Salt Lake County Inmates Get Science Lessons From U of U

By WHITNEY EVANS

The University of Utah is bringing science education to inmates at the Salt Lake County Jail. Starting today, scientists and educators will volunteer to give lectures and arrange hands-on projects inmates can do to get them motivated for life outside.

One by one, cell doors at the county jail open to release about half the inmates lodged in a housing unit of about 64. They take a seat and turn their attention to Nalini Nadkarni, a professor of biology at the University of Utah and director of the U's Center for Science and Math Education.

Nadkarni is here to talk about the relationship that exists between trees and humans in Utah and around the world but she says topics in the program will range from the ecology of brown bears to computer science.
“The inmates are actually the best behaved most interested students that one could hope for because they really have so little other intellectual stimulation and so they’re very grateful and very attentive,” Nadkarni says.

Inmates here are used to visits from religious groups and 12-step programs. But Nadkarni says now they’ve got an opportunity to pick the brains of some of Utah’s top scientists and think about the world in a different way.

“The other thing that I’m trying to stress is that understanding science and understanding trees in particular can really be useful for getting a trade, for earning money, for getting a job when they get out,” Nadkarni says.

Thirty-year-old Charles Garcia says he was locked up last fall for stealing cars and possessing methamphetamine among other offenses.

“That’s all you here is stories about dope and crime and getting high and getting out,” Garcia says. “It’s nice to learn something else, because you get tired of hearing about that.”

Garcia says he’s looking for an opportunity to say goodbye to a lifetime of gangbanging. This class he says, at the very least gets him excited about being able to fish again.