

Behind Bars, Lessons From Wallenberg

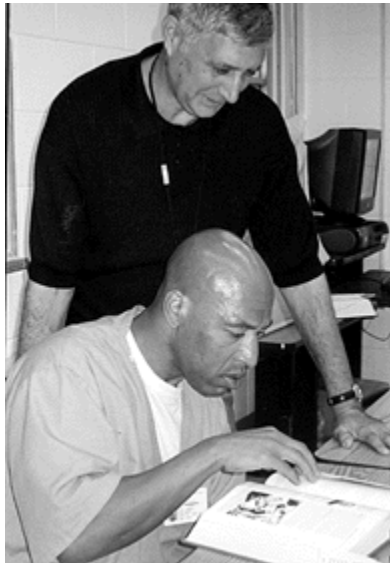
From [The Jewish Week](#), September 26, 2003

Fort Dix, N.J. — The residents who traverse the blue cinderblock wall hallways, decorated only by stenciled warnings not to loiter and to “keep your hands out of pockets,” are focused on two things: getting through each day and the date they will be released.



But on a recent Monday afternoon, two dozen men in dun-colored uniforms are bent over worksheets on their desks in a pair of windowless rooms at the Midstate Correctional Facility here focusing on something larger than themselves: the heroes in their lives.

Before writing brief essays and reading them aloud, they study examples of other heroes, including Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, a gentile who in six months forged protective documents and arranged safe houses to rescue upwards of 100,000 Hungarian Jews from certain death at Nazi hands before being arrested and imprisoned by the Soviets in 1947.



His fate was shrouded in mystery. The Soviets claimed Wallenberg, who was imprisoned when he was only 34, died soon after his arrest. But it was widely believed that he lived for years more.

Wallenberg was an educated man, far more so than these men in a state prison high school equivalency diploma prep class. But he was also an ordinary person made great by risking his own well-being to preserve the lives of others.

“Some students here ask why he helps Jewish people when he was Christian,” says Nivaldo Soto, 40, who has been imprisoned at Midstate for nearly three years after being convicted of arson and expects to be released in November. “But everybody’s the same to me. In Chile I had a lot of Jewish friends.

Soto, who came to the United States from Chile in 1990 and was working as a construction supervisor before being arrested, says of Wallenberg, “I like the way he helped people, just talking with people and being modest. Now we tend to be too aggressive.”

Most of the men have had little exposure to Jews or other groups outside of the prison or the depressed New Jersey communities where they were raised, so in Jeanine Puliti’s class they are learning about xenophobia and how Wallenberg’s action were its antithesis.

Puliti and her colleague, Frank Vangeli, usually teach the inmates basic arithmetic and literacy skills to prepare them to take the exam that might earn them a high school diploma.

Since July they have integrated a curriculum called “**Study of Heroes**,” learning about people whose actions made them extraordinary: Harriet Tubman, Anwar Sadat, Cesar Chavez and the Dalai Lama, among others. Each used nonviolent methods to improve the lives of those around them.

The idea originated with Rachel Oestreicher Bernheim, chairman of **The Raoul Wallenberg Committee of the United States**, who was speaking to students about Wallenberg’s life and legacy.

“Age and demographics didn’t matter,” she says. “As I began to tell the story of a real hero, an incredible stillness would come over the classroom, whether it was kindergarten, middle school or high school, and in Colorado, Idaho or North Carolina.”

She realized that **The Wallenberg Committee** had the opportunity to make a more systematic impact.

“Children do not have real heroes and we have a chance to inculcate the values of Raoul Wallenberg,” Oestreicher Bernheim says. “I said, ‘Let’s not do a Holocaust program, when there are such great ones out there. Let’s do something different, and address the multiplicity of ethnicities and nationalities in our country.’ ”

In the decade since the first versions were tested in New York and North Carolina public schools, the course has been taught to about 1 million students in more than 1,500 schools around the country. Among them were the Catholic schools in the Evansville, Ind., diocese, with funding from an interfaith group, and last summer in the Boys and Girls Clubs of Washington, D.C., for character education. It is adaptable to any grade level.

