

Bard Bard Prison Initiative Podcast

00:00:00 Josh: Welcome back everybody to the latest edition to our podcast series. We are very happy to have representatives from our Bard Prison Initiative Program here with us today. I am Josh Tyler, one of the Assistant Directors of Admission, and as usual, I am joined by our Director Mackie Siebens.

00:00:18 Mackie: Hi, Josh! Hi, everyone! As Josh said, I'm Mackie Siebens, Director of Admission, Bard graduate class of 2012. And we are joined by a fabulous group of people today who are going to talk to us about the Bard Prison Initiative. So, we will start with a round of introductions. Delia, do you want to go ahead and go first?

00:00:36 Delia: Sure! My name is Delia Mellis and I graduated from Bard in 1986. And I am BPI's Director of Program and Faculty Development and I also teach US history courses across BPI.

00:00:53 Mackie: Thanks, Delia! Welcome! Jessica?

00:00:54 Jessica: Hi, I am Jessica Neptune. I am Bard class of 2002 and I am the Director of National Engagement and a historian by training.

00:01:03 Mackie: Great! And Dyjuan?

00:01:04 Dyjuan: Yes, great! Thank you all for having me! I think it's a lovely idea of what we are doing. My name is Dyjuan Tatro. I am the Government Affairs Officer of Bard Prison Initiative and a Bard BPI alumnus, class of 2018.

00:01:20 Mackie: Welcome again, everyone! We are going to jump right into some questions here. The first one is directed to Jessica: Could you tell us a little bit about how the Bard Prison Initiative, BPI as what we often refer to it, began, how it started?

00:01:39 Jessica: Sure! BPI started as an undergrad organization at Bard. I was one of a number of students on campus in the late 1990s who were starting to identify the crisis that we now call mass incarceration —is really the social justice issue of our era. And so, a group of us began inviting speakers to come to campus, petitioning faculty at Bard to teach classes on prison related issues. We were going to Albany and protesting the Rockefeller Drug laws. We were going to NYC to attend conferences at Columbia and elsewhere in the prison industrial complex. But I think the most important thing we did as undergraduates and really led by Max Kenner, who is the Director and Founder of BPI, was to find our way into the prisons that surround Bard in the Hudson Valley. So once Max and other students started getting into the prisons, they were able to hear directly from incarcerated people. I think that was really significant as we were thinking about what we could do as students, to impact this issue, to have an impact, hearing directly from people who are most directly impacted. That was at a time of late 1990s and early 2000s, where there were a lot of people still in prison, who remembered the days before the 1990s Crime bill, when colleges were really common in prisons across the country. And in fact, in New York state, there was a college in every prison across the state. And after the 1994 Crime Bill made people ineligible for Pell grants in prison the state followed suit in 1995, rescinded state level financial aid for people in prison and that really meant a shuttering for college prison programs across the state. So, it went from 70 prison programs to 4, almost overnight. So, hearing directly from people who remembered what it was like in prison to have a college program there, who watched the devastation of losing those programs, it helped us realize how important it would be to bring Bard into the prisons that surrounded us, to return

to college opportunities, to those prisons. That kind of became the focus of BPI and that really resonated with me personally as someone who has had family members who were incarcerated and as someone who neither of my parents went to college. Thinking about, when I was in the classroom on Bard campus, the way that the world was opening up to me, understanding even in the early years of college, how much the experience I was having there, is going to open doors and opportunities that so many other people I knew back home were never going to have. So, I think even as we started as student activists, very interested in the problem of prison industrial complex, as we called it then. Very quickly, the focus began to become something that Bard was actually already doing in a lot of other ways, which is, thinking about democratizing access to college. It became about bringing the experience that we were having as students on the Bard campus to places where people have been most excluded from those kinds of opportunities. And that's something that Bard has done in a lot of different places, and part of what was so remarkable about that kind of openness—from the President and the Board of Trustees at Bard—was this ambition to push against what is so common in the world of higher-ed, which is this idea of institutions are valued by how much you turn people away, which is the mark of how good of a school you are. So instead, really being interested in opening up an access, and never conceding to closing down rigor or ambition as you are opening up an access. And that's a very Bardian thing to do, so BPI was groundbreaking in some ways, but in the Bard brand in other ways. But I will turn it over to colleagues to talk about what happened next. That was the origins.

