

# Student volunteers learn to give prisoners a break

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While some college students like to use their Thursday nights to get an early start on the weekend, a group of friends decided to spend theirs volunteering at an unlikely location: a state prison.

It all started during winter finals week, when senior economics major Michael Mintz and three friends found themselves procrastinating by watching an episode of Prison Break, a TV show about inmates trying to escape from prison. A discussion ensued about whether real-life prisoners were allowed to watch the show. To find an answer, Mintz searched online and stumbled across a prison volunteer program run by the Touchstones Discussion Project.

The program brings together inmates and volunteers for weekly discussions at the Maryland Correctional Institute (MCIJ) in Jessup, Md. The topics discussed range from classical literature to philosophy and are meant to improve the prisoners' group skills, critical thinking and reading skills as well as build respect and cooperation among participants.

Mintz thought the program sounded interesting, so after obtaining security clearance from MCIJ, he and a friend went to try it out for a week. But the two began to have second thoughts before they even set foot in the prison.

"We saw these huge gates, with guards and towers and barbed wire and we started to wonder what we were getting ourselves into," said Mintz. "It was scary but once the discussion started, we were shocked at how eloquent the inmates were."

Soon, Mintz's friends began to join him and while most of those volunteering right now are Jewish, members of Civicus and the Student Government Association will start participating next month.

Volunteer Benjy Spiro, a junior American studies major, said he's learning to talk to people and is seeing the language skills of the inmates improving too.

"You'd have no idea just by looking at the inmates how smart and respectful everyone is," he said. "They're actually really, really intelligent guys."

It's not unusual for volunteers to come in with certain expectations and be surprised by the level of discussion that takes place, said Lee Goldsmith, Touchstones' program

director. He said for UMD students, learning is as much a part of the experience as participating and interacting with the inmates.

"From my understanding, there aren't too many discussion courses at UMD, so it's something they're having to adjust to as volunteers," said Goldsmith. "It's a more humane sort of education than most people get from a lecture."

Mintz said one of the most interesting things he's learning is how influential the environment is on people's beliefs and actions.

"It's not that the inmates are bad people," said Mintz. "It's the circumstances under which they were raised. They worry about their own survival because that's the world they know."

One of the main purposes of the discussions, said Goldsmith, is to help inmates learn about different values and viewpoints so they can look and think beyond the violent surroundings to which they are accustomed.

"Exposure to the classics causes these men to explore more fully what it means to be human," Goldsmith said. "It helps build respect and cooperation behind bars."

With the recent influx of UMD volunteers, Goldsmith said Touchstones is making the students "the source of the investigation of knowledge."

"We're very excited about the UMD kids joining the program," he said. "It's always good to get young people with new perspectives."

For Spiro, it's more about giving back to a misunderstood group of people.

"It's a humbling experience," he said. "They may look like scary prisoners, but they have hearts of gold."

And, for the record, they are allowed to watch Prison Break.