

Listen to the Wind:

Lee College

AND THE

Texas Department of Corrections

As the people park their cars and walk toward the building, the wind gently brushes against them. Glancing at their commencement programs, the people entering the Chapel of the Prodigal Son of the Ferguson Unit north of Huntsville, Texas, visited quietly as they take their seats in the wooden pews. On this particular evening, January 26, 1970, the Texas Department of Corrections in formal ceremony presents the first two graduates of its college-level program.

The Dallas Morning News

Kristen Corder

LEE COLLEGE

heralded these two inmates as the "first persons in the United States believed to have completed their entire college education while in prison" ("Distinguished" 24). The two black-robed graduates marching down the chapel aisle that January evening were the result of a program created four years earlier by an informal agreement between Dr. George Beto, Director of the

Texas Department of Corrections (TDC) and Mr. Walter Rundell, Dean of Lee College (LC) (Tiller 3). Born as an "agreement between gentlemen," the Lee College program within the Texas Department of Corrections grew rapidly to dimensions far beyond the expectations of those who had initiated it (Beto letter).¹ Several aspects of the program prompted this rapid growth. "No one had any idea the program would mushroom the way it did. It was merely an experiment," claims John Britt, one of the first teachers

in the program (Britt interview). Despite the success of this "agreement between gentlemen," the program today stands in a precarious position.

A wind stirred in Texas during the summer of 1966, a wind that would eventually stir up seeds of education and knowledge and replant them behind the walls of the Texan prison system. Dr. George Beto strongly believed in the value of education as a part of the rehabilitation process. In his eyes, to educate prisoners in a structured, disciplined environment would prove to be much more efficient and beneficial to taxpayers and convicts than trying to educate released convicts faced with the pressure of the streets (Beto interview). To accomplish this goal of structured education, Dr. Beto approached Dean Rundell of Lee College. Beto proposed the idea of a college level prison program to Rundell for three reasons: Lee College had a reputation for incorporating imagination and creativity into its course offerings, which Dr. Beto attributed to the fact that Lee College is nestled in the center of industry; it had a reputation for responding to community needs; and because he was a personal friend of Dean Rundell (Tiller 3).² Because of the informality of the agreement between these two gentlemen, no written contract was composed until three years after the program's conception.

With the seeds of opportu-

nity planted, the prison program flourished. Dean Rundell selected a group of five Lee College teachers to be the first to travel the ninety miles to Huntsville to instruct at the Goree, Ferguson, and Ellis units. The First Five—Dale Adams, John Britt, Phil Dignam, Don Perry, and Robert Seale—approached their task with tinges of excitement, curiosity, and apprehension. Their students entered the program with similar feelings. Each Saturday, the teachers would car pool ninety miles to the all female Goree unit, just outside of Huntsville, to drop off Adams. Britt and Seale were dropped off thirty miles down the road at Ferguson, the unit for young, first offenders. Dignam and Perry then drove another twenty miles to Ellis where recidivists were housed. Once at the prisons, the teachers taught for three hours before making the long drive home.

The students in those first classes were the "creme de la creme" of the convicts, fulfilling the entrance requirements for both Lee College and TDC ("Center" 5). Probably the most striking characteristics of both the male and the female students that first day of class existed in the fact that they all wore clean, starch-white uniforms (Adams and Seale interviews). Outside the classroom door, they were inmates, but once inside the classroom, the inmates became Lee College students. After surviving initial introductions and scrutinies of each

other, the teachers and students anxiously proceeded with the classes.

Those first students in the fall of 1966 numbered 176, enrolled in a total of five academic classes. Vocational classes were added to the prison curriculum in the spring of 1967; however, Dr. Beto always felt that academic courses more aptly provided the motivation the convicts would need once released so that they could "become an enlightened and informed electorate in America's democratic society" (Beto interview).³ The students during the fall of 1967 numbered 458. This number increased dramatically to 658 students in the fall of 1968, then to 792 students in the fall of 1969. By 1976, Lee College professors had taught more than 2,000 students behind prison walls ("Community" 21).⁴ With such epic growth, the state could not help but take notice of this unique program.