00:05:46 Josh: Great, Jessica! I am curious if you could all speak to how the program began to expand from there, from its beginnings, to more prison facilities, but also how it began down the Associate and Bachelor's degree path, and how that came to be.

00:06:02 You know, I graduated in 2002. The first class, the first cohort began taking courses in 2001. And there were 4 credit courses always with the ambition that it will get to a degree. So, I went on to graduate school as that process was happening of moving from courses that carry Bard credits on Bard transcripts to an Associates Degree and then eventually to a Bachelor's Degree. But Delia, you can talk about how that works.

00:06:30 Delia: I can absolutely talk about how that works. Just the history of it, which is probably not necessarily important for the Bard program. So, we have distributional requirements like Annandale, we have the pillars of Bard education, L&T, (Citizen Science), Moderation, Senior Projects and we have both faculty from Annandale and also elsewhere who teach across the curriculum for us. One of the requirements we bring to faculty is that they teach the courses inside the same as they teach outside. For those courses, they have the same expectations. They offer the same level of context, and depth, and rigor that they expect from the students anywhere else, whether they are teaching at Annandale or at Columbia... We draw someone heavily from New York City, and the region and breadth of the faculty... We have fewer students across 6 campuses than we have at Annandale, so we don't offer the numbers of courses, but we certainly offer the range of courses.

00:07:51 Mackie: Thanks, Delia! I think that certainly helped provide a really important piece of context for BPI. Because students in the BPI program work, as you say, with faculty through the same academic requirements as students anywhere else in the Bard network, whether that's at Annandale or even our other campuses outside the U.S., like Berlin. There's a shared core curriculum that Bard believes students ought to have: the appropriate tools to think critically, to present themselves well on paper, in writing, and also on speaking, which Dyjuan can maybe speak about later. But we are going to talk a little bit about College Behind Bars, the documentary made about students moving through the BPI program later. But I just want to plug it in early that really does express, to those watching who are new and learning about the BPI, is just the similarities between those courses that students take. They are vastly different places and there are certainly limitations. But I think that is a really good point is, really the

curriculum is the same, the faculty for the most part is the same. And they are shared in this education that Bard really values, and things that support students really well, as they go on to graduate programs, to have a fulfilling life in a range of different fields and professions. So, I think, Dyjuan, I want to turn it over to you to talk a little bit about your own experience as a BPI alumnus. I think we will sort of turn it over in that direction, if you want to share about your story.

00:09:32 Dyjuan: Sure, and to begin and to follow up with what Delia and Jessica talked about, the history and expansion of BPI, I just want to highlight, the program like this is not possible, its proliferation and the level of excellence that BPI has reasoned to is not possible, without there being extremely talented incarcerated people in this country. So, BPI's success and expansion is ultimately founded in its students, the incarcerated students, Bard incarcerated students have reasoned to the highest academic levels and standards. To contextualize that in relation to my Bard journey, I was sitting in prison in 2017 and saw a 60 Minutes clip on the Bard Prison Initiative. So, Bard was gaining a variety of what it was doing, and I saw other black and brown men, like me, going to college. And I've never thought in my life that I would be going to college. I said in that moment: I am going to college in prison. Easier said than done. It took me the next 6 years to get from where I was in prison to Bard. And that point speaks to what Jessica says about incarcerated people whom they are coming into contact and meeting her, Max Kenner and undergrads at Bard in 1999, wanting and advocating for returning to college. So, there was a real dearth at this time. In 2013, I sat down and took an essay-based entrance exam. When I was going into an interview about BPI with the administrators who Max and Professor Alan Walker were at that time, it was a competitive process, very fortunately I got in and almost immediately plunged into L&T. You go from sitting in a cell, maybe working out, doing the most mundane things one day, to reading Shakespeare, James Baldwin, writing poems, writing essays, interacting with other people in a usually very isolating environment, the next day. It was an amazing journey and experience.

00:12:30 Mackie: Thanks, Dyjuan! Yeah, I think what's also remarkable about the BPI process is that it's the exact same process of students applying for Annandale and Berlin, or any other programs that we run, is. Students complete an application that the BPI applications come through the office here at Annandale and I look forward to meeting students wherever they are and particularly BPI students are moving from the Associate or Bachelor's degree that is truly special. The conversations that take place as students are taking that leap to the next degrees is a really exciting time. And the application process is the same. So, I really want to stress again, that, really, tying to the curriculum, tying to faculty, and tying it to the experience, even the application process, to exactly what it feels like to be going to college. I think that's something very important to everyone BPI: it's not different, it's exactly the same. The rigor is the same, those steps are the same. Thank you for talking to us a little bit about what that felt like to be moving into this.

