

A photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, a male teacher with a beard and a blue shirt is seated at a wooden desk, gesturing with his hands while speaking. Behind him, several students are seated at the same desk, looking towards him. A laptop is open on the desk in front of the teacher, displaying a spreadsheet. A purple water bottle and a blue water bottle are also on the desk. The background is slightly blurred, showing more students and a classroom setting.

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THE COMMUNITY AS CLASSROOM

An Upper School teacher brings
an experiential learning approach
to the study of criminal justice

// By Dave Whitson, Upper School History Faculty
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“When the community becomes your classroom and your textbook...assumptions and stereotypes are tested and the humanity of those you might dismiss becomes undeniable.”

Last fall, as Catlin Gabel’s faculty gathered to spend a professional development day thinking about experiential learning, a group of my students were in prison. I couldn’t have been more pleased.

The students were enrolled in Crime & Punishment (C&P), a Palma Seminar focused on contemporary criminal justice issues. First introduced in 2012 as a central component of the Palma Scholars Program, Palma Seminars share certain core features: they are interdisciplinary, open to all students in the Upper School, experiment with novel pedagogical techniques, and favor opportunities for experiential learning. Given the prevalence and significance of criminal justice-related issues in America’s public discourse in recent years, and the growing wave of bipartisan support for reform, this subject was ripe for closer inspection.

The curriculum was designed to weave together an array of diverse perspectives on criminal justice, landing on topics that included neurobiological explanations for violent crime, historical theories on police militarization, economic and sociological analysis of the mass incarceration phenomenon, and literary accounts of the criminal experience. Equally important to this set academic material, though, were the events unfolding around us on a daily basis. We learned in September about Oregon’s thousands of untested rape kits; October arrived with the mass shooting at Umpqua Community College; and November brought the release of the dash-cam video of Laquan McDonald’s shooting in Chicago.

As students learned about the big picture, and as they became more attentive to national developments, they also grew more curious about the local relevance. That curiosity, in turn, fueled their pursuit of independent or small group projects that engaged the Portland community in different ways. Several students explored the tense relationship between Portland’s homeless community and the city’s police, interviewing numerous individuals from both sides in order to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges they faced. One of those students ultimately produced a moving documentary film on the subject. Two juniors organized a public forum on police use of force that brought together diverse perspectives in pursuit of a civil exchange

of deeply held viewpoints. A freshman reached out to police departments nationwide because she was curious about their policies on issuing warnings for speeding tickets; after receiving dozens of responses, she quickly realized how vastly different those departments’ approaches to warnings are, and then also learned about some of the perils associated with these inconsistencies. And yes, a group of students visited the Columbia River Correctional Institution as part of a project oriented towards the accessibility of exercise equipment and fitness opportunities for incarcerated individuals in Oregon.

When the community becomes your classroom and your textbook, when you actually engage with people whom you would typically only read about or see from a distance, assumptions and stereotypes are tested and the humanity of those you might dismiss becomes undeniable.

One day stands out. Last spring, the class visited the Multnomah County Courthouse and sat in on a probation revocation hearing. We were swiftly caught up in the emotional intensity of the case before us. A mother had violated the terms of her probation and faced an extended sentence. Her ex and his new partner sat behind us, and the woman continually provoked the mother as the hearing unfolded. The judge immediately recognized the mother, noting that they had come in contact a handful of times previously; there was a sort of gallows humor on display as they recounted their history. As the hearing unfolded, and the very likely outcome of incarceration crystallized before us all, agony lined the faces of both the defendant and the judge. When the mother desperately appealed for one last opportunity to see her children before she went behind bars, the judge seemed to rack her brain for some way, any way, to justify granting permission for that, before ultimately denying it and imposing the prison sentence.

Having followed the coverage of criminal justice in the news, our students had encountered countless articles about drug-related crimes. They knew the statistics. They had a sense of the broader social implications. However, most had never seen it, put a face to it, or felt it—deeply, intensely, uncomfortably—firsthand. Every individual case speaks to a familial tragedy. One hour in a courtroom brought that home for us.

When Catlin Gabel speaks to the importance of experiential learning, it’s important to stress that this isn’t a substitute or replacement for the quality work that we have long



done inside the classroom. In C&P, our shared work in the classroom—and particularly the more “traditional” work like reading, discussion, and even the occasional lecture—built a foundational understanding that equipped the students with the tools necessary to meaningfully engage with the community on issues related to criminal justice. In turn, their experiences in the greater Portland community exposed them to new insights and truths that, when brought back to the classroom, elevated and enriched our conversations. And along the way, we had an opportunity to make a positive impact on the community that has shared so many educational experiences with us.

This year, the Palma Seminar’s theme is “Revolutionaries,” as we study the individuals and groups that have fundamentally transformed their communities and the world, across all fields. The course will culminate in final projects in which the students are tasked with making a significant social impact. The curricular freedom and commitment to experiential learning at Catlin Gabel affords us the luxury of building that explicitly into our courses. Our students have the capacity to make a transformative impact on Portland, on Oregon, or even on the world.

The Palma Scholars Program, named after longtime Head of School Lark Palma, was founded in 2011 with the dual goals of a) bringing a cadre of academically exceptional students with notable potential in leadership, athletics, and service to the Catlin Gabel Upper School, and b) serving as a force for educational and programmatic innovation at the school. Learn more online: catlin.edu/palmascholars.