

*From the Field***TIME WITH THE BUTTERFLIES**

BY TRISH O'KANE

"You the new doctor?" a blonde inmate with 1970s turquoise eye shadow asks as I walk through the corridors of Julia Tutwiler women's prison.

"No, I'm the creative writing teacher in the Medical Isolation Unit (MIU)."

She gives me a big "ooohhhh."

"Death row, huh?" she says and laughs conspiratorially with an inmate standing next to her.

My students are all HIV-positive, and this is typical of the attitude of many people towards anyone who is HIV positive or has AIDs, especially in the prison system. There is some truth to the "death row" tag and I am mad and sad about it. For a person with a weak immune system, a lengthy sentence in a crowded prison could become a death sentence. And in Mississippi and Alabama, HIV-positive inmates serve even longer sentences than inmates without HIV. Since they are in segregated units, they are unable to participate in work release programs where they can work off their sentence sooner.

I remember this on days when class poetry readings are punctuated by hacking coughs and the empty seats of those too ill to attend are pregnant with silence.

When I walked into the tiny white classroom the first time, students crammed into every available inch, I stepped into a garden forgotten. Older students sat, magnolias in full perfume, oozing a rich, dark humor. There were proud grandmothers, counselors, amateur biblical scholars. The youngest student was only 18, eager to be a wife, mother, and undertaker. They were black and white, and so many shades in between. Deep, and from the deep South.

During the two-hour rain of words, they twined like creepervines all over walls and out the one barred window, reaching for Pablo Neruda, Alice Walker, Frida Kahlo. Questions wrapped themselves around me like wisteria. What is an essay? What is a metaphor? Everything I had ever read and loved suddenly became a gift to give to someone.

I asked them to write about the kind of animal that they were. Nearly everyone chose the butterfly. Ever since, they refer to themselves, to me, and to any visiting writer or poet, as a butterfly. I receive letters addressed to "the Cloverdale Butterfly," or "the butterfly on the outside," and signed by "a beautiful butterfly." A visiting poet from California is referred to as "the West Coast Butterfly."

I taught freshman writing at a California university years ago, but I had never taught in a prison and knew nothing about the HIV virus. Humor is healing, so I started them off with the published letters of a California comedian who wrote to corporations complaining about their products. A class favorite was a detailed letter to Hershey's, complaining about a deformed M & M (chocolate piece enclosed). A lively discussion on irony ensued.

They asked me to bring in different kinds of music and this quickly became a favorite creative exercise. One day I brought my strangest CD, a singer named Yma Sumac, a kind of operatic gibberish backed by a big band. Students closed their eyes.

"You are on the New York subway, sitting across from a person who is listening to this music on a Walkman. It is Monday morning and everyone is packed in like sardines, trying to get to work. This person is oblivious, transported by their music. Who is this person and why do they love this CD?"

One student wrote of a frustrated middle-aged secretary on her way to work in a stodgy corporate office. A plain graying Jane in office garb that no one gave a second glance to. The one who poured the coffee, answered the telephones and gritted her teeth for years. But all this changed, Friday nights, when she escaped to the opera.

As the months passed, they learned other writing tricks like personification and I gained a greater respect and loathing for certain objects in the classroom. I asked students to write a class poem about an inanimate object. I'd never noticed the clothing iron sitting in a corner before, but 25 adjectives and verbs later this piece of metal had become a malevolent, sneaky, devious, abusive and downright evil spirit that urinates, spits, burns, and routinely punishes inmates.

An old broken-down computer perched on a gray file cabinet recently winked at me slyly. In a homework assignment one student described it as "an octopus with ninety-eight eyes" that brings "fire to the brain," and "sits exiled on a rugged mountain-top waiting for someone to arouse him."

Every class brings me new gifts. A 19-year-old student describes her mother's voice over the telephone as "white as rain." After a mini-lecture about the perils of using words like "good" and "beautiful," another student writes of a "popsicle perfect" day in the summertime.



Inmates at Julia Tutwiler prison experience the joy of accomplishment with their teacher, Trish O'Kane.

One day, there was a white plastic chair that was conspicuously empty. Quiet and sweet-demeanored Tammie, who dreamed of being an artist and a good mother, was suddenly paralyzed and bed-ridden. Prison officials said she was in the “final stages” of AIDs. I had been teaching for eight months and it finally hit me that somebody in here might die. Lesson plans flew out the window as students panicked about never seeing their children again.

“This is our future,” one wailed as we tried to comfort her.

Their writing was very much about the every day. A loss of laundry privileges meant dirty clothes for more days, the risk of germs spreading. Students wrote with anguish about not having enough bleach to clean toilets or soak underwear. Staying clean might mean staying alive long enough to get out.

Before Christmas, Tammie was granted a “compassionate release” because of her medical condition, and because she was a non-violent offender. While she waited for release, her health improved somewhat and she rejoined my class temporarily.

Just before she was paroled, we played a game called “Definition.” In this game each student had to pick five words from the class “magic word” jar. I wrote the words on the board, and students read each definition aloud. I told them to pick one word, write their own definition for it without using the word, and keep it a secret.

“Use your imagination,” I said, an utterly unnecessary instruction.

Tammie sat with a sneaky little smile and drew herself up in the white plastic chair as she began to read her own definition. The class had to guess the word. The scene was an outdoor picnic in a beautiful park. A large family gathering. The smell of barbecue wafting in the breeze. Children played on a swing set.

The other students listened to Tammie, puzzled.

I scanned the vocabulary words on the blackboard. Had Tammie understood the exercise? What was she writing about?

And then suddenly. . . Tammie paused for dramatic effect. . . a big bunch of killer bees attacked the crowd. Pork chops flew through the air in the frenzied scramble to flee. Everyone ran away.

We howled with laughter and the students clapped for Tammie. The word she chose to define was “departure.”



Trish O'Kane worked for nine years in Central America as a journalist and human rights activist. She is the author of Guatemala: A Guide to the People, Politics and Culture (Interlink Books, 1998) as well as numerous articles published in Time magazine, the San Francisco Chronicle, and other magazines. She began volunteer teaching at the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women in January 2000.

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