Dr. Richard Strahan, President of Lee College during the late 1960s, requested that the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools evaluate the Lee College program within the Texas Department of Corrections. Consequently, the Southern Association sent a committee to evaluate the program in Huntsville on November 9-12, 1969 (Southern 1). The following is an excerpt from the evaluation committee's report:

This is the first time a prison center has been evaluated for the Asso-



PHOTOS COURTESY TEXAS PRISON ARCHIVES

Texas Department of Corrections director Dr. George Beto (far right) was committed to inmate education and thus instigated TDC's college program. The Ferguson Unit for young first offenders (above) was one of the first TDC sites to offer college level courses.



ciation. Lee College claims to be "serving more prison inmates than all the rest of the colleges in the United States. . ." The unique purpose of the Huntsville Center was well stated by one of the Wardens. His comment was that their ultimate goal is to return 85-95 percent of the inmates to a useful life in society. Prison officials can produce statistics to show that 85 percent of the inmates who have completed their high school equivalency do not return to prison. Persons achieving at least 12 hours of college credit are seldom, if ever, repeaters. (1-2)

The committee enthusiastically approved the program on December 8-10, 1969, thereby granting the program full accreditation (Rundell 53).⁵ This accreditation

granted the students the assurance that the courses they completed behind those prison walls would be fully transferable (Laird 4). After receiving accreditation from the Southern Association, Lee College proudly presented the program's first two graduates on the evening of January 26, 1970, in the Ferguson Unit's Chapel of the Prodigal Son.

With the first stirrings of the wind, no one originally involved envisioned the potential success of the program. Although Alvin Community College already had a prison education program, the LC approach was fresh and radical. The statistics of the number of students enrolled in the program indicated that something had triggered the program's rapid growth and overall success. Three factors of the program which contributed to its success and which allowed for that first graduation on January included the sense of achievement and self-worth it provided the stu-

dents, the availability of funds, and the dedication of the Lee College faculty.

For the first students of the LC-TDC program, the opportunity to challenge their minds provided them the first breath of fresh air they'd had in years. The report, *School Behind Bars*, about prison education claims that "before an inmate can be rehabilitated, he must feel a sense of accomplishment and worth." The Texas Department of Corrections conducted some preliminary studies reinforcing the theory that a junior college level program would be good for the convicts. Dr. Beto strongly believed in this theory of the relationship between education and rehabilitation:

Dr. Beto reasoned that since ninety percent of the prison inmates were public school dropouts, inmate education at the junior college level showed a greater potential for success than education in the free world.

He also believed that a junior college program would be good for inmate morale since it would provide a sense of accomplishment. He hoped that improved morale, with the education itself, would help the inmate "to make it on the streets." (Tiller 3)

College level courses allowed the inmates a prime opportunity to set goals for themselves, whether the goal was to make good grades, participate more in class discussions or, ultimately, to graduate. One of the first five Lee College professors who taught in the TDC program best sums up the advantage of the program to the prison students themselves, "It was a good thing because it gave them the opportunity to reshape and redirect their lives" (Perry interview).

The LC-TDC program depended on more than just increased inmate morale for its success; it also depended upon the availability of funds. No money came out of Lee College's pocket for the execution of this program. John McCormick, current Academic Dean of Lee College, who served as coordinator of the LC-TDC program from 1965-1971, stated in his article "The College Level Education Program in the Texas Department of Corrections":

All faculty salaries, travel expenses, books, supplies, equipment, administrative and clerical costs were absorbed by the Texas De-

partment of Corrections. The Department's source of income was through Legislative funds allocated to the Corrections Department and revenues generated through special programs such as the annual prison rodeo. (5)⁶

Specifically, TDC "paid the full amount of fees for each inmate enrolled in classes as were collected from other students enrolled on the Parent campus" (Southern 4). Dr. Beto himself commented on the relationship between the availability of funding and the success of the program, "We had adequate funding. Money was not a problem. I get disenchanted with these people that are always complaining about a lack of money; you can do it if you want to. We were able to do it, and the program just grew, and it grew beyond my expectations" (Beto interview).

