Behind the Walls: Law School Documentary Chronicles Meetings with Attica Inmates

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ERESA MILLER, a professor in the University at Buffalo Law School specializing in criminal punishment, knows all too well the stereotypes of law students visiting prisons. People naturally assume the students are the unselfish ones, and the inmates – who have little to lose and time to waste – get all of the benefits.

Encountering Attica, a documentary film that chronicles a year of meetings between a group of first-year UB law students and inmates from the Attica Correctional Facility, stands that stereotype on its head.

The students are the ones with the most to gain, Miller says. They’re seeing how the effects of the laws they’re studying in class play out in the lives of real people with real stories. In this case, the men are serving long sentences, many of them for murder. Legal studies for these students become flesh and blood.

And the inmates, who most people assume would welcome the chance to occupy their ample time explaining their plight to eager young law students, are the ones willing to help, at their own peril.

“One of the things we’re trying to do in this documentary is to show that the law students are learning a great deal from the encounter, and for the inmates, it is risky for them to participate,” says Miller. “Other inmates hear they are participating in something like this, and they assume they are doing something with the administration, assume they are snitches or moles, and that is a dangerous label to carry in prison.”

And word travels fast in the highly routinized world of Attica, Miller says. If one inmate wants to send a harsh or violent message to another for something like participating in a prison documentary, the attacker often can get to his victim.

“Easily,” says Miller. “It turns out the inmates are not the lucky ones.”

That’s the dramatic setting of Encountering Attica, which shows how inmates convicted of the same crime often are treated differently and receive different sentences. The documentary is part of the ongoing effort of the law school’s Projecting Law Project to demonstrate Continued on page 28
One of the reasons it is so important to do this project and study what is going on in prison is because prisons have an increasingly profound effect on every layer of society as we rely more heavily on them; we put so many people away.

“When people come out after having lived 15 or 20 or 30 years behind bars, or just having a whole population of young men that do short terms, but keep cycling in and out of jail, those institutions are forming the society we will have in the near future, the world my kids are going to grow up in.”

Tim Gera, a UB graduate student in media studies and the videographer for the project, notes: “The only time we think of inmates in a positive light is in the movies when it’s Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. The big surprise is to go in there and connect with them so easily. There was not as much difference between us and them as you would have believed.”

how new media can be used to study legal issues.

“It is easy to make a judgment when you are reading about a case in a textbook or a news story,” says Siana McLean, a first-year law student from Toronto and one of three UB Law students actually going behind the bars into Attica. “When you actually hear a person telling his story, it can change your perspective.

“This is not to take away blame,” says McLean, “but to actually see the effects of circumstances like growing up in poverty and preconceived notions that go along with race. As a person of color, I look at it as more of a reason to be in law school.”

Spreading the word has always been a big part of Miller’s work, and Encountering Attica is a prime example. She hopes to obtain permission for another digital video project next year that would look behind the walls of Albion Correctional Facility, a prison in Orleans County that houses only women.

The crew making Encountering Attica showed early takes to other Law School students, and Miller took part in an assembly at Bennett High School during which she showed parts of the documentary-in-progress to students in the Law Magnet program.

“The students asked very practical questions,” Miller says. “They were not completely unfamiliar with the prison system.”

Which, for Miller, is exactly the point of doing the project.

“The more people are put away for long, long periods of time with no thought to what they are going to be like when they get out, the more we harm the society they are released to,” she says.

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“So when people come out after having lived 15 or 20 or 30 years behind bars, or just having a whole population of young men that do short terms, but keep cycling in and out of jail, those institutions are forming the society we will have in the near future, the world my kids are going to grow up in.”

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Inmate Matt Lemon shares some of his life experiences with the students.

The three law students and five inmates participating in the documentary are pensive as they view a rough cut of “Encountering Attica.”

Inmate Thomas Gant converses with law students Lissette Ruotolo and Siana McLean in an informal moment.