

# FINDING FREEDOM BEHIND BARS

*MMC's Bedford Hills College Program celebrates 20 years of excellence*



President Kerry Walk, Ph.D. presents BHC graduate with her diploma



Katie LeBesco, Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, addresses the audience at commencement



A group of women studiously sit around a room with white concrete walls, discussing the nature and origin of human rights. Beyond their matching green attire, they don't appear to have much in common, representing a range of ethnicities, ages, and life experiences.

This is a room in the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women, and this group is part of Marymount Manhattan College's Bedford Hills College Program (BHC). And although these women may seem dissimilar, they share a sense of purpose, a drive to succeed, and a desire to improve their own lives and the lives of their families.

#### THE TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECT OF EDUCATION

For 20 years, the BHC has proudly afforded inmates in New York State's only women's maximum-security prison the opportunity to enroll in college courses while serving time behind bars. To date, more than 200 incarcerated women have earned either an Associate of Arts degree in Social Science or a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology from MMC.

The program has been a boon to the facility's population, both those who are enrolled in courses and those who aren't.

"The women in the BHC change the culture here," said Aileen Baumgartner, the program's director. "They encourage incoming women to obey the rules so they, too, can take the courses they need to complete their high school diploma and enroll at MMC. The whole program is a big motivator, for the women who have a sentence of five years to those who will be here far longer."

As with all prison education programs, the BHC remains the single most effective tool for decreasing the likelihood that incarcerated women will return to prison upon their release. Recidivism among released BHC graduates is virtually zero, as compared with the national average of 43.9 percent for women.

#### RISING FROM THE ASHES

The BHC's success wasn't always so assured. In 1995, "tough-on-crime" initiatives slashed federal and state funding for prison education programs, leading to the closure of more than 350 pre college and college programs in prisons around the country. At that time, the program at Bedford Hills—then conducted by Mercy College—shuttered after 15 successful years.

By the spring of 1997, the program at Bedford Hills had made a comeback, this time as a consortium of colleges led by then-President of MMC Regina Peruggi, Ed.D. Today, the BHC exemplifies MMC's mission to educate a socially and economically diverse student body by fostering intellectual achievement and personal growth, and promoting social, political, cultural, and ethical understanding.

#### COLLEGE LIFE AT BEDFORD HILLS

Although MMC has been the degree-granting institution of the BHC since 1997, the program officially became an extension campus in September 2004, and the College now considers itself to have not two, but one student body.

In fact, MMC students at both campuses have plenty of crossover: main campus students attend classes like Theories of Justice at the facility, and the BHC hosts numerous educational events, such as the Crossing Borders conference, during which professors and students—from inside and outside the facility—present their academic research. Inside/Outside art exhibitions feature work by main campus and BHC students.

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—Valerie Rowe, Ph.D.

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Students in the program are held to the same rigorous academic standards as anyone at MMC, taking placement exams in math, reading, and essay writing, and fulfilling the same general education and major requirements.

A college degree substantially increases these students’ chances for fruitful employment after their release. With their degrees, many BHCP graduates work in social-service nonprofits, prison-transition services, and social work.

“The women of BHCP are extraordinarily eloquent about the power of education to transform their lives and the lives of those around them,” says MMC President Kerry Walk. “Many of the program’s students and alumnae describe entering the BHCP weighed down with self-doubt.... But their professors believe in them, knowing what they’re capable of achieving, and their self-doubt turns into self-empowerment.”

#### THE FUTURE OF BHCP

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education selected MMC for the experimental *Second Chance Pell Program*, which is expected to provide modest support for students, including replacing old and worn textbooks. The New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) at both the state and facility level, also fully support the program.

But to keep the program up and running, MMC relies primarily on the generous donations of private individuals and foundations, whose contributions support an operating budget of nearly \$300,000 each year.

One such contributor is Valerie Rowe, Ph.D., whose leadership gift to an endowed fund in support of the BHCP has been sustaining. “Speaking with these women is a life-changer,” said Dr. Rowe, a retired Clinical Associate Professor at Fordham University’s Graduate School of Education. “The Bedford Hills College Program provides a future for them, bringing a sense of hope and a purpose to succeed and do their best every day.”



▲ Panelists from left to right: Cheryl Wilkins '00, Sharon White-Harrigan '02, Stacy Royster '08, Colby Thompson '11, and Iris Bowen (90's graduate of the Mercy College program)

▼ Standing from left to right: Aisha Elliot '00, Cheryl Wilkins '00, Regina Peruggi, Ed.D., H'01 (MMC President Emerita), Rachel Bernard (Assistant Director of the Bedford Hills College Program), Claude Millery '12, Iris Bowen, Kerra Tolliver '14, Aileen Baumgartner (Director of the BHCP), President Kerry Walk, Ph.D. Seated from left to right: Sharon White-Harrigan '02, Stacy Royster '08, Colby Thompson '11

## 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration

On Friday, May 5, 2017, MMC celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bedford Hills College Program (BHCP). With the event’s theme of **KNOWLEDGE IS POWER** in mind, MMC President Emerita Regina Peruggi spoke to attendees, reminding them of BHCP’s origins, which began during her tenure.

A highlight of the day was a BHCP Alumnae Panel, in which graduates shared their experiences as students and attested to how their education helped prepare them for their lives outside the walls of New York State’s only maximum-security prison for women.

As MMC celebrates the history of the BHCP, the College also looks to the future. With the dedication of BHCP faculty, staff, and volunteers, and ongoing financial support primarily from private donors, that future looks bright—for BHCP students and alumnae, the wider MMC community, and society as a whole.

