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STACY BURNETT
TESTIMONY REGARDING REPEALING PARAGRAPH SUBDIVISION
b(1-v) and 6(d) OF EDUCATION LAW
2022 JOINT LEGISLATIVE HEARING – HIGHER EDUCATION
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Nearly 14 years ago I accepted a plea bargain that would send me to prison for five years. I swore to the judge I would make amends, find redemption and get an education to return home a better person. I decided my time would count. I shuffled out of the courtroom with the awkward gait of a shackled prisoner and wondered if I had it in me to get a bachelor's degree. I looked out the window of the police car for the two hour drive to prison, oblivious to the too-tight handcuffs cutting into my wrists as I wondered if I could pass math. I was so busy wondering what life with an English degree would feel like that I forgot to be scared I was going to prison.

Every indignity endured the first week in prison was an inconvenience made endurable by my internal debate between a science-ish degree or a creative one. The icy shower, cockroaches in the cafeteria, and separation from my three-year old son seemed surmountable when weighed against my bright future with a degree. I would be *someone* with my education. Exactly one week after my arrival in prison, I learned there was no college education for me. The facility I was going to call home did not offer college to anyone older than 24. The showers seemed colder, the roaches more plentiful, and the emptiness of separation consumed me. I made 11 cents an hour lugging trash and shining floors. I did not learn Shakespeare or algebra in prison. I learned I was unworthy and irredeemable.

I brought that lesson home and cycled back through the system, a two-time loser. The second time I went to prison I was housed at a facility that offered the Bard Prison Initiative. That dormant seed of hope that I could be *someone* stirred again, and I wondered if I had enough potential to be accepted. I applied and was given a test date. There were so many women with so much more to offer, and the entire visiting room was filled with test takers anxious to be chosen to fill just 14 slots. I stayed out of trouble to make sure I could attend the interview. Bard Prison Initiative was my one chance at education, my one chance to build that life I dared to dream of when I first went to prison. Being accepted to Bard and attending college in prison changed everything.

While attending Bard while in prison, I was no longer just a number being warehoused until a release date. Professors believed in me, and challenged me. I had to learn the ethics of academia and abide by an honor code. I learned more than Shakespeare and algebra. I learned

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how to think for myself and work with others to find solutions. I learned how to set goals, make a plan, and do the hard work that turns a vision into reality. I learned how to ask the right questions and find credible answers. The college classroom in prison reintroduced me to the wonder of promise, and sitting in that classroom, I was *someone*.

This time when I came home, I was armed with the education Bard provided to me. Traveling through life with a deeper understanding and rediscovering self-worth may not be a quantifiable benefit of my education in prison but it is the root of healing our communities. I worked for NYC government during the pandemic, and was trusted with the health and well-being of my neighbors. My community looks to me for advice and guidance to stay healthy and safe. In over four years, I have not had another brush with the law and was even released from parole early. I have more than simple job security - I built a career, and am working toward an MBA in Sustainability at the Bard Graduate Center. Not a single person from my Bard class has been re-arrested - statistically six of us should be re-incarcerated right now.

Making higher education available to incarcerated people is the best way to ensure people are equipped with the tools for a successful return to society. I am not an exceptional person. Our prisons are filled with people just like me who need the chance to see their own potential. The best place for that to happen is a classroom. This rare opportunity Bard provided to me must be normalized, and restoring TAP funding for incarcerated people is the morally right action to take.