

What is the nature of love and desire?
 What is the role of the individual in society?
 What is the relationship between power and justice?

Once thought to be the province of stuffy old professors at Ivy League schools, these philosophical questions are at the core of a unique class being taught by Reed College professors to low-income, disadvantaged Portlanders. The yearlong "Humanity in Perspective" course, aka HIP, brings together a diverse group of adults who learn as much from each other as they do from the texts they study.

Danny Benton, a 35-year-old gay man living with HIV, was one of these students. He was introduced to HIP through Cascade AIDS Project, and he graduated from the program last year. A voracious reader who never finished college, Benton was thrilled at the opportunity to participate in a college-level class.

HIP "is taking back the true notion of humanities," says Benton.

The program is administered by Oregon Council for the Humanities. According to council director Christopher Zinn, "HIP argues that people dealing with poverty stand to benefit from an intellectual life as much as, if not more than, other people."

HIP program associate Jennifer Allen says the course is based on Aristotle's idea that meaning in life comes through time for reflection. She was drawn to the program because it was *not* job training, unlike so many education programs aimed at low-income adults.

For students from CAP, those problems are not just about economics but also the challenges

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Cascade AIDS Project clients thrive in a class that asks the big questions

by Meg Daly

of living with a chronic illness. Dawn Thompson, Positive Directions coordinator at CAP, says her clients benefit in many ways from HIP. "HIP offers our clients the opportunity to tap into parts of themselves they may not have known were there, such as the ability to read challenging texts, formulate their own opinion in writing and to voice themselves within a group of peers."

Benton says he wondered how Greek philosophy could possibly relate to him when he first started the class. That was exactly the question the professors hoped to elicit from students: How does this relate to me?

"The works were a way to get disenfranchised people together," says Benton.

He says the way the class was set up "created a basis of inclusiveness." While the issue of homosexuality came up in class, Benton never experienced overt homophobia. He says he met people he wouldn't have otherwise, and he suspects that by the end of the class some people may have changed their thinking about queers.

In turn, Benton gleaned a renewed sense of the possibility of community.

"I learned better building-block ideas about how to relate to others," he says.

Thompson says the sense of community is a

key element for her clients. "The reading in HIP offers our clients a chance to identify with great individuals in history who have also been marginalized—a phenomenon that unfortunately is still prevalent for many living with HIV/AIDS today."

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN

Reed professor Walter Englert says teaching the course has been "one of the highlights" of his academic career. "The HIP students are a thoughtful, hardworking and courageous group. They all have faced great obstacles in their lives that prevented them from pursuing a traditional path in school, but they still have a tremendous passion for learning."

Students are recruited for HIP through various social service and community organizations serving low-income populations. Prospective students must apply to the program and are admitted based on need, enthusiasm and ability to complete the course. Most applicants have either not completed college or high school. Oregon Council for the Humanities covers tuition, bus passes, child care, books, library cards and snacks.

One of the biggest challenges facing the program is its attrition rate. For people living with

HIV/AIDS, illnesses associated with the disease can create an impediment to full participation.

"The most challenging aspect of the course for our clients is consistency in attending class twice a week over a long period due to unpredictable health concerns," says Thompson.

Englert says his students' life experiences are key elements in the class. Unlike typical college students fresh out of high school, HIP students bring real-world perspective to the questions of what it means to be human, what is death and should we be afraid of it.

Englert says these questions are "important ones for all of us, but especially for people living with a difficult and life-threatening condition like HIV/AIDS."

Because diversity and acceptance are stressed, Englert says gay students are well-received in class. "It's very important for the discussions of the ancient and modern texts we read that people feel confident that they can express their views freely and openly. The discussions are very lively, and people often disagree with each other, but there is also a real sense of respect."

For Benton, the demographics of his class, which brought together students of different ages, races and backgrounds, was one of its biggest rewards. He says you can't find that kind of diversity in a typical classroom.

"For individuals who must spend all of their resources on the struggle to just survive every day," Thompson says, "the chance to step into a free, supportive educational container can be a blessing, because the soul needs so much more than food and shelter to thrive." □

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