Students Expand Horizons Working with Teens at Rikers Island

By Ginger Adams Otis

Lauret Alfred knows that experience is the best teacher, so he goes to great lengths to make sure his students take his seminar “Youth Voices on Lockdown” a lesson that will last a lifetime.

For the past two years, the Yale University Law School graduate has coordinated an innovative program that buses 12 undergraduate and 16 graduate students from Columbia to Rikers Island every Friday during the semester to work with the inmates and the staff.

The seminars are part of the University’s Africana Criminal Justice Project, which was founded three years ago by Professor Manos Charalambous to focus research related to race and social justice in modern America.

“You can read about the prison industrial complex all you want,” says Alfred, explaining why he decided to create a seminar that included visits to Rikers. “Until you’ve walked through a prison hallway, observed how correctional officers treat the inmates and gotten a feel for what it’s like inside, you don’t really know what prison is. Those who take this class come out of the semester having learned a lot more than they expected to, but it doesn’t come from me.

Students who take Alfred’s class usually are already pursuing a degree related in some way to social justice. In 2010, Gossett, a rising senior from Boston, was one of the first students at Columbia to select Comparative Ethnic Studies, a new major that he describes as a “very interdisciplinary study of ethnicity, race and power and how it plays out in society.” For Gossett, the Youth Voices on Lockdown seminar was a natural fit.

I’d heard from a student who took it last year that it was a very profound experience,” he recalled, still being studied a lot of jazz, history [and] the role of the arts in the social justice movement, plus I’d had a class with Professor Lauret before and knew he was a great teacher—so I felt I’d had to take this seminar.”

Gossett and 11 other students spent the first few weeks of the spring semester acquainting themselves with authors who had turned their prison experiences into powerful texts and drawing up lesson plans for the small groups of students from Island Academy on Rikers that they would be working with.

“We take a lot of time to prepare [seminar students] for what they’ll encounter,” says Alfred. “The class of 16- to 18-year-olds that they taught in Rikers was about 60 strong this semester, so each student was responsible for about five students. They had to be empowered to express themselves.

Gossett described his first day at Rikers as extremely intense. He talked about feeling physically restricted from the moment he walked through the gates. Later, traversing the hallways to get to a back courtyard, he fixed on the proximity of LaGuardia Airport, clearly visible across the bay.

“You never think about how an airport is such a symbol of wealth, privilege and freedom, until you are in a prison practically right next door, watching planes fly overhead,” he noted.

Encouraged by Alfred to incorporate spoken word, poetry and visual arts into their writing, Gossett didn’t show up empty handed on his first day. After introducing himself to his group of students, he gave them copies of Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Then he played Tupac Shakur’s “White Man’s World” because it was the only letter written from prison.

“We talked about the difference between the reality of how King and Shakur had used their voices to promote social justice and experiences,” Gossett says. “I wanted to start with something they could get too personal—I hoped to bond some trust with students, so I wrote lesson plans that allowed for some open conversations.

A highlight of the semes- ter for Gossett was when one student came forward to talk to him about a burg- lary of his own and the works of James Baldwin, another one of Gossett’s favorites.

For the class finals, Alfred arranged for a local spoken-word artist to come to Rikers for a performance that led to a debate between the students about how privileged they had some control over their lives. It gave me a much deeper understanding of how incarceration affects an individual and, in a larger sense, the communities that suffer the highest rates of incarceration,” he concluded.

New Insights into Age-related Macular Degeneration

By Craig LeMoult

More than 50 million people worldwide are estimated to have irreparable vision loss caused by age-related macular degeneration (AMD), a disease marked by a progressive loss of central vision due to degeneration of the macula—the region of the retina responsible for sharp vision.

The widespread disease is the most common cause of blindness for those over the age of 60, and it is estimated that 30 percent of the population over the age of 75 may suffer some form of AMD by the time they reach the age of 75. Now, researchers at Columbia University Medical Center (CUMC) and the University of Iowa have found new insights into the origins of the disorder, which researchers say could pave the way toward the development of new therapies and diagnostics.

While there are many reasons researchers found, occurs when a commonly inherited gene variation is triggered, possibly by infection. The gene, known as Factor H, encodes a protein that regulates the body’s main source for Factor H, the body’s main source for Factor H.

Potential treatments could involve delivering healthy Factor H directly to the eye in the hopes of short-circuiting the disease process and preventing the disease from progressing to the primary stage.

The Iowa team also examined a large collection of donated eye samples and observed that the activation of the immune system results in the formation of drusen—inflamed yellow deposits under the retina that are the precursors to AMD.

The new findings link variations on the Factor H gene, which was found to be accumulated in drusen, directly to the process leading to AMD.

The genetic predisposition to AMD exists in approximately half of the Caucasian population. But not everyone who has this genetic variant develops AMD, so what causes this mechanism to activate? We believe inflammation from infectious might kick-start the process that leads to AMD,” said Hagman.

The variation in Factor H strengthens the immune response, keeping infections under control early but ironically that may contribute to a chronic disease as AMD later in life.”

The Columbia and Iowa scientists were able to make this connection in large measure by studying a rare form of kidney disease called MPGN II. Patients with this condition often share the same kind of eye lesions as individuals with AMD. And, in fact, a genetic determinant of the two diseases had been previously linked to the same protein.

“It has been always assumed that the two processes have an environmental trigger that turns on or off the pathological process,” said Hagman. “But as researchers, it is hard to find the basis for this trigger.

The researchers continue to conduct new studies based on their results to further understand the triggers for this gene.”

Encouraged to study this area, says Hagman, to understand the normal variation that is behind age-related macular degeneration and are beginning to target the trigger that sets the process in motion,” said Rando Allikmets.

Allikmets, senior author on the paper, led the study’s genetic analysis with patients and colleague from the Harkness Eye Institute at CUMC and New York Presbyterian/Columbia in collaboration with principal investigator Gregory Hagman, professor of ophthalmology and visual sciences at the University of Iowa Roy J and Lucille A Carver College of Medicine, who conducted the biological research. An international team of researchers was engaged in the project, including scientists at the National Cancer Institute, the National Institutes of Health, the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB) and Queens University, Belfast, United Kingdom.

The researchers examined 900 AMD patients and 400 healthy controls and noticed that half of all AMD patients have an inherited pattern of genetic variants in the Factor H gene—known as a haplo-type—that makes them more susceptible to AMD. Different haplo-types in the Factor H gene in about one third of the population provide varied degrees of protection from acquiring AMD.

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