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The Odyssey Project Makes Rehabilitative Powers of Art a Reality UCSB Professor, Students Team Up with Los Prietos Boys Camp to Re-create an Epic

By Kelsey Gripenstraw



Courtesy Photo.

The Odyssey Project

Throw six UCSB students, five members of Los Prietos Boys Camp, a determined theater professor, an ancient epic poem, an enormous mask, some martial arts, and a bit of hip-hop dancing into a blender, set it on high, and you'll produce an experience humbling and leveling for all involved.

For this year's Odyssey Project (a second stab at a class previously offered last summer), UCSB Theater Professor Michael Morgan interviewed six UCSB students to mentor and work with five boys of Los Prietos Boys Camp, a space alternative to juvenile hall for offenders aged 13-18. Over the course of the class the boys, many of who are gang-affiliated, work together to recreate Homer's *The Odyssey* by interjecting their own experiences into the classic epic. The goal: to give the boys a way to reflect on their experiences and circumstances, while spending a chunk of their summer with students on the UCSB campus. The program wraps with a performance of their work at Center Stage Theater on Sunday, August 5.

Morgan said his idea sprouted from his desire to give back to his community, as well as from watching the 2005 TV movie *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, in which prisoners put together a rendition of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

"One of the distinctions that occurred to me when I saw this movie was that these are guys that are locked up. Many of them may never get out," said Morgan. "The purpose of my program was to see if I could target people before they get that far, while they're still able to make some other choices."

The Odyssey Project serves as a lot more than just a summer course to the six UCSB students who enrolled. "It's a big class," said Morgan. "We meet Monday through Thursday for four hours a day for six weeks." It's a huge time commitment, especially compared to most summer session classes, but the students emphasize that the difference they're making more than makes up for the long hours spent indoors.

"It's a very humbling experience that makes me so grateful for how quick life can change," said Travis Orozco, a recent UCSB Theater Department grad who is spending his second summer with the program. "I just want to let them know that their lives can better."

"I judged them from the get go," admitted Samantha Cuellar, another theater major who participated in the course. "When I first met the boys, I was slightly nervous. They surprised me a lot. They were very respectful, very attentive. They were just young boys playing around the theater world. People slam down the door immediately on juvenile delinquents and their history. They see their history and just label them as that, and they don't really get a second chance because of it."

"Most all of them are motivated by sharing art with humanity," said Morgan of the students.

Orozco jumped at the chance to use his area of study to reach out to boys, whose experiences reminded him of his own. "I come from a very low income and social status area in Los Angeles and I've been through a lot of things they've been through," explained Orozco. "I was in juvie when I was younger."

Common motifs in the boys' renditions of *The Odyssey* were the ideas of a higher power, temptation, and going home. "Very often these guys have to leave their environment once they get out of probation," said Morgan. "They have to actually go away in order to avoid going back to the patterns, and in a gang, the loyalty puts on a certain pressure."

Through their participation in the program the boys were exempt from other activities at Los Prietos. When interviewed, Morgan and the students made it clear that the program's goal that artistic accomplishment can serve as a rehabilitating alternative to traditional penalty was reached.

"I think the boys definitely got something out of it. There was a point where one of the boys decided not to participate anymore," recounted Cuellar. "All of the other boys were upset about it. We made it very clear to them that if [they didn't] want to be here, [they could] quit. They

said, 'No, we signed up for this because we wanted to be here.' I feel like they've learned a lot about responsibility and loyalty to each other."

Orozco also participated in the class when it was offered in the summer of 2011, and vouched for its lasting results with a certain teenager he met last year. "One of the kids that I got really close to last year — he's going to community college, he's working at a hospital. ... There are some kids that put up this defensive wall through this entire project, but the kids that actually care and invest in it — they do see the power of art. Theater allows individuals to see life from different perspectives."