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Mind Over Subject Matter

— **Poor women take a crash course in the humanities, helping them open doors with a handle on the language of the elite.**

By Elizabeth Mehren
Times Staff Writer

HOLYOKE, Mass. Poverty, unemployment and the grip of bipolar disorder have built a wall of isolation around Myrna Colon. But twice a week, the 48-year-old finds sanctuary when she joins 15 to 20 other women to discuss philosophy, art, literature, poetry, history and the process of critical thinking.

"Most people do not want to have these conversations with me," said Colon, who could hardly wait the other day to talk about Socrates, Plato and the meaning of justice. "But here there is a certain freedom. We can speak without being afraid of being judged."

The program they are enrolled in, the Clemente Course in the Humanities, was developed 10 years ago by New York journalist Earl Shorris.

If poor people were to successfully navigate an economically stratified society, Shorris maintained, they would need to learn the cultural language of the elite. Reasoning that a grasp of the humanities could put disadvantaged people on an intellectual par with those of greater resources, he created a curriculum named for the building in Lower Manhattan where the first classes met.

Shorris outlined basic requirements: Classes would be free and would run for seven months. They would feature rigorous reading and writing, with instructors from prestigious institutions. To qualify, students would need to have household incomes of less than 150% of the U.S. Census Bureau's official poverty threshold. The minimum educational requirement was the ability to read a tabloid newspaper. The only goal Shorris demanded was "an expression of intent to complete the course."

His hope was to enrich the lives and expand the opportunities of the students and to strengthen families and communities by encouraging the participants to engage more actively in civic life.

Through **Bard College** in New York, the curriculum has expanded nationally to about two dozen communities. But only Holyoke has geared the program exclusively to women.

"People make the assumption that women living in poverty don't have intellectual needs, that they don't have moral questions rolling around in their heads," said Anne Teschner, executive director of a nonprofit organization here called the Care Center, where the Clemente course is conducted.

"Of course, they may have even more than the rest of us," Teschner said. "For example, 'Should I report on my bad boyfriend?' 'Should I turn in my landlord for housing violations, even though it means I'll be evicted?' 'How far do I go to get money to feed my kids?' "

Women in these circumstances "immediately comprehend Antigone's dilemma," said Kristin O'Connell, assistant director of the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities. "Anyone who has had to struggle

with whether to turn a boyfriend in to the law understands the conflicting claims of family and affection versus the claims of citizenship in society," she said. The foundation provides about \$30,000 annually to the Clemente course in Holyoke, which runs on a yearly budget of about \$50,000. The course is funded completely through donations.

In a recent section on moral philosophy, course director Kent Jacobson noted that "this is not simple stuff; it has been argued about for 2,000 years." Instructor Ernie Alleva, a philosophy professor at nearby Hampshire College, then gazed at the roomful of women, who ranged from 19 to 55. "Shall we turn now to 'The Republic?' " he asked.

The class already had tackled other works by Plato, but "The Republic" "runs a lot harder and faster," Alleva cautioned. "It is much more philosophically sophisticated." That admonition served only to ignite a spirited dissection of what Plato had in mind when he imagined Socrates on the road from Piraeus and meditated on the nature of justice.

Gaosia Misniakiewicz, a 35-year-old housecleaner, zeroed in on the matter of class distinctions. "He says the key to justice is to tell the truth and pay your debts," said Misniakiewicz, an immigrant from Poland. "Then Socrates raises a question about whether it is easier to be just when you are wealthy, because you have more money to pay your debts." Around the room, heads nodded in agreement.

In Holyoke, a city of 40,000 that hugs the Connecticut River, the median income is a little more than \$30,000. Holyoke has the largest percentage of children living in poverty of any city in Massachusetts, and its school dropout rate is three times the state average.

"Socrates says you don't have to steal when you are wealthy," Misniakiewicz said. "But I think the wealthy steal even more than the poor."

Carolyn Rivera, 38, said that when she leaves the two-hour class, she continues to ruminate about the subject matter. "When you are out there in your daily life, you may not take time to think about philosophy," said Rivera, a single mother of three who works for a city agency. "But this class makes you want to ask more questions. You stop seeing the world in just one way." Rivera calls the Clemente course "a foot in the door" toward her ultimate goal of a doctorate in psychology.

Her friend Wilma Rivera-Smith, 30, said that she briefly tried college, but dropped out when she had the first of two children. She signed up for the Clemente course because "at work, you just work, and when you are home, you are picking up the toys and talking to your husband about paying the bills or redoing the driveway. This brings out who you are."

Nearly 80% of those who sign up for the Clemente course in Holyoke graduate, substantially higher than the 64% average graduation rate for the classes nationwide. Graduates earn a certificate and, depending on their performance, six college credits.

Since the program was launched here five years ago, half a dozen or more graduates have enrolled in a small women's school nearby called Elms College. Others study at the local community college. Several have moved to better jobs. One Clemente graduate was elected to the Holyoke school board.

Another graduate, Maria Salgado, is a counselor at the Care Center. Salgado is 38, unmarried and the mother of five girls. She has applied to Mt. Holyoke College, in South Hadley about 5 miles northeast. If she is accepted, Salgado plans to study economics, focusing on issues pertaining to women.

"When you come from economically disadvantaged homes, you internalize that poverty," she explained. "You feel it is not just a societal problem, it is you. So what Clemente did for me was make me acknowledge that I was prepared to play with the Ivy League. I found out I was just as smart as they are. I just needed to speak their language."