

Anne Arundel

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Teaching critical thinking to inmates

St. John's faculty members trying school methods

BY JOE BURRIS
The Baltimore Sun

The class engaged in a discussion about power, focusing on an excerpt from Plato's "Republic." They later discussed laws and rules after reading works by St. Thomas Aquinas and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. about when it's right to break an unjust law.

The recent discussions did not take place in a school, but at the Maryland Correctional Institution in Jessup in Howard County. They were led by members of the Touchstones Discussion Project, a nonprofit organization that uses dialogue to foster critical thinking skills, promote leadership and break down communication barriers.

While the group's practices have been carried out primarily in schools and colleges throughout the country, Touchstones' president and co-founder Howard Zeiderman holds weekly sessions in the prison that encourage free thinking as well as better communication between younger and older inmates.

"What is really important in both prisons and schools and in every other environment is, 'What is the thinking of the participants?'" said Zeiderman, a senior faculty member at St. John's College in Annapolis who founded the organization with fellow faculty members Geoffrey Comber and Nick Maistrellis.

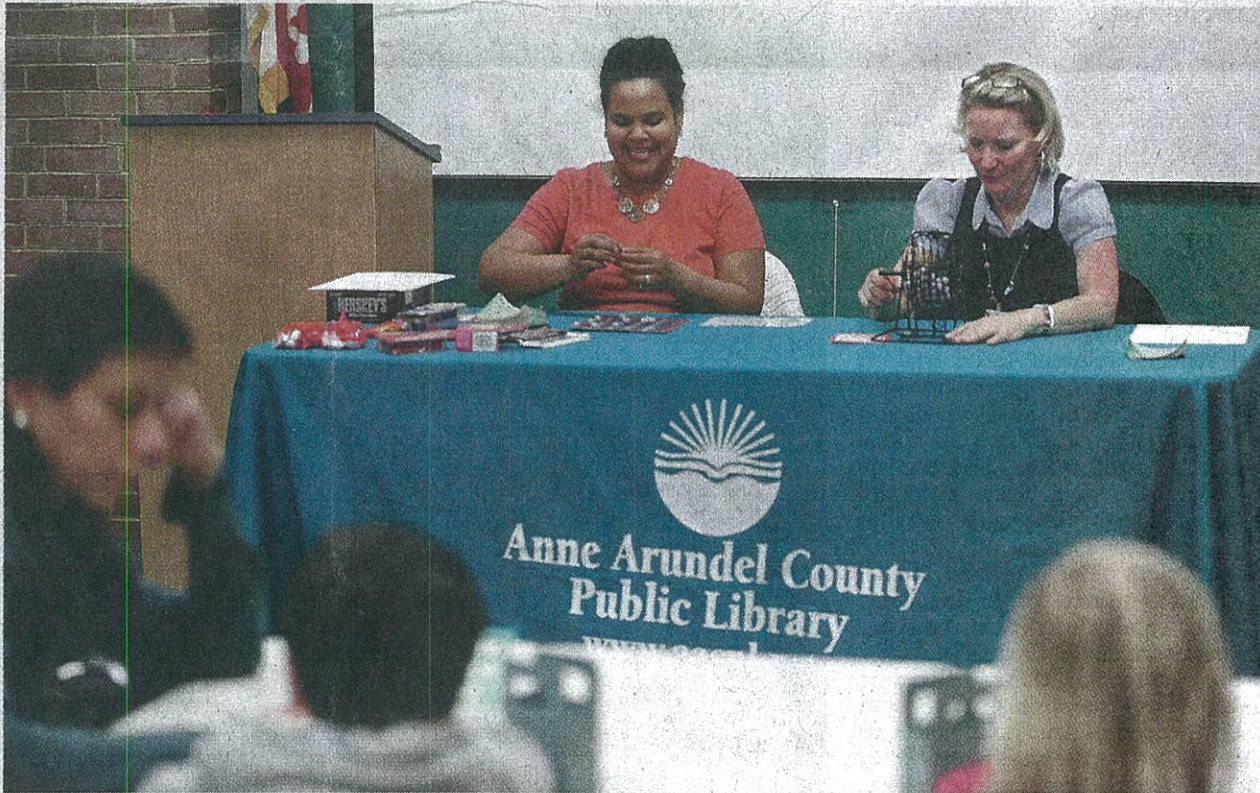
They developed a program that uses discussion techniques to promote students' intellectual freedom and creativity while still allowing for organization and classroom management. They launched the program in a magnet school in Hartford, Conn., in the 1980s. It was ultimately used in Anne Arundel County, where St. John's is based, as well as nationwide. The program is also being used by senior citizens groups and corporate organizations.

