

Cellblocks To Mountaintops
Video Episode 07: Class Inside
Transcript

Professor Melissa Buis: This is a class about the causes and consequences of mass incarceration and what we can do about it. Some of the root causes of mass incarceration might be centuries old. But the actual fact of mass incarceration, that is a new problem. You probably know these stats by now. The United States incarcerates more people than any other country in the world. The vast majority of them are in state prisons and local jails.

I decided I wanted to do a class on mass incarceration, and then I thought I should probably go to prison if I was going to teach this class.

TEXT CARD:

Willamette University Students in Buis' *Reforming Criminal Justice* Class
attend joint sessions with Adults in Custody at Oregon State Penitentiary.

Ben Pervish: What'd your parents say when they found out you wanted to come to prison?

Student: They said it sounded cool.

Ben Parvish: Yeah right?

Student: Yeah.

Ben Pervish: Usually the mom is like what if they kidnap you, like?

Student: Yeah.

Professor Melissa Buis: I was invited to come inside and join a group of prisoners who were trying to find ways to make amends for the crimes they had committed. And I just thought what they were doing was so inspired because they were working to be the best people they could be under really severe circumstances. Sterling, you're gonna lead off with an icebreaker.

Sterling Cunio: If you're a cat person on this side of the room. If you're a dog person on this side of the room, you got to choose. There's no iguana people.

Professor Melissa Buis: Sterling was actually conducting the restorative justice group. I said I'd like to be able to bring some students in, teaching a class that would be a combined Willamette student and prisoners. Sterling thought it was very important to bring men to the class who are still engaged in violence but maybe were trying to transform.

The book that we're reading, was written by Danielle Sered. She's the founder of Common Justice, which is a Brooklyn, New York-based organization that seeks to address violence without using incarceration.

So the class is a kind of ongoing conversation about what transformation can be.

Nolan Briden: Like, like my dad tells me he grew up in the 50s, and it was it was it was shameful to be Native American.

Professor Melissa Buis: Many of the men who take my class have unhealed trauma, childhood trauma, adolescent trauma, and/or didn't really develop the skills they need to be able to heal from that.

Sterling Cunio: Next thing you know, me and him fist fighting and punching each other in the face behind a little disagreement. And when you ask us why we did it, it's like I couldn't let him disrespect me as a man.

Professor Melissa Buis: They're swimming against an environment where you can't show weakness. You can't show any vulnerability. You can't express emotions unless your emotions are anger.

Cameron Hayes: It's like violence is expected of you. It's not only encouraged, but it's expected. And if you aren't, um violent, then you're at the bottom of the totem pole. You know, when I get triggered certain ways, my first instinct is still be violent, you know? And then I have to curb it like, no, no, no, wait, that's not...let's do something else, ya know?

Professor Melissa Buis: Cameron took my class a while ago, and he was someone who was just on the edge of thinking about alternatives to violence. And that was kind of a new idea for him. And he, after my class ended up in a fight, getting sent to the hole and then to another prison, he came back with a kind of newfound commitment to being engaged. He's really all in.

Sterling Cunio: What was some of the thoughts where she talks about how these problems are compounded by limited and broken ideas of manhood?

Professor Melissa Buis: I think of Sterling as my co-pilot in this class, or I'm his co-pilot. I'm not sure which way it goes sometimes, because he's taught me so much.

Sterling Cunio: And I will just start calling on people.

Professor Melissa Buis: For Sterling, it's about relationship building. If you want to teach, and that requires that you connect with other people. And he has a strong sense of how important that connection and relationships are. And I watch him forge those relationships with people who are incarcerated with him. But he does it with Willamette students, too.

Sterling Cunio: Are you open to some advice with it? Slow down, give people time to think about what it is you're saying.

Professor Melissa Buis: Before I met Sterling, if someone had told me his story, I would have had a hard time understanding that he really could be a different person, that he could be the person that he is. In fact, it's it's not just Sterling, it's a number of men that I've met inside that have committed violent crimes at a very young age, and they are different people. They have different values. They have different skill sets. They have just completely different outlooks on life. You have to see it. You know, you have to be in relationship with people who have made that kind of transformation, I think, to really fully believe it.