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Great Books Foundation Supports Prison Literacy Project

Nashville, TN—Thanks to a partnership between the Tennessee Department of Correction, Middle Tennessee State University, and the Great Books Foundation based in Chicago, prisoners at three Tennessee prisons began regular discussions of great books in late March of this year. The program, titled Great Books in Middle Tennessee Prisons, is currently under way at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, the Lois M. DeBerry Special Needs Facility, and the Tennessee Prison for Women.

The program began in January of this year, when Dr. Daniel Born of the Great Books Foundation visited the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution and the Lois M. DeBerry Special Needs Facility. Sharmila Patel, the head of the education department for the Tennessee Department of Correction, took Born on a tour of the prisons and described the need for such programs as Great Books in Middle Tennessee prisons. “The reading and discussion of great books expands our educational opportunities for incarcerated men and women. It enlarges minds, and it also creates a sense of community,” says Patel.

With a grant funded by the Middle Tennessee State University Public Service Committee and the College of Liberal Arts, the program was born. Dr. Philip Edward Phillips, associate professor of English at MTSU, wrote the grant and Born returned to conduct a workshop in Shared Inquiry™ discussion training for the faculty volunteers at MTSU in preparation for the program’s March kickoff. Since then, Phillips and five of his colleagues in the English Department have been leading regular discussions of great books in the prisons. Discussion groups range in size from ten to fifteen students, many of whom participate actively in the discussions. “My colleagues and I are very much impressed with the dedication and interest demonstrated by our students,” says Phillips. “We look forward to returning each week.”

Born is pleased with the results so far. “This program provides motivated prisoners with the kind of intellectual stimulation that is sorely lacking in many of the nation’s prisons,” Born says. “The program goes forward because of Sharmila Patel’s enthusiasm and vision and the support of prison wardens like Ricky Bell at Riverbend and Roland Colson at DeBerry, not to mention Dr. Phillips and the dedicated volunteers including librarians, lawyers, professors, and laypeople.” Born points to other successful Great Books programs in prisons as setting an important precedent for the Tennessee initiative. Currently other prison programs that use Great Books Foundation anthologies and Shared Inquiry discussion can be found in Woodville and Jackson, Mississippi, as well as the CCA (Corrections Corporation of America)–Metro facility in Nashville.

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For more than 60 years, the Great Books Foundation has been at the helm of a movement

to advance the reading and discussion of great literature in communities, schools, and homes. The foundation publishes stimulating anthologies and related materials, supports the efforts of local book clubs, and promotes a style of discussion that encourages civil discourse.

For more information about the great books discussions at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, the Lois M. DeBerry Special Needs Facility, and the Tennessee Prison for Women, contact Daniel Born at 800-222-5870, ext. 282.

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