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Idealistic Clemente program teaches classics as path to opportunity for poor

By **DEBORAH YAFFE**
GANNETT STATE BUREAU

Courtney Nelson's two little boys often fall asleep in the car during the half-hour drive to pick their grandmother up at her waitressing job. So Nelson, a 22 year-old single mother who works as a waitress herself, tries to arrive early and spend that peaceful interlude in the parking lot, hunched over the steering wheel, reading Shakespeare or Thomas Jefferson.

By her own account, Nelson, a New Brunswick resident, "lasted her high school years at parties and part-time jobs and didn't bother with college afterward. But today she is enrolled in an idealistic program that aims to bring great works of literature, art, philosophy and history into the lives of low-income people.

The program **Bard College Clemente Course in the Humanities**, began four years ago in New York City and expanded this year to Seattle; Anchorage, Alaska, and New Brunswick, where classes are held two evenings a week at the offices of the Middlesex County Economic Opportunities Corp., a non-profit community agency.



Courtney Nelson of New Brunswick reads during a Clemente class at the Middlesex County Opportunities Corporation building.

MARK R. SULLIVAN
Staff photographer

CLEMENTE: Students get chance to examine lives

The program's sponsor is Bard College, a small, liberal-arts school in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., 90 miles north of New York City.

Everywhere, the model is the same: free classes taught by highly qualified instructors, free books for everyone, free child care and carfare for students who need them—and the promise of six college credits for anyone who earns good enough grades in the 28-week course. Students must be between ages 17 and 40 and earn no more than 150 percent of the federal poverty level, which is about \$25,000 for a family of four. The program "is based on the belief that by studying the humanities those who are economically and educationally disadvantaged can acquire the cultural knowledge and conceptual skills necessary to improve their personal and societal situations," Bard's literature says.

The New Brunswick program began in the fall with about 20 students but has shrunk to nine, as the stresses of life on the economic margins take their toll.

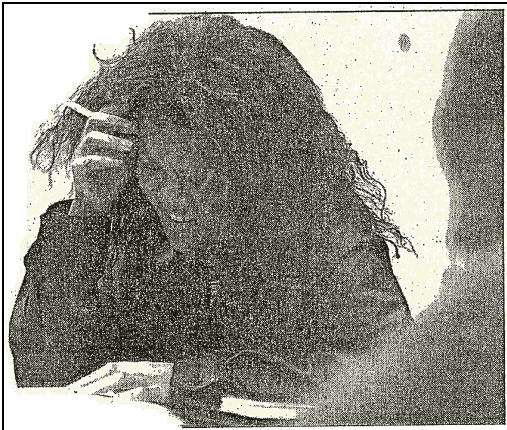
Nelson stayed on, squeezing Plato and Flannery O'Connor and Leonardoda Vinci into the spaces left between days of child care and nights of work. She is mulling over the final paper topic in her moral philosophy class—the question, based on Socrates, "Is the unexamined life worth living?"

"I posed the question to my mother, and she can't even sleep at night because of it," Nelson said.

Nelson too, has been haunted by that call to live reflectively—shaken out of her previous routine of work, parties, kids.

sleep. Now she's thinking about going back to college, perhaps when her sons, now 1 and 3, are older.

The Clemente Course, so called because it began at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center on New York City's Lower East Side, was the brainchild of Earl Shorris.



MARK R. SULLIVAN/Staff photographer
_ Amarylis Peralta of Perth Amboy gets a laugh
out of a story she is reading for her Clemente
class.

Naikera Sirmans, 24, of New Brunswick, a single mother of three who works in a bank, spotted a Michelangelo print on her boss' calendar the other day.

"She was just amazed, too, because I wouldn't have known it six months ago," Sirmans said. "I feel like I'm learning these things, not only for myself but for my kids."

In researching a book on poverty in America, Shorris met a prison inmate who had studied philosophy while behind bars. She told him the cure for poverty was to teach "a moral alternative to the street"—to offer students a way into a world of reflection that was closed to them, largely because of their struggles to survive. He founded the Clemente course to do just that.

It's a startling suggestion—that the poor need courses in Kierkegaard, not computers, Michelangelo rather than marketing. But to the students remaining in the New Brunswick Clemente Course, and to their teachers, all of whom have some past or present Rutgers University affiliation, the idea makes sense.

"I think it brings a sense quality to their lives that they're not going to get with just practical things," said Katherine Ramsland, a writer and former Rutgers philosophy teacher who directs the local program. "It is an experience of expanding and gaining depth and the ability to think through things."