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Dave Miller: *From the Gert Boyle studio at OPB, this is Think Out Loud, I'm Dave Miller. Higher education opportunities in Oregon prisons have long been limited. But until recently, they were basically non-existent at Coffee Creek, the state's only women's prison. That changed in 2019, when a program through Portland State University started up. It has expanded since then. Deb Arthur helped to start it. She is an associate professor at PSU, and the director of the Higher Education in Prison program. She joins us now along with Lanelle Rowe, who was a student in the program when she was incarcerated at Coffee Creek. Deb Arthur and Lanelle Row, welcome.*

Deb Arthur: Thank you. Good to be here.

Lanelle Rowe: Thank you.

Miller: *Deb Arthur first, can you give us a sense for, pre-2019, what options there were for men in Oregon prisons and for women?*

Arthur: Sure. There have been some college programs in prison for men, I would say not enough, and not for everybody. But Chemeketa Community College has had a wonderful College Inside program for many years at OSP and OSCI, offering an associates degree. The University of Oregon has a robust Inside-Out program at those same prisons. There's been some programming at CRCI. But for women and the folks at Coffee Creek, until our program, the offerings were really limited to an occasional Inside-Out class, and adult basic ed GED that comes through Portland Community College, as well as some career and technical opportunities, but really no higher education, definitely no degree pathway.

Miller: *So what was your idea? What did you set out to do when you started to work on what would become the program at Coffee Creek?*

Arthur: Well, I worked really closely with a woman who was in her master's in social work program at PSU at the time, Eileen Farcatch, had been at Coffee Creek and then been at PSU, got her bachelor's degree, got her MSW. And we really realized that this was a problem, that there was no higher education in any kind of degree pathway for women and trans identified and non binary folks at Coffee Creek. So we put our heads together and just determined to do that. And we wanted to make sure that we started at the beginning. We want to build a foundation just like we do at Portland State. So we started with freshman inquiry, the first year gen ed class. We wanted to help people build a transcript, and really to have just the same broad course of study that would mirror the breadth and richness of what happens on the PSU campus. I already teach at PSU, and I went to the director of my program at the time, the university studies program, and I asked and argued and pitched my case, and finally was told to go ahead. I could teach one class, but I had to go find some funding after that. So that's what we've done.

Miller: *How much buy-in did you get from the Department of Corrections?*

Arthur: The Department of Corrections has really been great. I think they recognized that this was a problem, that there were higher ed pathways for men and not for women. This has been sort of a longstanding problem, and I think that they were excited to have us on board. I know the current Director of Education and Training at the DOC, Tracie Hightower, is really supportive in helping us build out the pathway. I think that they know that that was something that needed to be remedied.

Miller: Lanelle Rowe, what went through your mind when you heard that you were going to be able to take college classes at Coffee Creek?

Rowe: Well I was very excited. I was very excited. I wanted to explore my future upon release, and be able to enter the world, not only with job skills, but also build my worldview. Be able to experience college and education.

Miller: You'd already been in prison for something like eight years at that point. What other kinds of programs had you already taken part in?

Rowe: Well the programs that I had taken part in, they offered through PCC in an agreement with the School of Cosmetology. I got into there in 2016, and graduated in 2018. I continued to stay there for a year to help assist in the hopes of getting a Master Educator certificate through the School of Cosmetology to be able to teach beauty school. But that was the extent of continuing the education there. I mean PCC in the school of Cosmetology, they also had the Advanced Aesthetics Program, which I was signed up for through that as well. But when COVID came in, that was unable to continue due to the mask requirement.

Miller: Deb Arthur, how did COVID affect your ability to actually have these classes go on?

Arthur: Well, it certainly threw up a roadblock that's for sure. We had started in Fall 2019, and so we had two terms in person, and it was beautiful. And then we got shut down right before the final exam for winter term. So we've been able to continue. There was definitely a pause where nothing was happening, because everyone had to pivot so quickly and it took a little bit to figure out how we were going to proceed, and what the DOC was going to be comfortable with.

But then we were able to pick up again with packet work. I have set up telephonic office hours so students can contact me on the phone, and other faculty and talk about the coursework. And we've been able to utilize some videoconferencing to be able to have classes that way. We really believe that student contact is really important. So we've tried to get creative, and not have it be just straight-up packet work, but to also connect with students. We joke it's like education by carrier pigeon. I mean we're sometimes bringing notes back and forth. But we do what we have to do to make sure that you know we're there for students. We have persevered, but we are absolutely looking forward to being back in person inside.

