifer, who can foresee a future when she might use her past to motivate inner-city youth. “You could see that they really wanted to make a change.

“The Outside students taught me a willingness to be open,” she says. “What I think they took away from us is a realization that, although we’re in prison, we have the same hopes, the same drive, the same dreams, the same lust for life, that they have.”

“Inside-Out gives inmates hope and a different perspective on life,” says Mabel Bassett Warden Debbie Aldridge. “I want to thank OU for doing this course for so many years. We have to do something to stop repeat behaviors and recidivism. It’s unfortunate that we can’t offer Inside-Out to everyone, but if we can save one person from coming back, that’s a start.”

Carl believes Inside-Out gives inmates glimpses of a different path. “I’m hoping they learn that not everybody in the



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“This class was a stepping stone into my future,” says Laura, who hopes to earn a bachelor’s degree after her release from Mabel Bassett next year.

world is going to characterize them as horrible. I hope they learn that they can do college work and interact with all kinds of people. I think hope is the only thing that actually gives life any meaning, and I’m trying to inject a little.

“What I want Outside students to learn from the class is that there is a human component to behaviors,” Carl says. “That doesn’t excuse the consequence of the behavior, but it is human to mess up, and that’s an important thing to understand, especially for OU students, who are going to be the next generation of leaders and will have the power to hire someone out of prison or be in the position to talk with someone who’s running for office and say, ‘Have you thought about funding more anti-recidivism programs?’”

However, Carl is careful to help OU students understand that their Inside-Out experience must, by necessity, end with the semester. “Quite frankly, you didn’t take the class to adopt an inmate,” he says. “But I do think you should try to figure out how you can be part of the solution.”

Maxey hopes to do her part by becoming a social worker

in the prison system. “By the end of the course, I had stopped worrying about my grade and I just enjoyed going to see my classmates,” she says. “It was hard to leave them and know that I wouldn’t see them again and that I wouldn’t see their journey, because we had spent 12 weeks together, learning about each other and being very academically connected in a way that normal classes aren’t.”

“There’s a passion that’s ignited within you when you meet these women,” agrees Erwin, who plans to pursue a law career in criminal justice reform. “My college experience wouldn’t have been whole without taking Inside-Out.”

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Laura is looking forward to her own college experience. She is on track to be paroled within the next year and plans to pursue an accounting or counseling degree with the support of the Cherokee Nation. Though Mabel Bassett offers two associate’s degree programs if prisoners’ family members can afford tuition, no bachelor’s degrees are available in the prison. Even the Inside-Out Program does not offer OU academic credit to prisoners, a situation Carl hopes to address by raising a private endowment for tuition.

When told that receiving credit from OU might someday be possible, the Inside students become incandescent. “I’m running for president!” Jennifer says, throwing her hands into the air before turning serious. “I feel that could be my aim. My dreams would be real with that little transcript. It gives me initiative.”

But even if that day never comes, Inside-Out has left an indelible mark.

“This class had a priceless, priceless value,” Jennifer says. “You can’t even insure the value of what Dr. Carl has done in our lives, because this is something that gives us hope. It’s not just something that we did for the moment and it’s over; it’s something we can truly use, that will live on as long as we’re alive.”

“We can build on this.”



Anne Barajas Harp is assistant editor of Sooner Magazine.