



+



=



Breaking the cycle of crime—jail—more crime—more jail: This is what AWE is all about.

Derrick: Making Something of Himself

"The ... boy ... ran ... into ... his ... *house*," the middle-aged man read, his face frowning above his gray prison uniform.

"Look at that last word, Derrick" Miss Mary said. "Does it end with an S?"

"No," said Derrick.

"Look at that last letter. It's an M. Think of how an M sounds. What's the word?"

Try as he might, Derrick couldn't use phonics to decipher the word.

"Home," interrupted Carlos, the inmate next to Derrick. "Into his *home*."

Derrick looked glum, as he often did when he didn't know a word. "I forget all the time," he said. "I don't remember."

Derrick and Carlos had been coming to GED classes at Potosi Correctional Center for months. They were far, however, from qualifying to take the GED test. Both were learning to read. Additionally, Carlos was learning English as a second language.

The two inmates created such an interesting contrast. At age 42, Carlos used many phonetic skills. His oral reading was good, yet his comprehension was poor. Carlos needed to increase his English vocabulary. On the other hand, Derrick, 47, could pronounce the first letter of a word on a list, but little else. When he read, however, once he determined the context, he recognized some familiar words by sight and guessed other words that might fit. Carlos could read a passage well; Derrick could comprehend it. Carlos had much trouble with writing; Derrick, amazingly, loved to write. He kept lists of words he knew and used them in his poems. Additionally, he had a well developed oral vocabulary. "Decades ago," he told me, "I got this scar on my arm. They were trying to chastise me for something I didn't do."

We weren't sure how to help Derrick read better—his goal for coming to class. He loved history. Give him the right book, and all of a sudden he seemed very literate. Give him one of our reading texts, however, and his knowledge of words seemed to disappear. His inability seemed particularly acute when he had to read a list of words out of context. What could we do?

Perhaps hearing a book would be helpful. At the public library, we found the book and CD of Maya Angelou's autobiography, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*. Derrick put on the headphones, opened the book, and turned on the CD. At first he had trouble finding his place in the book as he listened, but he improved. In fact, after several classes, he would greet us, sign in, and go immediately to the CD player. We sometimes had to remind him when class ended. Next he read Richard Wright's *Black Boy*—11 CDs, 15 hours long. Then he read a book by ex-con and now chef, Jeff Henderson, *Cooked: From the Streets to the Stove, from Cocaine to Foie Gras*. After he finished, we discussed the books. He liked Maya Angelou's the best. "Isn't it something how she learned words could kill?" he said. He noted that the narrators in all three autobiographies struggled with survival, but still tried to achieve in life—and they succeeded.

When Derrick started class, he seemed pessimistic about his memory, his situation in prison, his life. Reading—in the way he is able—has opened up his world. Derrick now waves the list of the books he has read. "I've been reading about stuff I've lived," Derrick claims. With a much more optimistic tone in his voice, he adds, "These books show me I can make something of myself."

We feel privileged at Alternatives With Education to be able to work with students like Derrick. The people we serve may be imprisoned by walls, but they need not be imprisoned by ignorance.

The people we serve may be imprisoned by walls, but they need not be imprisoned by ignorance.