



AMHERST COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Housing is THE Solution to Homelessness

Jailhouse Journalism

Written by Valerie Cedrone

The benefits of writing are plentiful, whether it is creative, professional, or journalistic writing. Most importantly, writing allows the expression of emotions, which helps individuals process difficult situations or experiences. A course at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, has chosen to extend learning beyond the walls of the classroom. Students visit inmates at the Hampshire County Jail once



At Work for the San Quentin News

a week to participate in a collaborative journalism program. In “Social Justice Journalism: Mass Incarceration”, students meet with inmates who tell their stories.

The students then provide their formal training in journalistic writing in order to produce a final, polished product. This program helps inmates tell their stories and develop valuable skills to use in their lives post-incarceration. The students also benefit from this program by creating a connection with a part of their community that they might not otherwise be inclined to get to know.

The benefits of writing programs both within and outside of incarceration facilities have been extensively studied. Perhaps one of the best-known prison journalism programs is the San Quentin News, which is run almost entirely by inmates. The San Quentin News publishes on their website, and also releases a podcast known as Ear Hustle, which touches on some of the day-to-day happenings in prison life.

IN THIS ISSUE



Small Moments, Big Impacts

Brian Eckelkamp

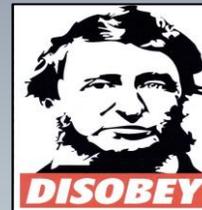
3



Doubly Good News for Double Grant Awards

Hwei-Ling Greeney

4



A Message from a Friend

Anonymous Friend

5

Amherst Community Connections

236 N. Pleasant Street, Amherst

(413) 345-0737

Walk-ins Mon.-Friday 8:30 am-12 pm; by appointment 12-5:30 pm

“To empower, advocate for, and assist

Programs such as these have a multitude of benefits for prison inmates, ranging from better emotional health and improved future job prospects, to a stronger connection and understanding between the inmates and the communities that surround them. In today’s world, writing skills are important at nearly every job. Developing strong writing skills while incarcerated increases the chances of inmates securing jobs and housing once they are released.

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In addition, since writing helps to deal with emotions, the practice can help improve communication skills and prevent potentially violent encounters. In the United States, the negative stigma around prison inmates continues to be an issue, but the ability of these inmates to tell their stories and publish them professionally may help to bridge the gap between those who are incarcerated and their communities.

Professor Shaheen Pasha, one of the teachers and founders of this class, discussed how receptive inmates were to these programs. She described how well-read the inmates had become while incarcerated, and how hungry they were for classes such as this one that enabled them to keep their minds occupied and learning. Professor Pasha has seen firsthand the positive effects that this class can have on these inmates.

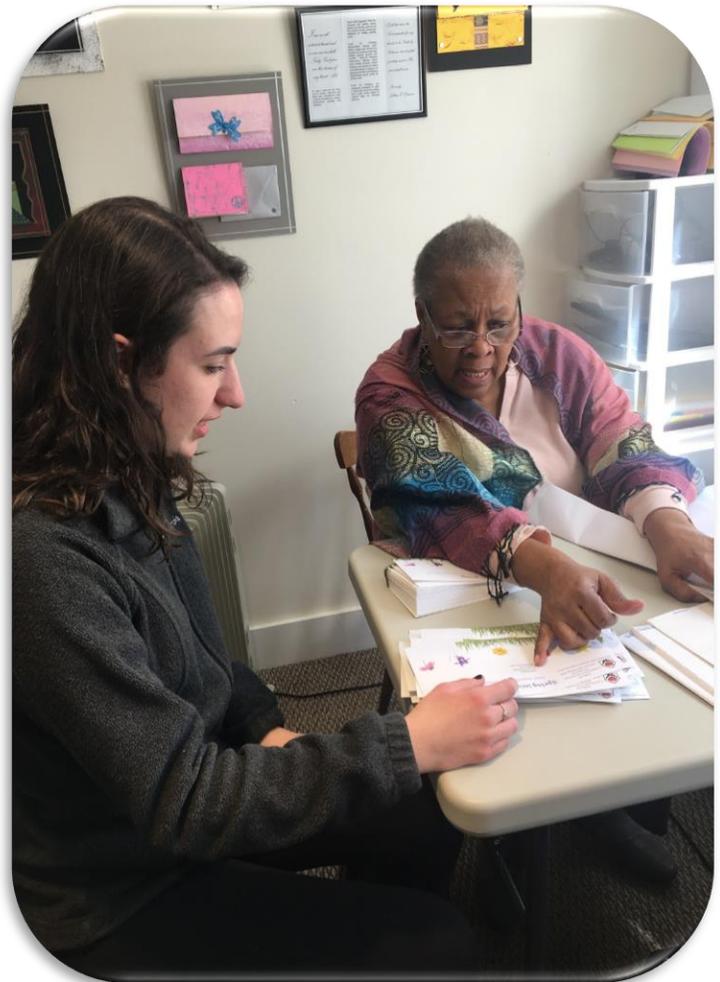
She has watched individuals who were initially reluctant and cold begin to open up and find peace and acceptance through the process of writing about their struggles. She believes that the exposure between inmates and students on the outside results in an opportunity for both groups to educate each other.