"Any of the fundamental concepts and constructs of our culture are going to be at the heart of our discussions in the Touchstones program," said executive director Stefanie Takacs. She said schools that have implemented Touchstones' methods have reported increases in participation, reading comprehension and social skills.

Zeiderman said the program started at the Jessup prison during the 1990s after some of the group's material was brought into the facility by another organization. He said he had already done similar work with corrections officials in New Mexico, where St. John's has another campus.

"When you're doing a project like this with a new type of group, you're really trying to understand what their needs are or what their capabilities are," said Zeiderman. See **TOUCHSTONES**, page 3

Plan calls for upgrade, modernization over several decades



KENNETH K. LAM/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTOS

Annapolis librarians Darnice Jasper, left, and Suzanne Welker call numbers for Chocolate Bingo. A plan to overhaul the county libraries would accommodate a growing need for computers, study rooms, meeting space and other services.

\$175 million update sought for libraries

BY ANDREA F. SIEGEL
The Baltimore Sun

Anne Arundel County will need to spend more than \$175 million over several decades to bring its library buildings up to snuff, according to a recent analysis done for the library system — and that doesn't include the cost to design and furnish them.

The figure comes from a consultant's plan to overhaul the 15 library branches and headquarters. The system is trying to adapt as the role of its facilities changes and patrons call for more digital access and community space.

With figures in 2011 values, projected costs of some new buildings run to nearly \$20 million. The county provided the library system with \$250,000 in capital funds in the current budget.

The plan calls for more than doubling the amount of floor space in the 15 branches from about 247,000 square feet to 573,000 square feet. That would accommodate a growing population and provide more space for meetings, programs, computers, study rooms. See **LIBRARIES**, page 4



Justin Caldwell uses a computer at the Annapolis library. The system is trying to adapt as the role of its facilities changes and patrons call for more digital access.

Fink keeps busy — and is going to get busier

Council chairman, local businessman — and soon, a father

BY NICOLE FULLER
The Baltimore Sun

chairman. And come the end of March, he'll be a first-time dad.

St. John's faculty teaching critical thinking at Jessup

TOUCHSTONES, From page 1
man. "Our assumption in working with any group is that anybody has skills. Unfortunately, everybody has weaknesses also. So the question is what skills do they have and how would this begin to fit into the institution in which they are."

Zeiderman said the discussions at Jessup usually involve about 17 people and that the inmates take part on a volunteer basis. He said he never asks inmates details about why they are locked up, but he added that among those who initially began the Touchstones sessions were inmates serving life sentences who are presidents of inmate organizations.

"Another thing was that these were older guys, all serving life sentences, and this was their world," said Zeiderman. "They also felt that it would enable them to have some contact with the younger guys who thought that they were coming in almost like a two-year course in a community college and then going back onto the streets and didn't grasp the full dimension of what could happen to them in the prison, and they might end up spending their lives there."

"It was an activity where there could be trust and mutual respect among the participants where they could begin to talk to one another," added Zeiderman. "And they thought they could spread this type of activity throughout the whole prison, and to humanize the environment, to try to give meanings to their lives in very difficult situations."

He said that during the group's last discussion about power, a section of Plato's "Republic" was read aloud. At the next meeting, the group will do a follow-up discussion on power, with passages taken from a work by Friedrich Nietzsche.

"Sometimes we talk about anger and honor," said Zeiderman. "Sometimes we talk about leadership, what's involved in being a leader. Recently we read a short passage from Machiavelli and had a discussion about leadership."

Zeiderman said that before he began working at Jessup, he had never entered a prison; initially, he said he conjured up "images of Attica," the 1971 riot at a New York prison that killed almost 40 inmates and hostages, and questioned whether he wanted to go through with the experience.

"It became very important as I came to understand who was in prison, and that these are human beings who can talk about the same things that we talk about, to bring other people from the outside," he said. "Not to do something for them, but just to spend that hour with them. It really changes your attitude about the world."

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