



# COLLEGE GUILD

*Celebrating 20 Years of Building Community Beyond Prison Walls*

## **"Can't" never could, but "Can" will always find a way...**

*Michael J. Tenneson*

*College Guild Student in Colorado*

I once wrote a brief little article called, "A Can Do Policy", in which I spent most of the intro paragraph, and body of the article pointing out some of the problems that I had encountered over the years of my incarceration just trying to get art and music programs opened in the Colorado Department of Corrections. It was a brutal time for those of us who had a passion for the communicative arts...we were systematically bound, gagged, and for several decades almost suffocated whenever we reached out for any meaningful changes.

For decades some of us fought just for the simple privilege to have more art materials in our cells than cheap colored pencils (with a plastic sharpener that few pencils would even respond to...). Musical instruments were absolutely not allowed in any Colorado prison cell for the first thirty-three years of my incarceration here. I have burned out three typewriters writing proposals (you know, the cheap highly inflated-priced pieces of junk they sell us that have a life of about two reams of paper...) - nonetheless; the lobbying campaign went on, often times single-handedly, because so many of my peers voiced their opinions that, "Why try, 'those' people are never gonna approve a proposal like that anyway?"

Well, perhaps, or perhaps not...nothing ventured, nothing gained. Right? I came into the Colorado DOC in 1988 with double life in Colorado, and Triple life in my home state of Wisconsin. I spent my first ten years in the rougher joints that Colorado had to offer, which...compared to some other states...are not rough at all. I was always confused as to why it was that Colorado was so adamantly opposed to the introduction of such liberal proposals as allowing inmates to purchase their own art, music, and other related electronic accessories that most other states freely allowed?

All along, as I pondered these simple questions, and continued to lobby for serious changes in these archaic policies; I was continually assaulted by the negativity of my own peers, some of whom were even friends - always saying, "Mike you're a damned fool if you think CDOC is ever going to change their policies regardless how many inmates complain about them..." My response was either none at all (for those who just had a bone to pick with anyone in blue...), or for those who were open-minded, I always said you never know unless you try. Really quite simple. It costs a stamp, and a lot of soul-searching, and personal investment of heart, soul, and logical persuasion. Continued on page 5.



*Henry Sotelo - College Guild Student*

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### "Can't" never could, but "Can" will always find a way...

Michael J. Tenneson

College Guild Student in Colorado

Well, sixty days ago, some staff for the Sterling Correctional Facility brought several inmates to my old facility (I just left...), they were there to network with us about some new cutting-edge programs, actually "mindsets" that were blowing minds at Sterling Correctional Facility - They are actually allowing inmates to set up, and run fully functional art, music, theater, (with massive support from Denver University) yoga, all manner of crafts, religious, and other programs that were always highly micromanaged by, and often undermined by half-hearted staff who had no personal interest in the very programs they were supposedly "running". All of that has flipped one hundred eighty degrees here in the Sterling arena, which has become the flagship for changes in what the incarceration experience will look like in Colorado's future, and these may even influence many other state prison systems nationwide as this new "normal" becomes the standard of what a truly "corrective" environment SHOULD look like. An example of how radical these changes have become is this; For 34 years I have fought to have just a simple nylon-string guitar in my cell. Denied. Over and over.

One month ago I came to Sterling, to set up a music theory class and help create a real music program. Staff told me to set it up as I see fit, it's an open door; a blank canvas - an opportunity to build it up from scratch. Staff are there to support, and not to micromanage - I was given an electric guitar; a classical guitar, and piano; all three of which are leaning up against the wall behind me in my cell right now. Something else that is a precedent is that they also told me that the sky was the limit, essentially, in regards to any potential donations regarding equipment, educational resources, etc. So long as proper protocols are followed - which is also a first.

