

A way to escape the past: Inmates do time in college



Staff photos by Craig Andresen

From top: Inmates Ed Sodders, left, and Paul Thompson; Wayne Womack; and Chico Watkins.

By Lori Sullivan

For inmates at the Nebraska State Penitentiary, time has a special meaning. They seem to monitor it unconsciously and generally agree that what they make of their "time in" is up to them.

More than 100 inmates choose to spend part of that time taking college classes. Through Southeast Community College, classes for associate degrees in business and general studies are taught in the education building on the penitentiary grounds.

Inmates say two basic types of education are available inside the prison — academic and criminal.

"If I would not have had the opportunity to go to school here, I would probably be a worse person when I leave," inmate Ed Sodders said. "There are so many authorities on bad things here, that if you wanted to, you could become very good at a lot of them. But if you keep your head into something that is good and productive, that's the way you want to go."

Sodders has 62 credit hours toward a business degree and would like to complete a bachelor's when he gets out. Academic courses give inmates something else to turn to and allow them to get the right type of education, he said.

Most classes are set up to match the same courses at UNL, generally using the same textbook and format. Sodders said knowing that he is on the same level as UNL students is encouraging.

"If we know we're taking equivalent courses, we know that we can go right into college and make it," he said.

Sodders is serving a 15- to 30-year sentence for first-degree attempted murder. He said he usually holds his course work down to six or eight credit hours each term, trying to spread his classes out over a longer time.

The first college course Sodders took was "terrible" at the beginning and getting back into the study habit was difficult, he said. He added that some aspects of prison life make attending classes harder than it would be on the outside.

"One day you can be riding high and the next day you can be down low and you don't want to go to class — it's hard."

Sometimes the classes are much harder than expected, and prisoners fear they will fail, he said. Others take too many classes at once and can't keep up.

The penitentiary's administration strongly supports the college program, Sodders said.

"I think they see that education can't help but make a person better — he will understand more things — no matter when he gets out."

Sodders said people on the outside should realize that a penitentiary also can be a resource.

"Everybody in here is not an animal — although we do have some — but there is also a tremendous amount of knowledge here that can be used," he said.

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Prisoners benefit from education

By Lori Sullivan

Being inside of a prison is no excuse for losing touch with events occurring outside its walls, said David Rice. People who made the effort to keep up when they were outside, he said, will continue to be informed and interested no matter where they are.

Rice is serving a life sentence at the Nebraska State Penitentiary. He was convicted of first-degree murder.

To keep up on his educational interests, he said he reads many different newspapers and magazines, takes classes and writes professionally.

"My attitude has been not to let the penitentiary interrupt my life or change who I am," Rice said. "I have never accepted this place as being my home — I live in Omaha."

"It's very important to me to be aware at all times of things that are going on," he said. "I think it's probably true that people who are locked up and don't pay that much attention to things going on in the rest of the world didn't pay that much attention before they got locked up."

In many cases that same attitude has a lot to do with the reasons why they now are locked up, he said. People who isolate themselves see their actions and situations "in a vacuum," he said, and may be more likely to commit

crimes for those reasons.

Although Rice completed an associate degree in general studies through the prison education program, he said he only took the courses because he wanted to, not to obtain a degree.

"To me the process of learning and developing your own insights is sufficient on its own, so I didn't care if I got a degree or not," he said.

Rice said his main interest is in humanities studies, especially writing classes. Before he came to the penitentiary, Rice attended Creighton University in Omaha and considered becoming an English teacher. He has written poetry since he was 18 and has had five volumes of his work published.

"To me, when you educate somebody, you not only provide information, but you give a person a framework by which that person can develop the ability to think things out — to question, to challenge and to come to conclusions," he said.

Rice is taking a directed reading course taught by Garnett Larson, a volunteer literature instructor. He said he enjoys the class and has taken several other classes with Larson.

"There are times when we'll sit here and battle each other over an issue and never come to any agreement, but we respect each other's point of view."

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Names left same here, Czech professor likes state

By Eric Peterson

A professor on exchange from the Charles University in Prague, Czechoslovakia, said he has found an interested and interesting Czech community in Nebraska.

"I'm conducting a really huge correspondence," Zdenek Stary said with a laugh. Stary said he is helping a family near Stewart, that no longer speaks Czech, communicate with relatives in Czechoslovakia who don't understand English.

About 80,000 people in Omaha, or about 30 percent of the population, have some Czech ancestry. Some smaller Nebraska towns, like Wilber and Schuyler, have primarily Czech populations. Stary said that unlike some ethnic groups, Czechs don't seem to have shortened or Anglicized their family names.

"I read the names in a phone book, and it looks

like a Czech town," he said.

Stary is in Lincoln on a Fulbright grant to pursue his linguistic interests. He taught Czech linguistics and literature at the 600-year-old Charles University, the fourth-oldest university in Europe.

Stary said the Fulbright program officials chose the place where he would teach and research. Ralph Albanese Jr., interim vice chairman of the UNL Modern Languages and Literatures Department, said the officials narrowed the choice to Texas and Nebraska, but settled on Nebraska, possibly because of "administration support and a deeper and wider tradition" of Czech culture in Lincoln.

Because Stary is here as part of a professor exchange, a woman from Chicago is teaching now in Czechoslovakia.

Albanese said both the United States and the Eastern European governments seem eager to make these cultural exchanges because of the goodwill

they help create.

"I think in political terms the value is great . . . The ice was broken, the diplomatic ties were made," he said.

Stary's Fulbright grant is for one year, which ends next January. However, he hopes to extend it another year. His wife, Olga, who is finishing art history studies at Charles University, soon will join him in Lincoln.

Stary teaches both at UNL and UNO. Twice a week he teaches a course in Slavic culture at UNL, then hurries back to Omaha to teach at UNO. Although his schedule is rushed, "it's fun, it's working," he said.

Stary looks forward to teaching Modern Languages 282, Czech Literature in Translation, next fall. Albanese said he hopes this and other classes will lead to a permanent Czech department at UNL. He said that with further administrative and local support, Lincoln could become a permanent center of Czech study.