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BOB EDWARDS, host

Four years ago, a writer named Earl Shorris came up with an idea for a humanities course for the poor, and it was to be based on the concept that giving people access to a middle-class education helps to redistribute the wealth of civilization. The Clemente course, as it's become known, is sponsored by Bard College in upstate New York. It's the model for a series of programs across the country that are based on the notion that exposing people to the classics is a way to help lift them out of poverty. The courses are opened to low-income, inner-city residents. Carole Zimmer followed one student in New York City who will graduate tonight.

CAROLE ZIMMER reporting:

Alberto Doblaise(ph.), a custodian at Eastern District High School, a large, inner-city school in Brooklyn, has been at work since 7 AM, cleaning and polishing newly installed gymnasium floors. At 5 PM, Doblaise, who is 36, exchanges his green uniform for a flowered shirt and chinos and heads to a school in another part of Brooklyn where 10 adults are greeting one another and pulling copies of Plato's "Republic" out of tote bags and attache cases.

Mr. ALBERTO DOBLAISE: The ...(unintelligible) is a large animal.

Unidentified Man #2: A large animal.

ZIMMER: Along with Doblaise, the other students include a carpenter, a manager at an electronics store and an AIDS counsellor. This evening, they're studying Plato's concept of justice and morality. One student, the carpenter, says he believes that Plato is too absolute and that sometimes there are good reasons why people act badly. But, Doblaise argues that a good citizen must behave justly even when others in society do harm and get away with it.

Mr. DOBLAISE: No man is an island. We live with one another. We have to depend on one another and if one person is unjust, in the long term, he will suffer more in a just society.

ZIMMER: During a break, Doblaise, who is wearing a large ring of keys on his belt that jangles as he walks, heads for the hallway to sip a can of soda. He describes the

opportunity to study ancient Greek philosophers as an expansive experience, an opportunity to pick up where he left off in his studies 20 years ago. Doblaise was born in Puerto Rico. He says after moving to New York, his father, a handyman, worked hard to support his four children. Doblaise says his parents' own educational background was limited, but they hoped their own children would go to college.

Mr. DOBLAISE: I believe my father got up to, like, the sixth grade, if I'm not mistaken. So they weren't really familiar with the higher education process and things like that. So basically, college was a thing that I wanted to get into when I was younger, but we all make mistakes in life and so therefore, I had to change my path.

ZIMMER: The mistake Doblaise is referring to occurred during his senior year. His girlfriend got pregnant and he decided to marry her. After leaving high school, he got a custodial job with the New York City Board of Education. Eventually, Doblaise and his wife had three children. His marriage broke up seven years ago, but he says he maintains a close relationship with his family and that his children visit often. As for regrets, Doblaise says he doesn't have time for what-ifs. He says he appreciates the fact that the years he has spent fixing school buildings has educated him in the workings of the physical universe. Now he's ready to take on the world of ideas.

Mr. DOBLAISE: I started getting interested in how people react to different conditions that were put upon them in the school buildings themselves. And that's basically what led me to an interest in the humanities. I started seeing, like, when you have certain amount of people in these key positions and they're affecting these types of rules and regulations, and you started to see all kinds of interesting social interactions between people. So that, basically, led me into the humanities.

ZIMMER: Back in the classroom, Doblaise's philosophy teacher, who spends his days as a commodities broker, hands back papers students have turned in. Doblaise looks over the comments written in the margin. 'Good argument,' next to one paragraph. 'Next time you might expand your thoughts on the concept of absolute justice.' Doblaise is pleased.

Mr. DOBLAISE: Learning new things is like more than just a new experience. It reshapes what you've already learned before. You know, now you can reapply different theories to what you already know. And when you're learning new things, you can apply--it sometimes changes your whole perspective of something you previously thought was true.

ZIMMER: Doblaise says once he completes this course, he intends to go on to college. He points out he's still young enough to embark on a second career. He'd like to become a technology teacher and show students how the physical universe and the world of ideas intersect, and to teach them that knowledge is power. For NPR News, I'm Carole Zimmer in New York.