

From Conversation to Dream to Idea to Reality

Conversations in 2013 at Marquette University Law School, the subsequent dedication of a Marquette lawyer, and the ongoing engagement of arts and sciences faculty at Marquette lead to a program helping incarcerated people get college degrees.

BY BILL GLAUBER

Conversations. Dreams. Ideas. And more conversations. Who knows the exact moment when intellectual curiosity turns into something that will become a reality?

But consider December 4, 2013, at Marquette University Law School: With final exams looming, the school hosts the semester's last "On the Issues" event, a town hall forum where big ideas are discussed and the community is invited to participate. Mike Gousha, distinguished fellow in law and public policy at the Law School, interviews Craig Steven Wilder, a professor of American history at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Wilder discusses his book, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*.

Afterward, there's a lunch with Wilder, organized by Marquette Law School's Dean Joseph D. Kearney and attended by eight people. One of them is R. L. McNeely, a 1994 Marquette Law School graduate and retired professor



Marquette Law School's Mike Gousha (left) interviews MIT Professor Craig Steven Wilder at Marquette Law School in December 2013.

at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. The conversation flows. And at some point, it turns to the topic of higher-education programs for incarcerated individuals.

Wilder knows how to create such dramatic change. He is a board member of the Bard Prison Initiative. Created in 1999 to provide college opportunities in prisons, Wilder described the program and its ultimate goal to lead students to degrees from Bard College, a small liberal arts college on the Hudson River about 110 miles north of New York City.

“We just sort of ended up talking quite a bit on the specifics of the Bard Prison Initiative,” Wilder recalled, years later. “It just came up.”

McNeely was a particularly active participant in the conversation. Wilder recalled that McNeely saw such a program “as a way of turning the tide on a number of pressing questions in Milwaukee.” In particular: “What happens to people who are being released from prisons?”

Gousha, too, remembers well the lunch in 2013. He got a sense that big things would happen. “That’s where a seed was planted for the work R. L. was to do in the years ahead,” he said. The conversation at the Law School in 2013 fired and inspired McNeely, helping him forge a key connection with Wilder and the group that had pulled off Bard College’s transformational program.



R. L. McNeely in 2015

It would be one stop on a long road to setting up such a program for Milwaukee and the surrounding community.

McNeely would not live to see the culmination of his dream. He died in December 2020. But it is being realized by others, who have carried on his work. And it is his name that adorns the McNeely Prison Education Consortium. The program is housed at Marquette’s Center for Urban Research, Teaching & Outreach in the Klingler College of Arts and Sciences.

The consortium, along with Marquette’s Educational Preparedness Program, is part of an initiative that offers courses at multiple sites, including correctional facilities and the Marquette campus. More than 500 students have participated since the program was established in the spring of 2022, with three individuals transitioning to degree programs.

It brings together full-time Marquette students seeking degrees with those who are incarcerated and seeking second chances and ways to reenter society with tools to survive and thrive.

Georgette Williams, McNeely’s longtime partner who accompanied him to the “On the Issues” program and the lunch in 2013, said that getting the program off the ground was hard, even with the help and advice of the Bard Prison Initiative staff. “R. L. met with lots of headwinds and obstacles,” Williams said. “He never stopped trying.”

McNeely kept pushing. When one idea didn’t pan out, he’d try another, going from university to university, looking for partners to join in the effort. “He was very persistent when he thought that something was a good idea,” she said. “And he wasn’t willing to accept that there was no way to get it done. He kept trying to strategize and come up with different approaches.”

Williams said McNeely, while a UWM professor and a lawyer, was at heart a social worker who was impassioned about helping those who had been incarcerated. “He knew there were issues around obstacles that people faced while they were in prison,” she said, “and once they’re released, around the challenges they have fitting back into society.”

A key breakthrough occurred

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around 2018. Instead of one university carrying the load in terms of outlays, administration, and staff, the idea was broached to create a consortium of schools. McNeely approached Robert S. Smith, a former UWM colleague who had come to Marquette to serve as the Harry G. John Professor of History and to head up the Center for Urban Research, Teaching & Outreach. Also in on the conversation was Darren Wheelock, a Marquette University faculty member in the department of social and cultural sciences.

McNeely saw the consortium idea as a uniquely Milwaukee way to forge ahead. “We needed other universities in the

conversation, other entities,” Smith said. “We steadily began to talk consortium. R. L. McNeely was the drum major for the idea that other organizations should be included in the conversation.”

Wheelock acknowledged it would be a “heavy lift.” But he wanted to forge ahead. “We knew it was viable, we knew it was possible,” Wheelock said.

