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Human connection

By Sam Allis
GLOBE STAFF

They've been reading Plato over at the Codman Square Health Center. Hannah Arendt and St. Augustine too. Moral philosophy. Scary stuff. Ruthella Logan-Cruz adores it. Better still is her mordant take on philosophers as a breed: "They're a bunch of crazy people. All you have to do is be a little eccentric and you can be a philosopher."

Jennifer Ewing, a native of Trinidad, is also hooked on the subject. "You have to think beyond the norm and you have to defend it," she says. On the other hand, much of it is unfathomable: "Plato is out there. I don't know who's going to understand him except a philosopher." Me neither.

Welcome to the Boston iteration of the **Clemente Course**, a national program in 15 sites around the country that introduces higher humanities education to poor people. (It already exists in Holyoke and Worcester.) It ends its first year in a couple of weeks and looks suspiciously like a success.

This is not for the faint of heart. Students face a daunting, fabulous courseload of moral philosophy, art history, literature, American history, and writing. Applicants need a high school diploma for starters. Then they're grilled for an hour by course director Neal Dolan to test their commitment to the challenge and acceptance of unblinking expectations. The students are Dorchester locals who heard about Clemente last year from friends or ads in the local paper.

There are scads of great efforts to provide the poor with practical skills for entry-level jobs. The Pine Street Inn, for one, does outstanding work in this area. What Clemente offers, in contrast, is absolutely nothing of immediate use to anyone. It sells ideas.

The responses can be wild. When American history teacher Tim McCarthy limns the evil of Hitler, Jenny Ali Bocas, another Trinidadian, notes, "He had personal issues."

Nineteen students listen last Wednesday as McCarthy, a young Harvard lecturer, prepares them for the final paper of the year: an ambitious essay combining history and moral philosophy based on Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

(This is before he delves into FDR's "Four Freedoms" speech and winds up mired in the 1939 nonaggression treaty between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.)

McCarthy offers suggestions that any writer could use: Come up with your own argument and lay it out clearly in your opening paragraph. One idea per graph. Stay with the past tense. Attribute sources.

Of 29 students who began last October, 21 still answer the bell. This is great considering a third are unemployed and half are single mothers. Assuming they finish the course, explains director Neal Dolan, another young Harvard lecturer, they get six credits from **Bard College**.

Jemma Joseph, a 31-year-old mother from the Caribbean island of Dominica, will be one of them. She's hooked on American history for the obvious reason that it's all new to her.

"Since I didn't grow up here, I knew nothing about it," says Joseph, who also holds down a job at Head Start.

The group assembles in the bowels of the health center Monday and Wednesday evenings for two hours. Codman director Bill Walczak provides child care, books, and food. Half of Clemente's puny \$50,000 budget is funded by the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities and the rest by Codman. Walczak relies on foundations because, he says, few rich people know much about Dorchester. Wake up, rich people.

"Child care is the key," says Dolan, who grew up in a blue-collar household.

Without it, Clemente wouldn't work. Indeed, McCarthy competes with the odd squall from the child-care room next door as he plumbs the civil rights movement.

The Clemente numbers are as interesting as they are troubling. All but two of the 21 are women. (Only one man, Wes, made it Wednesday.) All but one are people of color. Eleven of the 21 are from the West Indies. Half a dozen of them hail from Trinidad, known for its high literacy rate. So an immigrant thread is key in this story. What we've got here are motivated women bent on assimilating into our culture and creating a better life for their kids.

What's missing are men. Their near total absence is sad and disquieting. Forget excuses that they're working or they're too proud to check out Botticelli, they need to be here, too. Otherwise, Clemente becomes a women's support group - which is not what it was created to be. So bring on the men next year.

To its credit, Clemente avoids the easy slip into preciousness and subtle condescension. Forget noblesse oblige, says McCarthy, who grew up in a gritty part of Albany, N.Y.: "I'm not here to help the unfortunate, I'm here to connect the dots between two groups that shouldn't be so far apart."

There are the inevitable problems. Big chunks of material - Plato, for example - sail over most students' heads. Their success in mastering abstractions varies widely, so teachers constantly search for the right classroom depth. It's a moving target. McCarthy, for example, realized after the fact that he was off the reservation with the nonaggression pact.

Clemente reminds us of a simple truth: The humanities are sublime. Always have been, always will be. To people of every station in life. All we need to do, as McCarthy says, is connect the dots.