ACC's work involves advocating for the low-income and homeless community in and around the Amherst area. ACC has been doing outreach at the Hampshire County Jail since 2012 to work with inmates on their post-incarceration housing and employment plans. ACC believes in equal housing opportunities for everyone and understands the importance of providing these writing programs.

In addition, ACC is working on establishing a weekly creative writing program out of the Jones Library, with the goal of using writing as an emotional outlet and to empower those who are struggling in our community.

ACC currently collaborates with UMass to provide a space for a writing program that will be run at ACC for low-income individuals within the community. ACC recognizes the important role that writing can play in processing emotions and developing skills.

Meet our Team: Valerie



Valerie (Left) at work in the ACC office

The mission of Amherst Community Connections to work with low-income and homeless members of Amherst to help them find stability and success is what ultimately drew me towards this internship position. I have always had a passion for giving back to my community, especially by finding new and innovative ways to provide assistance and support.

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I discovered my passion for non-profit work by volunteering at various organizations beginning at a young age. It was in this work that I realized I would only find fulfillment in a career where I was working hands on with my community to ensure equal opportunities and assistance for everyone. I firmly believe that the path to a better world requires a more level playing field for all, and I am driven to do my part to fix the flaws in our society that keep people stuck in a cycle of poverty and struggle.

Along with my passion for the work that takes place at Amherst Community Connections, I come with experience in graphic design and website design. When I'm not at ACC, I spend most of my time working at UMass Transit Services. Working for the PVTa has provided me with extensive knowledge of the local transportation system, which allows me to assist people in understanding the public transportation system in the Pioneer Valley.

I am currently a public health major at UMass Amherst, and hope to also bring my formal knowledge of healthcare and health inequity to the organization.

In my free time, I enjoy going on hikes with my cat, always striving to find new and more challenging climbs each time. I also enjoy attending farmers markets and learning more about local food, as food policy is a personal interest of mine. I have also recently discovered a passion for cooking, and although I still have trouble getting everything to come out right, I hope to improve with time and practice.

Small Moments, Big Impact

Reflection by Brian Eckelkamp

This year spent as an intern at Amherst Community Connections has been one of the most positive and impactful experiences of my college career.

This small nonprofit is very clearly responsible for doing a lot of good and providing essential support to the most vulnerable and often overlooked among us.

I have been very lucky to be able to have this opportunity to make a difference in our community through this agency and through this year I have improved on a countless amount of skills and grown more as a person. There is an immense need for agencies like ACC that are working directly on the ground with individuals, giving them the empathy and attention that few others do.



ACC intern Brian Eckelkamp

Providing that support has been the most rewarding part of my time here. Nora May was the participant that I worked with the most, every other day trying to help her learn the rules of the road in order to pass her driving permit exam. Yet the connection goes deeper than that, as I was often one of the people Nora could confide in. She opened up once about a reoccurring nightmare that had prevented her from sound sleep for decades.

She described a traumatic childhood experience, an encounter with these giant ape-like creatures in a cave where she grew up on the Fort Apache Reservation. I did some research about the experience that she had had previously been unable to do and I discovered corroborating stories about a legendary "Mogollon Monster" that had been known to be in that area. **Continued...**

Nora later said that my research had helped her get a good night's rest and eased her mind. It is the simplest moments like that which have the most profound impact.

The other big projects that I worked on this year have been to create a series of videos for ACC. This was something that has never been done before but will provide valuable public outreach to raise awareness and drive donations. The biggest struggles have been learning the systems established in an agency that is this small. It took some patience and effective communicating to learn the ropes. The most challenging times have been juggling the twelve hours a week I spent here with the overloaded six classes I also have to take to graduate on time. It has taught me valuable time management and multitasking skills that I will be able to use in my future career. I plan on continuing

service to the community with my degree in Communications and Political Science, looking to use my skills with media creation to make the world a better place for those in need.

Doubly Good News for Double Grant Awards

Written by Hwei-Ling Greeney



ACC street outreach in Downtown Amherst

Amherst Community Connections is very pleased to share some wonderful news with you. For the first time in our history, ACC is the recipient of two funding grants; The Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), and The Community Preservation Act (CPA) grant.

The Town of Amherst selected our grant proposals this spring. We are looking to sign a contract with the Town this summer. The \$40,000 CDBG grant will allow

ACC'S MISSION

ACC's mission is to empower, advocate for, and assist those in need. We strive to provide help with issues affecting individuals' abilities to lead a stable and productive life. We can assist in...

- Disability Applications
- Housing & Job Searches
- Free Cell Phone Applications
- Food Stamps & Fuel Assistance
- \$ for rent, meds, utilities, etc.
- SSI/SSDI Benefits
- Debt/Credit Issues
- CORI issues *and more!*

ACC to continue its One-Stop Resource Center where every year nearly 700 households have made a combined 4000 visits with ACC workers receiving help on homelessness, prevention of eviction, electricity shut-off, securing gainful employment and many other services.