Miller: Carrier pigeon because of the packets, and because unlike the way remote school worked in K/12 schools all across the country, you couldn't use technology in the same way?

Arthur: Certainly not in the beginning, it took a little bit to set that up. Using technology for education was not something that Coffee Creek was accustomed to or was really set up for in the beginning. So carrier pigeon in the beginning in terms of packets back and forth, and just writing letters really back and forth, consistently, and exchanging that material weekly. But we have all learned from this, and the DOC did purchase a videoconferencing system. And part way through we were able to turn and actually have face to face. So I guess there's a silver lining to everything, but advancing the technology aspects of Coffee Creek has been a benefit. And then of course, the Oregon legislature just passed some legislation that will make Coffee Creek one of two pilot sites for online classes coming forward. So big advancements in that regard.

Miller: *Lanelle Rowe, I'm curious: pre COVID, pre everything grinding to a halt or going to packets, what was your experience of in person classes? What was it like for you to take college classes in prison?*

Rowe: Being able to be a part of the Metamorphosis Program with PSU, when Deb brought the first class in, it was so amazing, the interaction with the outside community, with people who are going to school. Part of our final class projects and a few other projects, what was great about it was we got to mingle with our classmates, or upperclassmen, who were working on projects. And we worked together to complete some of our assignments, our research, our feedback, groups, thinking, presentations. It was just a whole new way to see and be a part of education. Because a lot of the work while we were there at Coffee Creek, we do have instructors, we do have teachers, but a lot of our stuff we learn and read from a book. So the view and perspective of education in the experience of it was different in a way. I felt I had more input. I felt I was more part of the world and community outside, as opposed to just my world on the inside.

Miller: *Because you actually were collaborating at times with students who were on the outside, right?*

Rowe: Yes, that's right. So how it started was Mondays would be our group in, with our women there in Coffee Creek, with our classmates there. And then Friday, what we would do is we would comingle with students from PSU

Arthur: Yeah, I had four hours a week with students at Coffee Creek, with my first year students. And then there's a capstone class at Portland State called the Higher Education In Prison Capstone that partners with our programs. So those students are seniors, and they would come in pre COVID, once a week. And the sole focus is on the needs of the incarcerated student. And so, for instance, we were able to do research papers. So rather than have three canned topics that my first year students could choose from, they were able to each choose an authentic research topic that they were genuinely interested in. And then they had basically research assistants in the PSU students who would work with them, and pull the research that my first year students didn't have access to. So we did have that partnership in a way that supported the learning and the growth of the first year incarcerated students.

Miller: *Lanelle Rowe, you've been out of Coffee Creek for almost a year now, after serving your full sentence. Do you think that taking those college classes, both what you learned and the experience of taking the classes, do you think that affected your reentry?*

Rowe: Oh, most definitely. I felt more exposed to the world, to the community. I've built a support group within the education community. Of course, everything happens very quickly, but slowly at the same time once you're released. I stayed in contact with Deb, I reached out to my resources on how to get back into education. And to continue that, it gave me a view of some possibilities of what more I could do with myself.

Miller: *Do you intend to take more college classes?*

Rowe: Well I do, I would absolutely love to. Some of my favorite classes that we had in there: of course we did our first year classes. We had offered to us as well Healthy People, Healthy Places. I'm not sure, Deb, what background that was from. We also did Business 101, Business Communications-

Arthur: The Healthy People, Healthy Places is a public health class, and it also fulfills one of the gen ed requirements. Students really enjoyed that class, I think.

Miller: *Deb Arthur, just briefly, you said that PSU had said you can do it for one year and then you've got to get more funding. What would it take for this to become a permanent program?*

Arthur: You know, I'm really happy to say we're just about there. We did get more funding. We've brought in over \$300,000 in the past couple of years to run the program. We've offered 16 courses. We now enroll about 75 students. It has really, really grown, which is beautiful. And then late in 2020, Congress did lift the ban on Pell Grant access for incarcerated students. Literally jumped for joy when that happened. And so in July 2023, all the students that we're talking about will be able to access Pell Grants. So we just need a little bit more to bridge until the Fall of 2023. But we've done a tremendous job fundraising, and we're almost there to that bridge, and then PELL Grants will create a solid foundation of funding for our program. So I think we're almost there.