It took several years to round up the schools. Those participating now include Marquette, Milwaukee Area Technical College, Milwaukee School of Engineering, Alverno College, and Mount Mary University. The University of Wisconsin–Madison Prison Education Initiative is also part of

the consortium. UW-Milwaukee recently signed on to the program. Marquette University’s Educational Preparedness Program plays a key role as a college bridge program, creating what it calls a “prison-to-school pipeline,” with courses inside correctional institutions and on Marquette’s campus.

Students can take courses in areas such as philosophy, psychology, criminology, and social work. Recently launched classes include biology and business. Up to eight classes are tuition-free for those who are currently or formerly incarcerated students in the bridge program. Those who move on to a degree program are eligible for financial aid and scholarships.

The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the full launch of the Education Preparedness Program. Once it was up and running, seven classes were taught at three locations: Racine Correctional Institute, the Milwaukee County Community Reintegration Center, and Marquette. That first year, the program served 222 students, with 152 at Marquette and 70 who were incarcerated.

Pathways are now being created for those at Racine Correctional Institute to move forward for degrees from MATC, Marquette, and UW-Milwaukee. The aim is to launch the degree program at the facility by the fall of 2026.

Two key leaders from Marquette are Wheelock, who directs the McNeely Prison Education Consortium, and Theresa W. Tobin, a faculty member in philosophy, who leads the Educational Preparedness Program. It was Tobin who began teaching what

Klingler College of Arts & Sciences faculty lead Marquette’s participation in the prison education initiative: Darren Wheelock (Department of Social and Cultural Sciences), Theresa Tobin (Philosophy), and Robert Smith (History).



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— Robert S. Smith, Marquette University history professor

became known as “blended” philosophy courses to a mix of college students and incarcerated women in 2015 at the Milwaukee Women’s Correctional Center. “I’m really interested and felt passionate about getting the classroom to be a space where we were generally inclusive, transforming people and ourselves,” she said.

Wheelock initially became intrigued by the program because of his interest in smart public policy in dealing with those who offend. “But once I was in the program, my interest quickly grew to be more than that,” he said. “It’s transformational.”

Wheelock teaches a class on reentry into the community. His co-instructor was formerly incarcerated. “You can imagine the layers of content we talk about,” he said. “There is a fear, and apprehension, of leaving the system.”

By providing an educational pathway, hope, and wraparound services, the program aims to ease the transition for those leaving prison. It has also opened perspectives for those like Tobin and Wheelock and their students.

“It teaches how we’re thinking of the boundaries of the classroom, the boundaries of a university,” Tobin said.

“Our guiding North Star is what is in the students’ interest,” Wheelock said. “What they have told us is they want options to pursue.”

Two students are making a difference on Marquette’s campus.

Shanyeill McCloud and Andrew Mokwinski are juniors who are studying political science. They are McNeely Prison Education Consortium students who receive tuition support as part-time students. They have worked through past legal difficulties and are prominent in the reentry community. The program also provides academic and career advising and skill support.

McCloud is an advocate for the expungement or sealing process in the court system. She runs Clean Slate Milwaukee, which she describes as a “second-chance organization for men and women who have made mistakes and are now seeking legal pathways out of poverty.”

Mokwinski, a member of the U.S. Army Reserves, is a mentor in the Milwaukee Turners’ initiative to provide peer support mentorship for individuals enrolled in the Comprehensive Community Services program, which helps those coping with mental health or substance abuse issues.

“Education is the ultimate equalizer,” McCloud said.

“Sometimes when you give people a chance, they turn their whole life around.”

McCloud grew up on the city’s north side and for years yearned to go to Marquette. She can still hardly believe she has made her dream a reality. Neither can Mokwinski, who grew up on Milwaukee’s south side.

They both heard about the program through a flyer.

“So you mean to tell me, I can be a Marquette student?”

McCloud said, recalling a conversation with someone who had the flyer. “I was like, ‘You know I have a record, right?’”

“I thought it was a scam,” Mokwinski said. “Something just pushed me to come here and take the initial test.”

The program was very real. McCloud and Mokwinski started in the Education Preparedness Program in 2022 before becoming degree-seeking students. They embrace the tagline: “We Are Marquette.”

There was an adjustment process for both of them. They’re older than their classmates by a full decade or more. As parents, they also have lives outside of school. “We all fit right in,” McCloud said of herself and her classmates. “We’re all learning together.”

Mokwinski appreciates the effort Marquette is making with the program. The “ethos of the school” as a Jesuit institution, he said, is “to help the community and spread education to different people.”

McCloud and Mokwinski are already thinking beyond graduation. The two of them have dreams. Ideas. No doubt conversations, too.

There’s reason to expect that McNeely and all others involved in the origin and work of the McNeely Prison Education Consortium would be pleased by the realities that McCloud, Mokwinski, and other such students will create in various sectors of society for years to come. ■