Everyone is eligible for this free, timely and convenient service. When time is tough, the tough get going. We are here for the residents to get through their tough time.

After our successful Housing-First program began in 2016, this year ACC is again

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funded by the CPA for 3 additional housing vouchers totaling \$112,800. Amherst residents who have been chronically homeless for a year or more, and are experiencing challenging disabilities, are eligible to apply for the vouchers.

Thus far, the participants in our phase I Housing First program are doing very well. Everyone has gotten off the streets and moved into their own housing. With intense weekly staff support, they are able to fully participate in the community – either doing job training, working, or going to college full time.

For application and information about the Housing First program, please contact Hwei-Ling Greeney (ACCinAmherst@gmail.com) or go to www.AmherstCommunityConnections.net

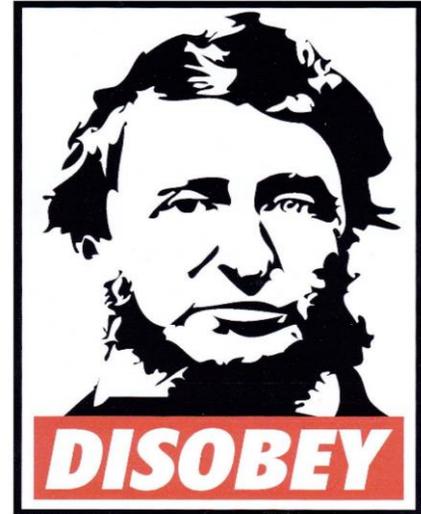
Message from a Friend

Dear Kind Folks,

In the spirit of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" and in solidarity with the National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee (nwtrcc.org), as an act of resistance against a corrupt, dysfunctional government that refuses to meet the needs of its citizens, I have not paid or filed income tax forms.

Instead, as many war tax resisters do, I am redirecting the funds I put aside for taxes to organizations that help people in my local community; organizations that a functional, caring government would be funding instead of the military industrial complex.

This is an act of conscience that comes with some personal risk, but I feel, as anyone who engages in nonviolent action against a corrupt government feels, that the potential benefits to society outweigh any risk I might face.



While many people around the country are showing their resistance by marching in the streets, or making phone calls and writing letters to their elected representatives, or meeting in groups to educate and motivate, I've chosen a quieter form of resistance that, I hope, will directly help people right here in Amherst.

Letter from an Anonymous Friend

A Big Thank You to our Donors!

By Hwei-Ling Greeney and Erin Ransom

Thanks to generous donations from over 60 of our supporters, we were able to raise \$3554 through the Valley Gives Campaign!

Special thanks to Henion Bakery, The Works, Starbucks, and The Black Sheep Deli for partnering with us in this campaign!

Coupling with Amherst College's 10 Women's Sports Teams we reached our goal of \$5000 to get 5 women who experience homelessness off the street and into housing and sanitary items for many.

Your support means so much to us and to the individuals we serve. **Continued...**

We encourage all of you to stay in touch with us throughout the year, whether it's by keeping up with our monthly newsletters or stopping in for one of our weekly incubator meetings every Wednesday from 10:00-11:30 am at the ACC office.

All are welcome, and lunch is provided!

Interested in volunteering or an internship?

Our volunteers contribute in a variety of ways, depending on the skills and experience they bring with them. Volunteers engage in advocacy and case management, event planning, community outreach and more! Visit our intern page !

We are so grateful for you!



3.25

Poems by Kafele Marcelin

A Cottage
In the woods is a place
where radiance dwells
in small orbs
it traces itself
layer upon layer of
red crystalline

Stall stones on a
path almost invisible
a rush in fir

And poplar
Long nettles line
the way

to reach it's doors
is to find

5

Ring of Verge
There other rings
One of Verge
Wrought with
intricate design

Unfinished Work

Poem by John Kydd

I once was told "you're finished"

I responded "you're lying"
WHY...?

Cause, the Lord knows that I'm
trying

In every single situation I'm in

I keep on digging....

...As if I were mining...! And,

Since the Lord is in charge,

I'll keep relying, on him to finish
what he's been designing

The unfinished work on
me...Today,

...I Know who I want to be

JUNE EVENTS



The following Incubator Meetings are on **Wednesdays from 10 to 11:30 am at the ACC office**

June 6: Growing Up & Being Homeless, Tim Scalona

**June 20: Yoga For Relaxation, Sasha Rivera
Amherst Yoga Center**

June 27: Discovering the Artist In Me, Melissa Phoenix

Amherst Community Connections is a non-profit organization working to aid those in the Pioneer Valley struggling with housing insecurity, unemployment, hunger and any variety of other issues. For more information please contact us at ACCinAmherst@gmail.com

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AmherstCommunityConnections.net