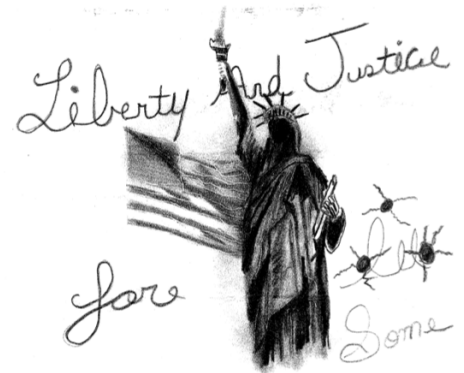
What this means is that outside sources, church groups, and educational institutions are now able, along with private donors - to support the development of truly new and exciting programs that will have the ability to radically alter the lives of incarcerated men, women, and children in Colorado's prisons. A necessary step in penal institutions evolving into healing institutions that specialize in making broken people whole...and returning them to their rightful place in society as autonomous functioning, healthy human beings.

Much of these changes came about because a handful of Colorado inmates, men and women, lobbied for decades in a slow, tedious campaign to be recognized as human beings, who refused to believe they "couldn't" succeed - Never believe the lie that "you CAN'T" because the reality is that if you believe you can, and do the work...you probably CAN! I'm not the sharpest tool in the belt, but I promise you this: Can't Never Could! And Can..will always find a way...Peace. Be well. Dream your new reality.

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#### There's A Man by JayRoy G.

There's a man who's literal with everything said it seems,  
And he has an accurate sense of reality.  
He despises group settings even if others insist,  
And when it comes to needed change, he tried to resist.  
He doesn't get the joke yet laughs at odd times,  
Like answering the question what's on your mind.  
Some reasons why he prefers to be left alone,  
For this man has Asperger's Syndrome.



College Guild Student Art

## **Focusing On College Guild's Longevity**

As College Guild enters its 21st year of providing free correspondence courses to incarcerated people, the question I ask myself regularly is how do we ensure College Guild is here in another 20 years?

There is no end in sight to the United States having a large prison system. People in prison need what College Guild provides - a connection to a community of caring people around a shared love of learning. Education is a game changer for people in prison. It's proven to reduce the number of people returning to prison. Few states are willing to pay the cost of providing education to people in prison, with Texas and Florida as prime examples of states with two of the largest prison populations and few educational opportunities. So many people who are incarcerated are simply warehoused instead of being prepared to stay out of prison when they leave prison.

## **Growing and Changing**

2021 was a big year for College Guild. Julie Zimmerman, our founder, retired. We celebrated our 20th anniversary! I cannot emphasize how remarkable this is, as most nonprofits don't last beyond 10 years. Very few make it to the 20-year mark. A big thank you to all the volunteers and donors over the last 20 years that made this possible. I am extraordinarily grateful to the dedicated donors who have supported College Guild over the years and for our new donors who have joined this effort in the last year. I hope you'll stick with us for the next 20 years!

Our Board of Directors had big changes with three board members finishing their terms in 2021 - Linni Kral, Adria LiBolt and Andrew Ryer. It was an honor and a pleasure to work with these individuals. We also welcomed 5 new board members

These include Max Auger (ME) Patty Barnhart (ME & AZ), Christine DiBuono (MA), Marley MacDonald (MA), and Reynaldo Vargas (NY). A big thank you to Linni, Adria and Andy for their commitment of service and to our new board members!

Our big project this year involves an update and revisions to our curriculum. This is no small task as we have more than 30 courses and 153 units. We've been so fortunate to have so many volunteers step up to write and edit courses over the years. I want to thank each and every one of you. Your commitment to give of your time and talent to design a course is the reason College Guild has a program that changes lives. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your generosity in giving of your time this way.

## **Spring is sprung... and your generous support helps to make all this happen!**

As we move into our 3rd year of learning to live with Covid, I want you to know that for many of our students, College Guild has been their survival tool to get through being in lock down for months on end. Lock down means locked in their cells for 23.5 hours a day. Cells that typically measure 9x5 feet are shared with another person. Just imagine the discipline it takes to get through that day after day. When mail arrives from College Guild, they can escape for a while with their minds. Escape to a place filled with hope, fresh ideas, simple fun and a sense of accomplishment for each completed unit.

