GIVING

BY CAITLIN CUSHMAN

Safeguarding a Second Chance

MET alumna’s record-setting gift promises perpetual funding for Prison Education Program

KARIN ADDISON JACK knows that you don’t have to set foot on a college campus to get a quality university education.

The long-distance approach worked fine for Jack (MET’08), who earned a master’s degree in criminal justice online through BU’s Metropolitan College. It also works for inmates at the state prison in Framingham, Mass., where classes are taught by BU instructors. The only all-female correctional facility in Massachusetts, the prison is one of two in the commonwealth that offer a Boston University degree. To ensure the program would not end, in August 2011 Jack set up an endowment of $1.5 million, the largest gift in MET’s history.

BU’s Prison Education Program, established in 1972, offers a Bachelor of Liberal Studies curriculum to select prisoners at Framingham and at the all-male correctional facility in Norfolk. University-sponsored prisoner education is a rarity in today’s economic and political climate, and Jack was surprised to learn that while most universities had cut similar programs, BU has continued funding the Prison Education Program from its own operating budget.

“During my graduate studies at BU,” Jack says, “I found myself focusing on the topic of female offenders and the issues particular to women who become involved in the criminal justice system.” The Prison Education Program at Framingham provided a concrete way for her not only to get more involved, but also to make a difference for those female offenders by supporting one of what she calls “the last remaining programs of its kind to survive budget cuts and the antiprisoner zeitgeist of the past few decades.”

When MET Dean Jay Halfond spoke with her about the program, Jack found its credentials “beyond what was necessary to warrant an endowment and a guarantee of perpetual funding.” She accepted Halfond’s proposal to create the Addison Female Prisoners Education Fund at Boston University, which would underwrite the entire operating expenses for the women’s program.

“I was pleased with how immediately she shared my passion for this program,” Halfond says. “She instantly understood how special this was, how committed our faculty are to prison teaching, and how meaningful and precious this opportunity is for incarcerated students.”

“Not many people choose to give to prisoner education,” says Jenifer Drew, director of the Prison Education Program. “But it doesn’t surprise her that Jack would want to do something so unique. “Karin is a real individual, open-minded and adventurous,” Drew says. “She stands out. And when we were ready to visit Framingham, she was ebullient.”

Jack knew what to expect. As an undergraduate at Hollins University, she was a volunteer tutor with the Offender Aid and Restoration program in Roanoke, Va. Drew was impressed with Jack’s demeanor when they went to the Framingham prison. “She didn’t disdain or fear the prisoners,” she says. “She saw them as flawed people who’d done bad acts and made stupid mistakes, that’s all. If I could have hired her as a teacher for the program, I would have.”

During Jack’s first classroom experience at the prison, Drew asked the women to describe their relationship to education before they took courses through BU in terms of a romantic relationship. “The conversation just flowed,” she says. “The relationships were abusive, one-sided, and unrequited, education was taken for granted, or vice versa.” Jack signed her gift pledge on the steps of the prison.

Jack believes that prisoner education is in jeopardy across the nation. “Anything viewed as ‘coddling’ prisoners has been politically unpopular in recent years,” she says. And yet she finds changing minds on this topic to be a fairly simple matter. “Without exception,” she says, “anyone I have spoken to about the program—anyone who will listen—has been impressed with the rehabilitative success and concedes that it is a superior approach to breaking the cycle of offending.”

Jack’s next goal is to interest fellow philanthropists in funding the BU men’s Prison Education Program at the Norfolk facility.

Drew hopes that Jack’s attitude will catch on. “Karin’s gift is amazing,” she says. “A lot of people have these experiences in college and then move on to live their lives. When you get a yearning to give back to something, it’s important to recall what you were once passionate about. Karin found the ticket.”

BU established the Prison Education Program in 1972.

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