

Pen Project helps unlock writing talent for incarcerated writers

Students provide anonymous feedback for participants

By Dolores Tropiano, ASU News

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It's a typical Monday afternoon and Lance Graham is on his way to the Arizona State Prison in Goodyear.

It's a familiar scene. Graham has been in prison before.

"I feel comfortable in prison because of my background," says Graham, who was incarcerated on and off for several years. "Prison will always be a second home."

These days, Graham is no longer serving time in prison, he is serving his purpose. This time, he is there as an Arizona State University instructor for ASU's [Pen Project internship](#) — a writing class that allows maximum-security and other incarcerated writers to receive anonymous feedback from ASU student interns in the New College of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences.

"I try to inspire them and get them to improve their writing," he says. "And get them to believe that this (prison) does not need to be home. But mostly, I help them to believe in themselves in the same way someone believed in me."

The writing on the wall

Graham grew up in Maryvale, an urban neighborhood in the city of Phoenix. He dropped out of school in eighth grade to join a gang. At the age of 15, he was arrested for shoplifting.

"At a very young age, I already knew that I was going to prison," he said. "My peers were already in and out of the juvenile system. We were all going to prison. That's what we did. Every kid I grew up with is in prison."

Drugs were very prominent in the gang culture, and his drug use played a major role in Graham's prison sentences — but being incarcerated deepened his understanding of addiction.

“We send people to prison as a chance for them to get clean and refocus their minds and think about the choices that led them there,” he said. “But drugs are the easiest thing to get in prison. When I was there, it was easier to get drugs than it was rehabilitation.

“I sobered up in prison. I saw the access inside was meant to further addict us and learned from it. And the reason people went back (to prison), is that they didn’t have to take responsibility for anything. They didn’t believe that they could be more.”

At first, Graham didn’t either. But his mother did.

“All she ever said was, ‘I always believed you could go to college. I believed you were smarter than this. And that’s all I ever wanted for you.’”

After getting out of prison, at the age of 28, Graham attended Glendale Community College where he was exposed to literature and decided to pursue a degree in English. While a student there, he learned about [MyPath2ASU](#) — a program that helps community college students transfer to ASU. He jumped at the chance to continue studying literature and storytelling.

“I was exposed to the way that our stories connect our experiences, even when we think those experiences are so different,” he said.

Eventually, the man who dropped out of school in the eighth grade earned a bachelor’s degree in English with distinction, followed by a [master’s degree in interdisciplinary studies](#). He now teaches classes at ASU’s [West Valley campus](#), where he attended classes as a student.

Graham credits ASU’s charter and culture of inclusiveness for his new life.

“I never expected anybody to give me a chance to teach,” he said. “I never expected what happened when I went to the West Valley campus. I never expected people to believe in me.

“But that’s what happened at this campus.”

Writing was a transformative experience for Graham. One that he has been sharing with his students — those at ASU and those behind bars.

“I wanted to show the world their humanity through their writing, and that’s what the Pen Project allows my interns to see,” he said. “The human aspect of a population that we have been told is anything but human. They’re able to see those same experiences, those same desires that we all have as larger members of society.”

This year, [Graham](#) is also teaching at a women's prison and in person on the West Valley campus for the first time.

People, places and penitentiaries

Perryville is one of two prisons Graham works with. The other is the Penitentiary of New Mexico in Sante Fe, which houses prisoners in solitary confinement.

"The facility is the highest security level facility in New Mexico," said Leah Weed, who facilitates the Pen Project program at the prison. "It is where inmates are sent when they get in trouble within the system.

"All of them are in solitary cells, with varying degrees of privileges as they move through the program. Some have no phone, no visits and no yard or tier time. ... For many, (the Pen Project) is the only educational program they qualify for, and for some, it is their only contact with the outside world."

Right now, 96 individuals participate in the program, which is also available to writers in lower security facilities. When it isn't possible to meet in groups, Weed meets with writers at their cells to discuss their craft. Participants have the opportunity to submit a range of content, including poetry, GED practice essays and excerpts from memoirs or stories.

"I have been incredibly impressed by everyone at ASU who has been involved in the program," Weed said. "And I know that — for some participants — it is a lifeline. ... The writers are living in a context which is not conducive to individual self-expression. Providing a context which fosters such expression changes and enhances individual lives."

A path to freedom

Julianna Stachiw is interning with the Pen Project for the first time. She is a second-year English major at ASU.

"The process of editing and giving feedback has reinforced concepts I have not frequently concentrated on, making me more thoughtful in my own writing," she said.

It is also extremely beneficial to the writers behind bars.

"Recidivism rates have been shown to decrease when some sort of educational opportunity is provided to inmates," she said. "And writing is a great skill to have. ... It's something that they can apply to their lives beyond prison — from working to sharing their stories so their voices can be heard and teaching others from their experiences."

Julia Hipolito is interning with the Pen Project for the second time. She will graduate in May with a bachelor's degree in [social justice and human rights](#).

“As much as I love teaching people to write, I didn't come back to the program for the second time to proofread,” she said. “I didn't come back to try to decipher handwriting¹. I didn't come back because my degree required it. I came back because of freedom and hope.”

The very freedom and hope she found from writing while in an abusive relationship.

“A person can be in a dark, dreary place where there seems to be no way out, where rights have been stripped away, whether that person is in a physical jail or trapped and controlled mentally,” she said. “In the bleakest of situations, writing can be a way out. There is freedom that comes from expressing yourself — a freedom of the mind. Through (the inmates') writing I could see the human dignity and self-determination flowing through these individuals.”

Beyond that, the Pen Project provided a powerful experience outside of the classroom as well.

“I've studied social issues, from criminal justice to poverty to drug addictions... I've studied it all,” she said.

“But reading the short stories and poems from The Pen Project focused the lens of my studies in the most intimate way,” she said. “As I move into this career, I know who I'm doing it for and I know why I'm doing it. The Pen Project has grown my empathy tremendously and given me a greater desire to work in my community.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

¹ The papers the inmates submit are all handwritten.

Main image



ASU instructor Lance Graham works with fourth-year social and cultural analysis student Serenity Garcia and other students participating in ASU's Pen Project internship, which provides feedback for incarcerated writers. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



ASU Instructor Lance Graham talks about prison conditions with his Pen Project students, an internship class that provides feedback to incarcerated writers. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News