Last year the New Jersey Department of Education listed the curriculum as an exemplary character education program, which prompted the head of the state prison’s education office to contact **The Wallenberg Committee**.

In March, teachers from the state’s 17 prisons met in Trenton for two days of training before integrating the curriculum into their work.

“We know that from January 1945 onward, Raoul Wallenberg was held in the gulag. What better place to hold this program than in a prison?” said Oestreicher Bernheim.

“We hope to see this in prisons and jails across the country. We’d like to see a mentoring system with law students and attorneys who would begin doing afterschool mentoring for students who have a parent in prison. We might be able to have parent studying the same thing in prison at the same time,” she says.

Making An Impact

Surrounded by tall fences lined with concertina wire, Midstate is tucked in the back of a vast military base at Fort Dix in the building that used to serve as the stockade for wayward recruits. Green pastures and stands of mature trees carpet the area beyond the armed guards and watch towers.

Inside the prison, inmates live 38 to a large room called a tier, sharing two showers and one television. They have been convicted of a variety of crimes: arson, driving without a license and running from the police. More than half were convicted of sexual offenses.

They are fathers of young children, former construction workers. Nearly all are black or Latino. Some quit school after the eighth or 10th grade, though others, like David Jackson, 45, are educated.

Jackson, asked what got him into prison, responded with an abashed laugh. “That’s personal,” he says. He has two bachelor’s degrees and had started studying for his MBA.

For two decades, Jackson says, he worked as an accountant and analyst in the pharmaceutical industry. He has two children, 8 and 10, but has divorced since being in prison. He expects to be released in April.

Jackson, articulate and confident, is working as a teaching assistant in Vangeli’s cinderblock-walled classroom. He says the curriculum on heroes helps the inmates in his class with their reading and writing, which they ordinarily fear, by getting them to do both as a byproduct of the coursework.

The assignment he helps oversee on the day a visitor is present is for the prisoner-students to identify a hero in their lives. Most name their mothers or both parents.

“My mother and father tried to tell me right and wrong, but I didn’t listen,” says Sal, a man with a sweet smile and goatee. “And right now I’m locked up, so ...” he trails off.

“My mom told me to stay in school,” says Emerson High, 42, who was sentenced to 62 years for burglary. He quit school in the eighth grade “just to hang out.”

“Today I can really see what she was talking about. This class keeps my mind on the right track. My mind is clear now, got no drugs and no alcohol. I plan to keep it that way. I don’t have to put another burden on my mother’s back,” he says, sounding repentant.

High says when he is freed, he wants to attend computer school and maybe even speak to young people, urging them not to make his mistakes.

“I really want to share my strength and hope and be that role model,” he says.

Puliti is enthusiastic about the impact of the heroes program on her students.

“It helps them see the potential for heroism in their own selves,” she says. “It shows how you should take serendipity and make it a time to help someone else.

“What’s been most important is helping the men learn to verbalize feelings. Coming in, the guys mostly don’t differentiate and everything comes out as anger. Sometimes they confuse power with being a hero. With this curriculum the guys automatically get into little groups and start talking, emotional, about what they believe.”

“The guys really took in the material on Wallenberg and saw how communication, nonviolence and instilling hope in people, how that made a change,” she says.

Anthony Flores, 28, at Midstate “for the first time and last time,” he says grimly, has served 13 months for driving without a license and leading police on a milelong chase when they tried to pull him over. His first appearance before the parole board was scheduled for later that week.

He and his wife, who is now a police officer, have an 8-year-old daughter, Chelsea, who comes to visit him biweekly. To shield her from reality, he told her, “ ‘This is a camp for me, we have a swimming pool and horses here.’ And this summer she tells me, ‘I go to camp, too, Daddy.’ ”

“This class has helped me,” Flores says. “Before I started I was depressed. No one ever talked to me about heroes, not before. This is the first time, in prison. I have learned a lot.”