

Odyssey Project Aims to Reduce Youth Recidivism

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Courtesy Photo

GOING HOME: Incarcerated youth join UCSB students in theater production about Homer's *Odyssey*--and their own.

UCSB Theater Program Engages Los Prietos Boys Camp Teens

Unfortunately, juvenile detention centers like Santa Barbara County's Los Prietos Boys Camp face multiple challenges as they attempt to fulfill their core mission, which is to "return wards to the community as responsible and productive members of society." The experience of entering the system and being committed to these facilities all too often leaves the young men between the ages of 13 and 18 that they serve less, rather than more likely to get home safe and remain on the outside. As our nation looks on in alarm at the growing divide not only between rich and poor, but also between law enforcement officers and the young men who make up the majority of the criminal justice caseload, the need for an imaginative remedy for juvenile recidivism has never been more acute.

That's why the Odyssey Project, a program of the UCSB Theater Department created and directed by professor Michael Morgan, is more important now than ever. When Morgan started Odyssey five years ago, he was curious to see what would happen if he took boys from Los Prietos and put them together with UCSB students as equal collaborators on an original theater project. Using the story and the archetypal characters of Homer's *Odyssey* as a starting point, each of the last five summers Morgan has lead six weeks of daily theater and writing practice classes designed to get boys from Los Prietos to tell their own stories of nostoi, the Ancient Greek term for a delayed or difficult homecoming. Through enormous emotional ups and downs for everyone involved, Morgan has remained the calm steady presence at the center as the Odyssey Project has evolved from experiment to proven concept.

This summer, accomplished documentarian Mark Manning (*Road to Fallujah*) has been filming the sessions, which lead to a public performance, and profiling five of the participants. The goals of this documentary film are twofold: first, it's intended to spread the word about this unique and effective tool to support the reintegration of youthful offenders into society, and second, it will serve as a platform to launch the Odyssey Project's next phase, which will involve establishing similar programs at other locations around the country.

The film, which is called *The Odyssey Project: equality and opportunity for incarcerated youth of color*, will be funded by a Kickstarter campaign that is scheduled to close on Tuesday, August 25 at 11:05 p.m. Visit the [page](#) and you can see a video trailer further explaining the concept and, if you like what you see, you can make a donation. This year's performance is set for September 13.

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