

Senior English elective studies with incarcerated women in Maine

Erica Jiang

Staff Writer

From last Friday to Sunday, the senior English elective “Monster Lit: Human Monsters, Monstrous Humans” visited the Southern Maine Women’s Reentry Center (SMRC). In the class, students from the school spend the year studying alongside women from the center.

“Monsters Lit,” offered last semester as “Bridging the Divide,” was created by Simon Schackner (12) and Upper Division English teacher Rebecca Bahr. Bahr taught both classes with Abbie Embry-Turner from SMRC to students from the school and to women at the reentry center, who connect over zoom, Bahr said.

Schackner was inspired by the documentary “College Behind Bars” by Lynn Novick, which he watched during an assembly in the fall of his sophomore year. The documentary led him to realize how much he and his peers take their education for granted, he said.

When thinking about establishing a class at the school, Schackner wanted to diversify the classroom experience, he said. “We talk a lot about diversity in the classroom, but at the end of the day, most people at Horace Mann are from a certain background, age, and location,” he said. “But with these students, they are incarcerated in Maine and range [in age] from their 20s to 70s, so it’s really about broadening our perspectives.”

Bahr too was moved by the documentary, as it connected with her familial experiences, she said. “My whole family has done work in prisons with education.” Bahr’s mother took part in a pen pal program and ended up becoming very close friends with one of the incarcerated members through the exchange. When given the opportunity to create a class with Schackner and the SMRC, Bahr was enthusiastic to continue her mother’s work, she said.

Schackner created the class with help from the school’s Alexander Capelluto Award, an annual competition among sophomores and juniors that awards grants of up to \$2,500 for students to start a community project.

In the first semester class “Bridging the Divide,” 11 students at the school and seven women from the center studied modern American literature and America through poetry, Bahr said. The class read “The Bluest Eye” by Toni Morrison, “Sigh, Gone” by Phuc Tran, and other formative documents along with the movie “Dakota 38,” she said. This semester, 16 students from the school and new women from the center took “Monster Lit” and read short stories from Stephen King, “Frankenstein” by Mary Shelley, and are currently finishing the poetry anthology “Felon” by Reginald Dwayne Betts.

The trip to Maine has been in the works since the beginning of the year, but was unable to occur until this weekend, Bahr said. “There’s only so much you can do through the computer screen, so we always wanted to eventually meet in-person and hang out.”

In the week leading up to the trip, students from the school and the center wrote poetry exercises inspired by “Felon.” Last Saturday, the two groups finally interacted face-to-face and shared their poems, Schackner said.

The trip to Maine has been in the works since the beginning of the year, and finally occurred this weekend, Bahr said. “There’s only so much you can do through the computer screen, so we always wanted to eventually meet in-person and hang out,” she said.

Before going on the trip, Sunshine Quinones (12) was both excited and nervous that it would be awkward to meet the women because of their age difference. “I was scared we wouldn’t mesh well,” she said. Luckily, they were able to relate through shared experiences from when women were younger and through the women’s kids at home, Quinones said.

The class also visited a farm together where they ate lunch and did various activities, Quinones said. “You can make connections online, but there’s something really special about physically being in a space with them.” The visit showed her the privilege she holds to go to the school and further underscored the phrase “don’t judge a book by the cover,” she said. “Meeting these women and getting to know them as people and students has taught me that you never know a person’s story by just [the] fact that they may be incarcerated.”

As part of the trip and the course, Head of School Dr. Tom Kelly also donated \$10,000 to an education fund started by the women at the center. The fund will be used to pay for books, transcript fees, late fees, and other materials needed to support the women’s education, Bahr said.

The class is important for students as it shows that no one is incapable of learning and that education is a powerful force to open people’s minds, lives, and hearts, Bahr said. “The kids get to hear real life experiences from these women, and they also bring such richness to the table,” she said. “The idea that we can all be students together is this kind of radical idea, but we’ve forged really close knit relationships.”

Next year, Bahr plans to run the class again though it may not be with the SMRC, Bahr said. She also hopes that the next class can visit their partners at the beginning of the school year as well as the end, and that this program can expand to other high schools, she said. “My real hope is that this expands to a lot more schools who have resources to do something like this.”