

Students, inmates collaborate on writing project

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(Photo from Thinkstock)

Tulane University students are collaborating with the inmates of Lafayette Parish Correctional Center through an introductory creative writing class taught by Zachary Lazar, an associate professor of English in the School of Liberal Arts. This spring, 12 Tulane students are partnering with an equal number of inmates to produce a book of original works.

The idea developed when Lazar, the author of three novels and a memoir, began work on his fourth novel based on a journalism project at Louisiana State Penitentiary, known as Angola. At Angola, Lazar worked closely with photographer Deborah Luster and assistant warden Cathy Fontenot.

Luster and Lazar found much in common, having both lost a parent to murder in Phoenix, Arizona. Crime and its consequences have become a major reference in their work today. The pair met in Louisiana, the state with the highest incarceration rate in the country.

“I am not by nature an activist, but I have become one through the project at Angola,” said Lazar.

After becoming involved with service learning, Lazar reached out to Fontenot, who had become warden at Lafayette Parish Correctional Center. “We wanted the class to involve equal participation on the part of the Tulane students and the inmates at the prison,” Lazar said.

They have arranged for students to visit the prison three times during the semester and to exchange writing and video chat each week. The first visit took place on Jan. 21. “It was really great to ... start the semester face-to-face,” Lazar said. He enjoyed watching the two groups relax as they became familiar with one another.

Lazar hopes that the project will continue in future semesters, ultimately including prisons closer to home and other professors.

“I don’t know of anyone else who has ever done it quite this way,” Lazar said of the project. He looks forward to the new understandings and the diverse writing that will come from the collaboration.

Jamie Logan is a senior majoring in English and classical studies with a minor in psychology at Tulane University.

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