

Hey, Professor!

Frank came to prison in 1967 when he was about 24 years old. It was a time when educational opportunities were very limited in prison and most formal education finished at the 8th grade level. To go beyond you had to get involved in a self-study program operated through the school by some very gifted prisoners. It was there that Frank was able to finish his high school diploma and was then accepted into the first college program ever held in a New York state prison.

It is hard to imagine now the impact this program had on the imagination and consciousness of the 22 men in the program. The impact on Frank was even more profound. At first, he was not going to apply because he was convinced he could not do college work. As it turned out he was very bright and became an honor student in a group of high achievers. Several members of the group were to later earn advanced degrees after release. One graduated from Harvard Law School and another from the graduate school at the University of Michigan.

Something else happened to Frank. Going to college began to affect his whole life, from the way he understood himself to the way he saw the world and society. It also affected his talk and his walk. He started to carry books and read them. There was a new inflection in his voice and he began to relate to others with a new understanding. One day someone yelled down the corridor, “Hey, Professor!” It took a minute for Frank to realize that the title was his. He didn’t realize it then, but it would stick with him for many years to come, and he would like it very much.

It was only after he was paroled, some ten years later, that Frank realized how much the “professor” role had become a part of his being and self-understanding. “The first day I was released,” he recalled, “I remember riding the subway and being pushed around, and nobody called me professor. I walked down the street in my old neighborhood, and I did not hear it. When I walked into my home I was greeted by my family, I did not hear it. It wasn’t until 18 months later,

when I returned to prison, that an old friend yelled, 'Hey, Professor!' that I realized that the only adjustment I had made over all that time was to life in prison and not to life outside."