00:13:47 Dyjuan: And Mackie, I'll just add to that, in terms of how BPI strives to mirror the Bard experience on the Annandale Campus. I am one of the many BPI students who have finished their degrees on the campus.

00:14:06 Mackie: Great! Nice to see that transition too! You get to explore different pieces of the Bard networks, which is nice, which students strive to do, to connect this notion of one Bard. Yeah, we have a couple of other questions to dive into. I am wondering if Dyjuan you could speak a little bit about the extracurriculars that you were involved with during BPI as well as your Senior Project? A number of students were incredibly successful in debate, in particular. So, I am wondering if you could speak a little bit about those pieces of your Bard experience?

00:14:48 Dyjuan: Yeah, so the Bard BPI graduates before me really served as role models, an inspiration for my life. I got into the Bard BPI in 2013 and after that fall, the Bard Debate Union of BPI had its first debate against West Point.

Some of my peers got on stage and really brought down a definitive victory. And at that moment, kind of like the 60 Minutes moment, I said to myself, this is something I am going to do. So, I joined the debate team. We have a fabulous coach, who is also the coach for the debate team on the main campus, David Register. My first debate was against the University of Vermont. I think they were 7th, maybe 15th in the country at that time. And that debate in the fall of 2015, at this point, we beat Harvard. And that story made global news: I think that was the third most-searched story on Google in 2015. So, debate while I was a student was a huge extracurricular and it took up a lot of my time, a lot of my energy, to the consternation of my professors. But I made it through. And in relation to my Senior Project, as Delia highlighted, you can't major in Biology as a BPI student because the prison is not going to let BPI bring in a Biology lab. Early on in my educational journey, I started taking content-based Biology courses as I wanted to be a Biology major, but that wasn't going to happen. So, I decided to be a math major and wrote a senior project on applied mathematics in biology. I remembered saying that to my professor in my first year. And he was like, I don't think you could do that. I don't know if that's possible. And BPI went on making it possible for me and other students, I ultimately wrote applied math in biology, specifically modeling cancer cell proliferation using differential equations. And by the way, I've never been good at Math in my life and I really had to master it and learn it, and I think my capacity to do that owes a lot to amazing and dedicated BPI professors.

00:17:43 Josh: Excellent! Thank you! I am curious that you all have BPI as a significant part of each of your lives, but in very different ways. Can each of you speak about what this program has meant to you?

00:17:59 Jessica: I will start! Being part of the BPI as an undergraduate really set the course of my entire career trajectory. I wrote a senior project as a history major on prisoner resistance at Sing Sing at the turn of the century. So, I thought that was fun and maybe I should go to graduate school and do more history and also try to understand more how we got to this problem of mass incarceration. I went to graduate school, really wanting to continue both the intellectual work I have started related to what we were doing as an organization at BPI, understanding how we got here in terms of mass incarceration, understanding what over time the purpose of the prison was understood to be. I went to graduate school with the back of my mind the sense that if I kept the academy, maybe I could form another "College-in-Prison" program somewhere else in the country over time. And staying in the academy can help continue this work. After graduate school, I spent a little bit of time in the post- doc with the Obama Administrations Re-entry Council working on the policy side of things, from learning about how the history of policy was made to sitting in a room and watching that. And through the experiences I have had, I realized what I had in mind as a 20-year-old was right, there was no more impactful work that I could do than being back on the ground and work rather than championing it, or writing about the history of it, or doing other policy work. Really struck by how much BPI was a paradigm shifting example in the policy field where really often, people in prison are met with low expectations— even cynicism even by the most respected practitioners in reentry and reform spaces. So, I wanted to go back and do more of that kind of work, paradigm-shattering. So, I joined back at BPI about four and half years ago, working on the national project side, which has meant working with other colleges and universities around the country to help them form their own programs, based on the BPI model. So that's a lot of the work I've been doing since I've been back.