The absolute dedication of the Lee College faculty served as the third factor contributing to the LC-TDC program's enormous success. *The School Behind Bars* report presents a quote from an unknown source on its very first page describing the old conceptions of prison education:

...the chaplain standing in the semi-dark corridor, before the cell door, with a dingy lantern hanging to the grated bars, and teaching to the wretched convict in the darkness beyond the grated door

the rudiments of reading or numbers.

The impression of teaching in prisons has evolved from these archaic notions to a better understanding of the process. The teachers and students of the educational cooperation work in a much more enlightened atmosphere and under much more favorable conditions. Determined to bring the convicts a fresh perspective, Dr. Beto imported the first five teachers from the "free world" to instruct the convicts in English, history, and math. Beto wanted to reach outside the prison community for instructors because he felt "this would bring to the inmate student a fresh and natural element each class meeting even though the classes were being conducted within the prison units" ("Center" 2). These teachers often taught in neat classrooms similar to those available on the parent campus (Adams and Perry interviews). Mutual respect surfaced as an important element in the success of the relationship between the teachers and the students. Determined to treat the prison students as they would students on the parent campus, the teachers exhibited a high level of respect for the convicts. John Britt, one of the first teachers of the LC-TDC program stated it simply, "I treated them with respect just I did my students at Lee College, always addressing them as 'Mister' or 'Sir.' Many of the older inmates would almost cry, not being used to such high regard" (Britt interview).



PHOTO COURTESY LEE COLLEGE

Lee College history instructor John Britt teaches a class at the Ferguson Unit during the early days of the program.

An excerpt from a TDC student's freshman composition paper shows how such respect often influenced a student's rehabilitation and, in turn, the student's life:

Respect is something an inmate is not accustomed to outside of the classroom. The association with a teacher from the free world is a benefit to the inmate in his attempt to rehabilitate himself. In every classroom meeting he is reminded that he too can be successful if he desired to be. Little is said about the teacher's influence on the life of an inmate, but his influence is an important factor in his rehabilitation. ("Disadvantaged" 20)

Don Perry, one of the first teachers in the LC-TDC pro-

gram, expressed the general feeling of all the faculty who taught behind prison walls, "I told them that once they came into my class, they were no longer in TDC; they were Lee College students" (Perry interview).

Over a period of only a decade, a prison education program begun humbly as an "agreement between gentlemen" grew to epic proportions due in part to the uniqueness of the program, the sense of achievement it provided the students, the availability of funds, and the dedication of the faculty. As the program grew, Lee College maintained a permanent office in Huntsville, staffed by faculty who devoted their full time to prison classes both in academic and in technical-vocational programs. From those first two graduates, many have completed two-year de-

grees and have gone on to finish four-year programs in senior institutions which also offer classes within the prison.

The modest seedlings blossomed into a fruitful garden. However, twenty-five years later, the status of the "agreement between gentlemen" stands in a precarious position. Enrollment has been declining; fewer classes offered; cooperation with the TDC system seems to have broken down. According to Johnette Hodgins, Dean of Extension Studies/Continuing Education at Lee College since 1986, the Lee College program behind prison walls has been steadily declining. The main factor responsible for this decline, she feels, is the Multiple Assessment Programs and Services test (Hodgins interview).

The problem reflects changes that face schools all over Texas with TASP (Texas Academic Skills Program), which mandates testing student skills throughout the state. All Texas schools will be held accountable for students graduating without sufficient skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. Such a mandate is particularly disturbing for a system which contains a high proportion of academically disadvantaged students. To minimize failure, the Texas Department of Corrections feels it necessary to administer to the convicts TDC's equivalent of the TASP test, the MAPS test, in order to determine if the students need remedial help before entering the college level program. The problem arises, Dean Hodgins

says, when the students do not pass the test, for whatever reason, and they are put back into the Windham Independent School District (WISD). The Windham Independent School District, established by the Texas Department of Corrections, serves as a special district to provide the convicts with high school GEDs (Wendi McCormick 1). The WISD does not allow for new curriculum for the recycled students; therefore, the students face the same program they had before, and this has a "demotional effect on inmate morale" (Hodgin interview).⁷