**I hope you'll take a few minutes to go to our website at [www.collegeguild.org](http://www.collegeguild.org) to make an online donation or write a check to help support this work. Thank you for helping us reach into prisons across the country with hope, connection and respect.**

Please know that you make me feel "real". That sounds stupid maybe, but to have someone want to really learn and to read something I put on paper made me remember my life before. For a while, I was who I once was, not a number, not a face, but the real Daniel. Thank you for that.

DANIEL

Amelia Muir

*In Honor of*

Julie Zimmerman

\$50 from Melvin & Brenda Morris

\$25 from Nan and Fran McMahon

\$50 from Joanne McCartan

\$150 from Anonymous

\$200 from Susan Walton

\$300 from Patricia Spock

*Special thanks to Jennifer Caswell*

who volunteered to help transcribe student work

### *Student work from College Guild's Early Days*

#### **Reset or Rebirth**

*Author unknown*

Life on 7 South has helped show me that in a new way, being there saved me, not from actual death, but despair. But, to move forward, to be healthy, a death of sorts is necessary. I cannot remain the man I was.

Prison is rock bottom, but it provides an opportunity for a reset. No, that's not quite right. A reset or reboot of a computer is a new start, but with the same old operating instructions. Nothing changes.

So, my time of incarceration must be about rebirth. Birth involves pain and I bear it every day. Behind bars it's bold to not just dream about new life, but to plant seeds to bring it forth. I'm doing what I can in the hope that after a long dreary winter the pregnant promise of spring delivers me into a world bursting with color.

#### **Untitled**

*Author unknown*

In my mind, I am free.

In your world I dress in white

I live behind your cold cruel bars

I eat when you say, sleep when you say

I do as I'm told.

In my world you are small

You are weak and cowardly

And hold no power over me

In my world there is no ceiling

To limit my ascent into

Sunny blue skies and white cotton candy clouds;

Into starry moonlit backdrops.

In your world, I am shackled

But in my mind I am free.

### *Impact Report*

294

Active Volunteers

580

Active Students

667

Enrolled Students in 2021

3328

Units completed in 2021



College Guild is open to all incarcerated people regardless of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, details of sentence, or socioeconomic status.

#### STUDENT SNAPSHOT

10%

Women

48%

Non-White

15%

LGBTQ+

Our goal is for Students to use education to discover the best in themselves and to connect with a community outside of prison walls. Once in the program, Students begin to see themselves as capable, creative, and confident human beings.



"College Guild has helped me see myself in a new light and made me aware of possibilities that I didn't know existed. The comments on my answers have opened a whole new world to me. College Guild has inspired me to desire a college education."

-Joy, CG Student



94% of College Guild Students have a high school diploma or above.



Our program is free, with the exception that Students must pay for stamps to mail coursework back to CG.



College Guild is available in all 50 states, with the majority of students based in California, Texas and Florida

Learn more at [www.collegeguild.org](http://www.collegeguild.org)



@College Guild @collegeguild @college\_guild @college-guild

We rely completely on mail for our interactions with our students. Some years ago, we started posting mail regulations on the wall in the office. Currently, it makes more sense to post the facilities without weird requirements! Mail restrictions are designed to limit drugs entering facilities – not only preventing the incarcerated from receiving contraband, but also to protect prison staff from handling unknown substances hidden in mail. All the rules change constantly, and federal facilities do not always follow the same regulations as their own state facilities. Even within a particular state, mail regulations vary due to the security level at a particular location. Although we ask new enrollees about their mail restrictions, many of them are not aware of the rules or of any changes.

College Guild has budgeted \$5000 for postage costs for 2022. The information below tells just a little of how your donations are being used to continue our promise of a free education to any person in prison in this country.

