Odyssey Project Gives Voice to Incarcerated Youth

THE ODYSSEY TELLS THE STORY of the Greek hero Odysseus and his 10-year journey home after the fall of Troy. Taking a detour to raid the island of Ithaca, Odysseus gets thrown off course by a series of storms and unfortunate events.

Michael Morgan, senior lecturer for the University of California, Santa Barbara Theater Dance Department, uses Homer’s epic poem as the theme for a summer class open to university students and incarcerated youth from Los Prietos Boys Camp. The Odyssey Project engages these two disparate groups in theatrical exercises culminating in a contemporary live performance of The Odyssey.

“I thought this class would be a good way to create a dialogue between the university and the community by bringing people together on a level playing field,” said Michael. “College students are working with young incarcerated youth in a way where they realize their commonality. It is not a mentorship situation; they do the same exercises and the same demand exists for all of them.”

Approximately eight teens from Los Prietos and eight UCSB students are selected to participate in The Odyssey Project. Together, they spend three weeks writing the script, two weeks rehearsing, and one week moving the performance into a theater. “There is a very strong bonding that happens during the class,” said Michael. “Generally they start off as separate groups, but the ice gets broken pretty much right away because theater exercises are so participatory.”

Using The Odyssey as a metaphor, Michael challenges the students to think about detours they have taken in their own lives. The students write about their personal experiences and draw maps of their journeys, which Michael then weaves into a script combining both classic and contemporary language. “I am really interested in the idea of taking the classics, deconstructing them, and retelling them in a contemporary way,” said Michael. “I want the students to know that their writing lives on the same level as this beautiful text, and that their stories are as valid.”

Learning alongside university students, many of the Los Prietos youth begin to take ownership of their situations and see possibilities for the future. Almost unanimously, the UCSB students say the class has helped them understand humanity in a deeper way. “In this class, the students start to see that acting and life are full of choices, and the best actors make brilliant choices,” said Michael. “Whatever they have been through is not a terminal situation; it is part of a journey and they can always make choices.”

Beginning its fourth cohort in June 2014, The Odyssey Project received an Express Grant from the Santa Barbara Foundation in 2012 to produce a 30-minute documentary about the class and a second Express Grant in 2013 to create a tracking program to better understand how to support the youth. “With this tracking program, we hope to keep the dialogue going, to maintain the positive energy and perspective the students gain from the class, and to figure out what these youth need to sustain that momentum when they return to their communities,” said Michael.

Michael hopes the project can be a model for working with other marginalized groups. His interest is in looking at how art can give a voice to groups such as the elderly, veterans, battered women, homeless, and LGBTQ. “I would like to further build The Odyssey Project as a template that can be duplicated in different settings,” said Michael. “The story is so vast and deep and essentially human. It is about losing your way and finding your way home. I believe it can touch many lives.”