

# Former professor tutors inmates

By KEN HASWELL  
Of the Emerald

Ruth Jackson, who retired from the University's English department five years ago, still finds time to teach. For the last nine years, Jackson has been teaching literature to the inmates of the Oregon State Penitentiary on a voluntary basis.

Born in Cotton Valley, La., on November 16, 1907, Jackson says she became interested in teaching at the prison while she was moonlighting at the University. She says she was grading extension papers and noticed that almost a fifth of her correspondent students were prisoners.

"So I got the bright idea that it would be nice if I went up once a month and had a little conference with anyone who was having any problems," she says.

She says she first suggested her idea to the penitentiary officials "just about the time of the 'Big Riot,' of 1968. But, at that time, "they were not introducing strange females into the prison, even an elderly one."

Jackson, who has a master's degree in English from the University and who has studied at Harvard's sister college, Radcliffe, says she received no response from the prison officials the first year so she tried again the following year. After another year's wait she was told she could enter the prison for monthly conferences with her correspondent students.

When she started teaching at the prison, there was no college program at all, but soon a full-time college program called Newgate, which was federally funded, began. She was then asked by a prison official to teach a regular college-level English class within the walls of the prison.

She says she started teaching at OSP in the evenings and after she retired, she started teaching three full-time day classes. Jackson says she spends two full days a week at the penitentiary with her students.

When she initially retired from the University after 17 years she worked at OSP strictly as a volunteer. However, Chemeketa Community College has now taken over the inmate-college program and Jackson now gets paid for two of the three classes she teaches.

"And then I spend an extra period each day in remedial work for anyone who wants to come in and get special help," she says.

"Because if there is anything my students in there have in common (with those on the outside), it's that they did not take advantage of their high school training; and many of them do need the extra help," Jackson

says. To give her imprisoned students the best exposure to English Literature, she would invite different guest lecturers from the University's English Department.

"And that was very interesting, I think, for the students, because when we were on Drayton, Sherwood could come up and give a lecture and when we were on Middle English Ballots, Barre Toelken could lecture," Jackson says.

Jackson says at one time about one-third of the University's regular staff in the English Department had either given one lecture or done something connected in some way with the prison.

She says the Educational Department of the prison seems to have more value to the prisoners than any other section.

"And the atmosphere up in the

Educational Department, I'm sure, is so different from that of the rest of the prison," she says. "People are treated so courteously and it's just very pleasant up there," Jackson added.

When asked if she received any personal reward or satisfaction from teaching within the walls, Jackson says she receives a great deal of satisfaction but "it isn't that I think I do a better job than other people would do," she says. "I'm doing something other people could do but don't do; I'm doing something useful. I get a lot of personal satisfaction," she says.

"But actually I find it so much fun that I never think of it as a duty. It's a pleasure. And, in general, students there are very cooperative and friendly. They are more responsive, I think, than University students would be.

Of course you could say that I

have a captive audience," she says.

"And I suppose they have got to have this rule, but it seems so strange to have me be escorted up the stairs by an officer. I would feel more frightened to walk around the University campus alone at night than I would to walk into the prison," Jackson says.

"If anybody tried to hurt me there, somebody would spring to my defense, I know," she adds.

Jackson says that she views the prisoners in OSP as human beings not as the stereotyped television image. "They are human beings and some of them are very nice human beings. Human beings can do very stupid or foolish or wrong things, but that does not change them from being basically nice," she says.

Jackson says that prisoners, like students, need to learn better study habits.



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