

The University of Maine

DigitalCommons@UMaine

Social Justice: Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion

Special Collections

6-1-1999

UMaine, Penobscot Nation and Bangor Court Systems Collaborate on Alternative Sentencing Program

Peter Cook

Division of Marketing and Communications

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/social_justice



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Indigenous Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Cook, Peter, "UMaine, Penobscot Nation and Bangor Court Systems Collaborate on Alternative Sentencing Program" (1999). *Social Justice: Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion*. 816.

https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/social_justice/816

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Social Justice: Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

UMaine, Penobscot Nation and Bangor Court Systems Collaborate on Alternative Sentencing Program

June 1, 1999

Contact: [Peter Cook](#) at 581-3756

ORONO -- Criminal offenders convicted in Maine courts now have an alternative to jail time or fines. Judges can now sentence offenders to spend time in a literature discussion group.

The University of Maine, the Penobscot Tribal Court and the Bangor Court system are joining together to offer an alternative to traditional punitive sentences. The Changing Lives Through Literature program will offer a series of eight weekly meetings at the Honors Center on the UMaine campus. This will be the first time that the two court systems have collaborated.

"People will be sentenced to this program in lieu of other punitive actions," says Gary Grove, chief judge of the Penobscot Nation Tribal Court. "I think this program appeals to offenders on a different level than punitive measures because it provides them an opportunity to think about their relationships with others and authority in ways they have not before."

This program began in 1991 as the creation of Robert Waxler, a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts in Dartmouth. Waxler and Judge Robert Kane started with a group of eight men, ranging in age from 18 to 45. These men had 146 convictions between them.

Waxler says the group was required to read and discuss a series of books, including "Seawolf" by Jack London, "Of Mice and Men" by John Steinbeck and "Sula" by Toni Morrison. He says that through reading and discussing literature, the often isolated participants have a chance to regain their own voice and communicate on a deeper level than they would normally.

"Before these meetings, many of these guys thought they had lost their voice and identity and they didn't think anyone would listen to them," says Waxler. "This program helped them believe they could once again become a part of society."

Grove and George Tomer, director of the Tribal Court, brought the program to Maine after seeing Waxler give a presentation about it at a conference in Virginia Beach.

"I thought it sounded interesting, so I started communicating with Waxler and getting more information," says Grove. "The tribal court doesn't get enough people to generate a discussion group, so I began to enlist the cooperation of the state courts and started talking to district and superior court judges."

Grove says his hope for the program is that it will show criminal offenders different ways to solve problems.

"I did a lot of criminal defense in the past and saw that the court spent a lot of time figuring out how to punish people and little time drawing out their positive qualities," says Grove. "Many people who commit crimes have very fixed responses in how they approach problems. In this program, people will see alternatives to their fixed responses."

The course will be taught by Margaret Lukens, an associate professor of English and at the University of Maine. Lukens specializes in Native American literature, 19th century American literature and multicultural studies.

Lukens is concentrating on Native American authors for this first class. She is using the novel "Ceremony" by Leslie Silko, "Aboriginally Yours," a collection of short works by Henry Red Eagle and an anthology of Native American literature edited by Gerald Vizenor.

"I was interested in this program since I first heard about it," says Lukens. "It provides a great opportunity to teach in the community. I've taught Native American literature at the university for seven years and this literature always seems to have a transformative effect on people." The course will meet in the Honors Center next to the Memorial Union on the University of Maine campus. Holding the classes in a university environment is essential to the success of the program, according to Lukens.

"This is a chance for people to respect themselves. It's hard to feel self-respect when you've been handed a punitive sentence such as jail time or a fine," says Lukens. "These classes are held in an academic setting, a place designed for self-improvement and inquiry."

Tomer and Growe will attend most of the classes, and Lukens also plans to invite guest speakers, including a Native author. This will help the participants in the group to feel their opinions count even with those who sentenced them.

Waxler says the program was evaluated in 1993 in which 32 program participants were compared with 40 men in a comparison group. The two groups possessed a similar makeup. However, program participants in the study group possessed a higher risk in their criminal backgrounds and a higher ration of violent offenses than the men in the comparison group.

The two groups had very dissimilar outcomes. Over the course of the study, 18 percent of the program participants were convicted of new crimes while 45 percent of the comparison group were convicted.

"This program demonstrates the power of literature to make a difference and change lives," says Waxler.

Lukens has the same hope for the Maine program.

"Literature gives us a chance to experience emotions, both our own and those of other people," says Lukens. "It gives us a window into other people's lives. Discussing literature can help people understand others by giving them an opportunity to listen and be listened to."