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REACHING KIDS AT RIKERS

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Special to the AmNews

Every Friday, for the past five weeks, 12 students from Columbia University made the journey to Rikers Island.

The students from Professor Laurent Alfred's "Youth Voices On Lockdown" class conduct a creative workshop with 60 boys at Island Academy, the ironic name of Rikers' mandatory high school for inmates under the age of 19.

The unusual seminar, offered by Columbia's Africana Criminal Justice Project, founded by Dr. Manning Marable three years ago, provides undergraduate and graduate students with an up-close look about the issues facing teenage inmates.

"When you walk in, you see a long line of young Black and Brown faces," says Alfred, who also coordinates the Project, which is dedicated to exploring



Professor Laurent Alfred with students from the "Youth Voices on Lockdown" class and local performing artists pictured outside of Rikers Island where they host a six-week workshop for teen inmates as part of Columbia University's Africana Criminal Justice Project.

the mass incarceration phenomenon among residents of color.

"These are kids whom we are locking up, putting in cages and

warehousing at a tremendous social, economic cost."

On a recent Friday afternoon when rain clouds bully the sky,

Alfred's class crowds into a chartered minibus to make the trek across the Francis R. Buono

Memorial Bridge into Rikers

Island for their last workshop of the semester.

The last five times they came, they conducted a 90-minute class with the youth.

During this time they invited local artists to perform. This day is no different. Three spoken-word poets traveling with the group are scheduled to perform.

"Getting the attention of young people in the midst of this massive media onslaught, MTV and Hot 97, really requires that you use what appeals to young people but carefully," said Alfred, the Yale Law School graduate who himself is a musician. "You can't just use art as a hook to draw people in and then not have the content behind it," he adds.

Alfred and his class use rap and spoken word as a means to connect with the youth at the start of the workshop then break

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Rikers

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out into small groups where the inmates talk and write around themes the Columbia students have prepared. The inmates' writings will be collected into an anthology that will eventually be edited by Alfred's class.

On this last Friday, some Columbia students exit the minibus with some trepidation:

"[It's] very unpredictable. You never know what to expect," said Ole Martin Ihle, a Norwegian graduate student from New York University who has an interest in Africana Studies. Though he does not attend Columbia, he cross-registered for the course.

Some days the inmates in Ihle's group want to talk and write, other days they don't. He, nor the other students, can predict how they'll be on any given Friday. But none of that matters. He still shows up.

Marable's decision to create the course at Rikers Island came at a time when many colleges across the country that offered similar programs were beginning to cut back on prison education programs.

As Alfred's class enters the jail, they are greeted by metal detectors. To their right is a window where they turn in their state-issued IDs for crumpled yellow badges. Alfred and his class then pass through two electrical doors—with no handles—that clang shut behind them.

They walk down yards of nondescript corridor, sterilized with disinfectant. The smell hangs all over the jail. They pass a line of kids—inmates—who look no older than 17, and are dressed in a blue jean/white T-shirt uniform. The inmates curiously look over the pain-clothed civilians and make catcalls at the Columbia girls as they walk by. But the students maintain their focus. They're here to take care of busi-

ness. The overwhelming majority of the inmates are Black and Brown faced, just as Alfred described.

The workshop is housed in a mess hall. After the Columbia students wait for about 10 minutes, the 60 or so inmates, escorted by correction officers, file in and sit down for small group discussions.

"What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about community?" Courtenay Barton, the Columbia student, asks her group of three inmates.

"I'm in the wild, I'm free," Leon Flowers, the 18-year-old inmate from Belize responds. He continues. "I ain't locking no doors when I go back home—I want those doors open!"

"I'm in jail, I don't know," says Kirell Green, responding only when prompted to answer Courtenay's question. "It's just the hood. Shooting...fighting," he explains.

"Would you leave?" Courtenay

asks him.

"I've been there 18 years—all my life. I can't leave," Green responds. Green is in jail for a robbery he says he didn't commit.

Flowers, the kid from Belize, who carries his future in his pocket—a picture of the sun bursting into brilliant colors above the sea—is quick to encourage Green.

"You've got to travel—that's not where it's at," Flowers tells his fellow classmate.

But Green has a lot on his mind these days. He is the father of a 1-year-old girl and he has another child on the way. Recently, he was convicted and sentenced to 2 years in jail for robbery and says he will eventually be sent upstate to serve his sentence.

After the breakout session, Alfred offers the inmates an opportunity to share their writing and rhymes on the mike. As the inmates take over the mike, they find freedom in their creative expression—a freedom that

is suppressed by the end of their semester-long workshop.

The boys are ordered to make a double line by the mess hall wall and their numbers are called off by their correction officers.

As they trudge out, several of the inmates wave boyishly at the Columbia students. The parting is emotional for Columbia students like Latoya Travnier.

Travnier, an undergraduate from Massachusetts who is majoring in psychology, looks straight ahead as the boys leave. As the last few exit, she breaks down.

"This is going to be an experience that they will not forget," said Frank Dody, who is the principal of Island Academy.

As Alfred's class leaves the mess hall, a reluctant rain begins slowly. It falls faster while they're on the minibus driving them away from Island Academy, over the Francis R. Buono Memorial Bridge—that short distance between jail and freedom.