The decline of the success of the Lee College program becomes evident in the number of prison students enrolled in the program from the fall of 1980 to the fall of 1989. The fall of 1980 showed 1071 students enrolled in the program, while the numbers decreased to 981 in the fall of 1985, then rose slightly to 1000 in the fall

of 1989 (Lee College). The fluctuations in enrollment reveal that something has affected the success of the LC-TDC program over the last several years. Whether or not the MAPS testing caused the decline is debatable; the issue is rather, can the program be restored to the status it once knew?⁸

A wind stirred in Texas in 1966, carrying seeds of education behind TDC walls. Three elements helped these seeds grow: inmate morale, funding, and faculty dedication. Over the past decade, education has wilted under the blazing heat of bureaucracy:

Even our modern prison is proceeding on a rather uncertain course because its administration is necessarily a series of compromises. On the one hand, prisons are expected to punish; on the other, they are supposed to

reform. They are expected to discipline rigorously and at the same time teach self-reliance. They are built to be operated like vast impersonal machines, yet they are expected to fit men to live normal community lives. They operate in accordance with a fixed autocratic routine, yet they are expected to develop individual initiative. All too often restrictive laws force prisoners into idleness despite the fact that one of their primary objectives is to teach men how to earn an honest living. They refuse a prisoner a voice in self-government, yet they expect him to become a thinking citizen in a democratic society. And, so the whole paradoxical scheme continues. . . .
(*School Behind Bars* 44)



PHOTO COURTESY LEE COLLEGE

The 1971 Lee College/TDC commencement exercises were held in the chapel of the Ferguson Unit. Lee College faculty and administrators donned traditional academic regalia.

The cool waters of reform need to be tossed upon these dried seedlings to revive a once-viable prison education program. Students thrive on knowledge, and knowledge breeds rehabilitation. Dr. Beto strongly believed this theory about the direct relationship between education and rehabilitation; "You cannot rehabilitate people, but you can make the opportunity available to them, and the inmates have to make decisions to rehabilitate themselves" (John McCormick interview). On this premise, the Lee College-Texas Department of Corrections program graduated thousands of convicts, educated, self-confident, and better prepared to face their future. And many have benefited over the years.

The people sitting in the wooden pews of the Chapel of Ellis II Unit begin to stir as the black-robed graduates enter the sanctuary. The children laugh and point excitedly at the men and announce, "There's Daddy!" A smiling Dr. Lane Murray, Public School Administrator for TDC, steps to the microphone and says as the families try to hush the outbursts, "Please don't quiet the children, the men would rather hear them than us" (Orton 14 and Hodgkin interview). Dean Hodgkin attended this graduation and recounted the emotional impact to see "the pride in the eyes of families and friends as they watched the men walk down the aisle. It was as if it was the first time they had seen

them succeed in something." The graduation finally ends, and the graduates migrate to the Picnic Area for a two hour visitation with their families with no glass walls, no walls, no partitions to separate the men from their visitors. As the faculty and administrators drift away from the prison, they glance back to see the guard tower looming above the high, barbed-wire fences and the little Picnic Area where people are hugging and talking excitedly together (Hodgkin interview). The wind picks up slightly as they get into their cars and drive away. ☆

NOTES

1. For further explanation of the term "agreement between gentlemen" see Beto taped interview; Tiller 4.
2. For the personal accounts of those involved see Beto taped interview; Rundell 52.
3. For more detailed information see Tiller 3.
4. For further verification of these numbers see "The Huntsville Center" 2; "The College Level Education Program in the Texas Department of Corrections" 2; Tiller 5.
5. For a description of the Committee's visit see "A Community College Gets Involved" 3-4.
6. For further explanation of the allocation of funds see Tiller 3; Laird 4; Southern Association 4.
7. For the further explanation of the effects of MAPS testing in TDC see "New Testing Procedures," article 1.
8. For more details on how MAPS testing affected TDC inmates and Lee College see "New Testing Procedures" 5.

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