Science education brought to Salt Lake County Jail inmates


SALT LAKE CITY — Within in the walls of the Salt Lake County Jail, the inmates in pod-D get to see what life could look like outside of it.

“I'm 46 years old, and I've been locked up almost half my life. And this is something new at the jail,” said inmate, Darrell Herzet.

Sent away, most recently, for theft, Herzet signed up for a lecture at the jail on Monday in hopes of learning how to change.

“It's kind of interesting that the jail would offer something like this, or that guys would even come in and do the class,” Herzet said. “I appreciate it.”

For two hours, they gave their attention to Nalini Nadkarni, a biology professor who can usually be found lecturing University of Utah students, not convicts.

“We believe science really belongs everywhere. And education belongs everywhere, including with incarcerated people,” Nadkarni said.

A forest ecologist and director of the U’s Center for Science and Math Education, Nadkarni coordinated the visit to the jail to speak to inmates about science and conservation, a discussion she hopes leads to future opportunities.

“If they come out of this lecture and say, ‘Wow, I really understand photosynthesis now and I didn’t before, and I even know what that word is,’” Nadkarni said. “That means to them, perhaps, that they can learn other things, as well.”

It’s a theory she bases on a program she started in a similar setting about 10 years ago in a prison in Washington State.

“I was trying to solve an ecological problem of how to relieve the collection of moss from old growth forests of the Pacific Northwest from the horticulture trade,” Nadkarni said.

She solved the complicated science problem with inmates.
“I thought maybe I could learn to farm mosses,” Nadkarni said. “And then figured out, maybe I could enlist prisoners to help me.”

The program grew from farming moss at one prison to conservation programs at 11 others that have saved the state $1 million since it began in 2003.

“Putting in composting, raising vegetables for the prison table,” Nadkarni explained. “Setting up a little recycling sheds in the backs of the prison. It really sort of fostered a mindset of how can prisons, which are kind of black holes of money and people and negative things, how can we move that around to be places that are actually models of sustainability?”

It’s a question she now hopes to answer again through working with Utah’s inmates.

“I mean, they’re the most motivated students that I’ve ever had when I give lectures in prisons because, I can’t say all of them, but many of them say, ‘You know, I never want to come back here again. I never want to do this again. I want to somehow reintroduce myself, get a job, and not come back here,’” Nadkarni said.

For at least some of the inmates who attended Monday’s meeting, the lecture provided the motivation to try to open new doors outside of the jail.

“I am a felon. But it’s hard to even get a job at 7-11. So, if I could cut down some trees and be active and actually help the community and the environment, why not?” said inmate, Brandon Jimenez.

Through a $250,000 grant from the National Science Foundation and assistance from a private donor, faculty from the U will be delivering monthly lectures at the jail over the course of the next two years. During that time, Nadkarni expects to develop conservation projects with the inmates, based on their interests.

“It’s just really to do what education is about, which is about leading you from one place to another, from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, and that’s really what we hope will happen,” Nadkarni said.

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