00:20:13 Delia: For me, I came to BPI very much as an alum. I was working on my dissertation and began teaching in Language and Thinking at Annandale. Through that, I met Madeleine George, who was at that time running our sites, it was one of the prisons in the city. She eventually hired me to teach a history course there. So, from that, I was hired to teach Language and Thinking that very same year, one of the prisons at Eastern, which Dyjuan mentioned and then another course. I was also interested in BPI because I was proud of it, as an alum, and having heard about it from friends, Jane Brien who is now the Alum Director who is friends with Max, who worked as an early volunteer of

the program. That's when I first heard about it. I was curious and interested, and whoever teaches for us said the same thing and wanted to keep working with students, going back to what Dyjuan and Jessica both said. These students are just amazing to work with; they bring you to your best as a teacher, as a scholar. And the ways that they push themselves and each other also pushes you. That's just a very magnificent teaching experience. And I was teaching pretty consistently for a couple of years and eventually I applied for an administrative job which involves teaching... Really haven't left as it's been more than a big part of my life, over a decade now. I consider myself, I know myself, to be very lucky, as someone who was a little bit ambivalent about academia when I was in it as a graduate student trying to see my way to becoming a professor. BPI really created a space for me to be who I need to be in the world as a scholar and a teacher. So, I am incredibly lucky.

00:22:49 Dyjuan: Yeah, I can answer this question in so many different ways. But I think my experience as a student at Bard has been really critical to my reintegration back to society. As I mentioned earlier, prison is a really isolating space. So, going into a classroom and talking to other incarcerated people, Bard students, that you otherwise wouldn't have spoken to, was really liberating. Being able to learn from professors like Delia Mellis. I've never taken her class because I've heard she is notoriously kind of hard, but I ran into her in her capacity as a tutor, which was amazing. But maybe I can encapsulate the moment after I was released, I was on the main campus and I went into the enrollment office to activate my student email. And the woman in the office looked down at me and she said, you've been here for 3 or 4 years and you are just here now activating your student email? There was nothing in the Bard system that said I was incarcerated. I kind of did not know what to do. And my professor said something. I don't know, at that point, what that moment had meant to me, but it's been really enriching for me as a person for me to be accepted as a Bard student, to be recognized as a person, who should have a right and access to an amazing first-rate education, the type of education that people who come from where I come from usually don't receive in the world. That's kind of my first point on that, and the second one: I got out of prison and kind of didn't know what I wanted to do. I did a few different jobs, I got into politics and went and worked in the tech space doing some project management. But, I have an older brother who's been to prison and a younger brother who's been to prison and that type of opportunities as a result of me not only having a Bard degree but also a Bard education, that have been opened to me, in contrast to them were very, very stark in my life. So, I went back to BPI where we received no public funding for the work that we do at this time. I want to raise us public funding. And Max said let's do it. I started doing that and that was successful. so today I am the Government Affairs Officer at the prison initiative. It was just announced yesterday that the DCCC, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee announcement, that I am going to join them as a Senior Advisor for Strategic Outreach. And so, Bard, this experience, the individuals, the accomplishment, the curriculum at BPI has fundamentally changed the trajectory of my life.

00:26:25 Mackie: That's really exciting! Congratulations! Not a small task! And I think something that's really common is the ambition and the success of BPI alums. That's really remarkable to see and not surprising given the rigor particularly in BPI, honestly. Working with students in BPI, every year during the application cycle, I feel like my ideas are challenged more in those spaces than they ever are. So, I am not surprised that there is so much success. Congratulations, Dyjuan, that's so exciting! What a job to have!

00:27:08 Dyjuan: Thank you!

00:27:09 Mackie: So, I guess, I have one other question and there are pieces of information, pieces of your story that you are welcome to share. But one thing I want to talk about is: doing another plug for College Behind Bars, it is a great way for people to learn more about what we are talking about, very important to help people understand, during the recording of this podcast, is available on Netflix. You are welcome to watch that, for anyone listening, but

it's also a remarkable piece of film. So, I encourage everyone to watch it if you can and to educate yourself a little bit more about what BPI does, what the potential of college education in prisons; the potential there is significant. But what does the future hold for BPI? There have been a number of expansions; working with different populations of students in the microcolleges. And maybe we can touch on, just before we close, touch a little bit on, how this crucial work is expanded into other spaces?

