

# Reading Program Strives

By Todd Spangler  
Associated Press

The men sit quietly in a circle, listening to the biblical story of Abraham and God's demand that he kill Isaac, his first-born son. Then they ponder the philosophical implications.

"What kind of God would make a request of this nature?" a man asks.

"A God that would say you have loyalty only to me," another answers.

"If God spoke to me right now—and I really knew it was God—and He said, 'Knock off your whole family,' I would probably do it. What do you tell God? No?" a third says.

The students are inmates, many of them lifers, in the medium-to-maximum-security Maryland House of Correction at Jessup, in Howard County.

For two years, Howard Zeiderman, a teacher at St. John's College in Annapolis, has met with these inmates once or twice a week as part of an educational project called Touchstones. The process is simple: Read some of the seminal works of Western civilization and then discuss them.

The point, Zeiderman said, is to help the inmates learn how to discuss their feelings and thoughts through unfettered conversation, with little interference from him.

"Jessup is a violent place. There is not a lot of freedom of movement. If these discussions could be introduced, this could be an alternative way of dealing with each other," Zeiderman said.

That is the focus of Touchstones, which was launched about a decade ago by Zeiderman and two other St. John's graduates. At the Annapolis college, the curriculum con-

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## to Free the Minds of Men Behind Bars

sists of reading great works of literature, philosophy and mathematics, then discussing them, with a tutor guiding the students along.

Zeiderman, who has been teaching at St. John's for 23 years, developed Touchstones with the help of two colleagues to see whether the discussion method would be useful for students of all ages at schools across the nation.

Almost a quarter of a million students have been exposed to the experiment in schools nationwide. But Jessup is the first experience with inmates.

The program "puts the responsibility for their personal development on themselves," said Brenda Fogel, who coordinates library programs for the Division of Corrections.

At Jessup, the hope was to teach a few prisoners how to run the discussions themselves. Then, each of the new "facilitators"

would meet with groups of 25 inmates, taking part in a 10-week curriculum.

But Warden W. L. Smith said last month that the program has been put on hold. Zeiderman said the program was delayed so corrections officials could work out the logistics of bringing together the groups of inmates. Security, staffing and space for the talks are all issues to be worked out.

"I hope this can happen for larger groups of inmates," Zeiderman said. "It was a unique experiment, to sense their own humanity and dignity and experience."

The tutorial has helped Vaughn Barksdale learn how to deal with other inmates through discussions, rather than automatically resorting to violence. Barksdale, who is serving 15 years for cocaine possession, said he has learned to respect the opinions of others.

"In prison, everything is negative. Our dis-

cussions turn into fights, stabbings, that sort of thing," Barksdale said.

But Touchstones, he said, has convinced the group that it is helpful to allow a discussion with few ground rules but no threat of violence. It helps them to learn and encourages them to read some of the greatest works ever written.

One of the works Zeiderman had the inmates read was Francis Bacon's "About Revenge," a piece extolling the virtue of turning the other cheek. It was a philosophy few of the prisoners in the group had considered.

"Revenge to me and my world was, 'I'm going to get you,'" said Barksdale, 32. "After we looked at the text, we talked about it. When you walk away, that's your opportunity.

"I'd never thought you could just stop and forgive somebody."