### **Background:**

#### **What do we mail out in average a month?**

- 60-80 enrollment packets to new inquiries
- 60 first units to new students once they have enrolled
- 230 student work packets comprised of reader feedback, student original work, next unit assignment, and possibly a certificate of completion for a course
- 15-20 re-sends to students because they moved, they now have a different mail processing center, their facility lost their mail, or their facility only partially copied/scanned the contents

#### **Other mail regulations**

- Weight limit: All of Virginia and several other facilities restrict incoming mail to one ounce
- Page limits: All of Wisconsin and several other facilities restrict incoming mail to 5 pages
- Page limits, part 2: several facilities restrict incoming mail to 5 one-sided pages. This also applies to the student's written response to the assignment, which has to be re-printed as one-sided so it is not refused
- No color paper: our certificates must be printed in B&W. Also, if the student wrote their assignment on yellow lined paper, we must reprint it in B&W so it is not refused when we send it back to the student

#### **Other peculiar rules...**

- Ocala Florida: no maps (block out parts of the Travel course)
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- Pine Knot Kentucky: 5 single sided pages with NO images (block out all images in all courses)

### **Mail processing centers**

All Pennsylvania state facility mail goes to St Petersburg Florida for scanning and forwarding to PA. Their dictionaries go to yet another parcel processing center

All Wisconsin state facility mail goes to Phoenix Maryland for scanning and forwarding to WI. Their dictionaries go directly to their Wisconsin address.

All North Carolina state facility mail goes to Phoenix Maryland for scanning and forwarding to NC. Their dictionaries go directly to their NC address

However, the women's facility in Ukiah California routes their mail to Durham North Carolina...that NC mail is not routed to Maryland.

### **Mail regulations**

30 outgoing items can easily become 45 individual envelopes once the material is packaged according to the regulations of the particular facility.

A 2-ounce stamp costs 78 cents but using two 1-ounce stamps costs \$1.16. Depending on the length of the material, a student's outgoing mail can require three or four 1-ounce stamps. We also use more envelopes than ever. (continued on page 4)

### 1 Postage Costs

- This year College Guild has budgeted \$5000 for postage. We have seen our postage cost double in the last 3 years.
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- No postcards, greeting cards, or any other heavy paper stock is allowed. This rule has been in place for years and it is really not a concern of ours.
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- No address labels: we currently have about 40 facilities (plus 17 state facilities in Texas) that cannot have address labels on their envelopes.
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- Within these, there are about 10 locations who cannot have stamps affixed to their envelopes either

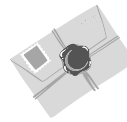
### 2 Postage Costs: Returned mail

Prison mail regulations are often changed without warning, and we do not find out until the mail is returned to us as “refused”. Usually (not always) there is a note about the reason. Sometimes it simply says “contraband” and we must track down the regulations for yet another facility. The mail then must be repackaged and re-sent. More postage and more envelopes!

### 3 Stafftime

What used to be a pretty simple fold, stuff, label, and stamp process is now more labor intensive. Each item must be checked and customized according to its destination.

We have implemented a Stamps.com system for printing addresses and postage for those who cannot have labels and/or stamps, but even that is an extra step in the process and extra cost as we cannot buy postage ahead to save on increases in the cost of stamps. Updating mailing addresses while keeping track of where a student physically resides is now added to our data tracking.



*Mail is our lifeline to our students.*

Ensuring that students get their material in a timely fashion has always been important to us. Our staff do an extraordinary job of trying to stay ahead of the curve with changing requirements but as noted, we often learn of a change because mail comes back to us.

When I first came to prison, I could barely read and write. The Department of “Corrections” offers very little in the area of self-improvement, but thanks to the free courses I found at College Guild, I have come a long way from where I was. I have learned how to draw better through their drawing course and now create beautiful works of my own art (the love of my life).

**K E N**

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*All proceeds benefit College Guild*