00:28:13 Jessica: As we said earlier, moving from an undergraduate activist organization to something different, we have long-said, much of what we do is not about prison at all: it's about expanding access to education and the intersection of the crisis of mass incarceration and the problem of higher-education being; the failure to identify talent and capacity, in all kinds of different places. And the crisis of mass incarceration means there are so many talents unrecognized by higher education in prison. So, over the course of years, BPI has been doing that work and saying to other practitioners and others in the world: this is less about prison and more about expanding access to education. It became interesting to take that actually and make that into action; bringing the kinds of things we did in the prisons into the community and finding ways to even further expand the reach of Bard education to communities that had been largely excluded from those kinds of opportunities, began kind of an expansion of what BPI has been doing. For a couple years now that we have been innovating what we call micro-colleges out in community, the first one started with a partnership called the care center in Holyoke, Massachusetts where young mothers were receiving kind of wrap-around services, including completing the GED and going to community college but having a tough time completing their college educations. So, we partnered with them and created a micro-college where women are enrolled in Bard education in the center, getting a Bard Associate Degree, much like what we do at the prison. The second one we launched is housed in the Brooklyn public library in a similar situation. But Delia I'll turn it over to you to talk more about what that looks like and what's that all about.

00:30:28 Delia: So, the micro-colleges we offer the associate degree and it's the same curriculum we offer our students inside. Faculty are finding these students to be motivated, brilliant, and surprising in all sorts of ways because they bring their life experiences to their education; they bring a kind of skepticism about institutions and often a prior negative experience of schooling to micro-colleges to their time in the micro-college, and that somehow spurs them to get really great achievement. We support them in figuring out what they want to do by way of completing a Bachelor's Degree. Similar to what we offer students inside, we have continued education, counseling and support for them, we are not looking to turn it into Bachelor's but to help them figure out where to complete their degree. It's a really exciting program, it's really tapping into a need that community colleges are really important institutions, some students need a smaller classroom... the high touch... the intensity of a Bard education and that's what they get in the micro-colleges that set them up to be really successful students from micro-colleges. (Students from) Holyoke have been getting scholarships to Smith and Mount Holyoke and other colleges. It is a very resource rich environment, educationally up there in western Massachusetts and our students are really finding their way into these other schools. Same thing is happening in the city. It's really exciting to see students take it on and take it up, and carry it forward.

00:32:22 Mackie: I think it's absolutely fair to say that Josh and I really enjoy reading applications from students whatever their experience was, wherever they are applying from. But there is something special about students applying from BPI. No doubt about it. I think it's a combination of experience and this really impressive and remarkable drive to take as much as possible out of the education as you possibly can, and it is special to BPI students. It's definitely recognized. So, Josh, do you have any other questions?

00:33:01 Josh: I have one last question. This is a question that gets asked often by prospective students hoping to get involved with BPI during their time at Bard: are there any ways for current students at Bard to be involved with BPI?

00:33:13 Delia: There are two ways that students on the Annandale campus can work with us. They are unfortunately very limited —students who are able to volunteer and tutor—but they need to be 21 years old. That’s a state law. Generally, students who are getting into their senior year, but not always. So that’s one route. Those tutors have been incredibly important part of the resources and the community of colleges inside. And then another way they can help us is through work-study. We hire people to help out in our office and we hire researchers who provide research support to students who do not have internet access inside. So, students, especially Senior Project writers, can request materials and work-study students who beautifully fulfill these requests and help students find their way through the world internet that they have access to.

00:34:23 Dyjuan: I’ll add, first of all, I’ve moderated into debate on the Annandale campus. And BPI alum engage with the student body in other ways different kinds of activities, like panels discussions, there have been screenings on campus like College Behind Bars, so I always think it’s an amazing idea for students at Bard to see the work of BPI in the first hand and be inspired to change the world. Max Kenner, Jessica Neptune, young undergraduates at Bard created this program. I think there are other things that other undergraduates at Bard can do to make the world a better place, but I just want to encourage every Bard student to reach out to BPI, us in the alumni community love to engage with you all and I look forward to hearing from you!

00:35:42 Josh: Thanks so much, everybody! I think that’s a great way to wrap up the conversation for today! But certainly, if any of our listeners out there have questions, you can reach out to BPI at BPI@bard.edu or reach out to us in Admission at admission@bard.edu! As always, we look forward to the next time!