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

## ***Simon: Giving Back***

"Hi," I whispered to the stocky inmate hunched over a math book in the corner. "I'm Sister Barbara. I'm here to teach GED. Don't you want to join the larger group?"

I came to Potosi Correctional Center to help Sister Elaine with GED. The other inmates in the class had gathered at the blackboard around John, an inmate who taught math.

"I don't need to join them," the man said. Equations filled his paper. I read his ID badge.

"Simon," I said, "John's showing how to solve equations. Wouldn't that help you?"

"No," he said again. "I work better on my own."

When the state cut funding for the GED program at three maximum security prisons, the program coordinator at Potosi begged Sister Elaine to reinstate it. She was already teaching meditation and cognitive/ behavioral change. "The men really want GED," another staffer said.

He was right. These men, most of whom had given up their recreation period, were eager to learn, so Sister Elaine taught GED on her one free afternoon.

Simon had been in the GED program for three years—two while the state still funded the program and another when AWE brought it back. When I took over the class, we were able to offer GED two full days a week. Every Monday and Thursday, Simon walked in and sat in the back corner. Gradually, as John taught math each morning, Simon started listening to him.

One day John asked, "Does anyone know how to solve for x in this problem?"

Simon looked over from his desk in the corner. No one said anything. Then—with some surprise in his voice—Simon said, "I think I know how." He hesitantly walked to the board and began writing. Simon wrote with more surety each time John said, "That step's correct." He completed the problem and turned to face the class.

"Your answer's correct, Simon," John said.

"I know," Simon smiled. "I know!" From then on, Simon moved into the group working with John. He often suggested how to solve algebra and geometry problems. Simon wrote well and understood science and social studies. It just took him a little longer to complete work.

When he told me he had been tested for learning disabilities, I obtained his records from the public school district. The contents surprised me. All during his formal schooling, Simon had been labeled "mentally retarded" and placed in a special classroom. I disagreed with that label; Simon's mind was sharp. He just needed more time.

Two years after I met Simon, he qualified to take the GED. When his results arrived in the mail, the men told me Simon opened the envelope slowly. He unfolded the enclosed paper and read it carefully. Then he started dancing! He had passed.

Simon's self confidence spills over. He wrote an essay for gang members. "This is a way to pay back," he said. He requested hospice training at the prison to minister to dying prisoners. "You learn a lot when you sit with a dying man," he said. "I want to do something with my life."

"You are doing something," Mr. Vince, our volunteer, reminded him.

"I know," he said. "But I'm thinking of the future, too. I want to take the wisdom you all have given me and share it with others that are like I used to be—show them it's OK to make a positive change in their lives."

Education can transform people. We see that in Simon. Because of the generosity of volunteers, foundations, and donors who support us, we can see it in many more students who participate in the programs offered by Alternatives With Education.

*I want to take the wisdom you all have given me and share it with others that are like I used to be.*