

## Prison inmates helped high school student with tuition; he's now in college

By Kellie B. Gormly, *Washington Post*

Required Annotations	Student-Created Annotations	Summary / Questions / Reflection
----------------------	-----------------------------	----------------------------------

Student-created

Required (bold)

Shortly before Sy Newson Green's sophomore year in high school, a family health crisis ate up the money that would have paid his tuition at the private Catholic school he'd been attending for a year.



Sy Newson Green (center) embraces people at Soledad State Prison who paid his tuition at a private high school. Jason Bryant (left) was one of the leaders of the fundraising.

His father needed a heart transplant, his mother lost vision when a softball hit her eye -- and both parents lost their jobs. Sy was thriving and happy at the all-boys Palma School, in Salinas, California, and the school could provide some scholarship help, but not enough to cover the \$12,900 annual tuition.

That's when an unlikely group of people stepped up with the remainder of the tuition: inmates at the nearby Correctional Training Facility, also known as Soledad State Prison.

Inmates pooled the money they earned bit by bit from doing prison jobs such as cleaning and **clerking**. They raised a total of \$32,000 over about three years - a remarkable feat considering prisoners in California earn a base wage of 8 cents an hour for many of their daily jobs, such as mopping the floors.

"I broke down and started crying because I knew where it was coming from," said Sy's father, Frank Green, about the donation. Green, 49 years old, had recently lost his job with a limo company.

The inmates started gathering their money in fall 2016, and they collected enough to cover most of Sy's high school tuition starting with his sophomore year in 2017. They raised \$24,000 from their own pockets and also received an \$8,000 donation from outside the prison. The project was first reported by CNN.

Sy, who is now 19 years old and graduated from Palma School in 2020, attends the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, California, where he plays on the basketball team.

"It definitely was a surprise and a huge honor," he said of the inmates' donation to him. "That's not something that happens every day."

The idea for the scholarship was hatched in a prison-school book group called Exercises in Empathy, a Palma School program now in its seventh year. Before the pandemic, juniors and seniors, teachers, and some community members would take regular trips to the prison to read and discuss books with inmates working on self-improvement.

The program was started by Jim Micheletti, English and theology teacher and director of campus ministry at Palma, who said both the students and inmates found the book discussions deeply meaningful. The boys and the inmates would often become close in sharing ideas and feelings, he said. But never did he imagine the inmates would come together to support a student in this way.

"Oh gosh, I was in disbelief. I couldn't believe it," Micheletti said. "I thought, wow, I'm living in a dream here with this."

Former inmate Jason Bryant, one of the leaders of the scholarship fundraising, said that of the approximately 2,000 inmates in his unit, about 1 in 3 agreed to donate twice a year. Some donations were as small as \$1 and a few as big as \$100, with most donations in amounts of \$5 or \$10, Bryant said.

He said they were motivated by wanting to contribute to the next generation.

"I think that **inherently** most people, even those of us who have made the worst decision in our lives, want to be a part of something good," said Bryant, 41 years old, who earned a bachelor's and two master's degrees remotely while in prison. "This idea when we started was just so good: We can help some young man get a head start that a lot of us didn't have."

Bryant likes to tell the story of the day in fall 2016 they came up with the scholarship idea at Soledad prison, where he served 20 years. Students and inmates were in the book group discussing a book they'd read about a different kind of prison -- a prisoner-of-war camp, described in Ernest Gordon's *Miracle on the River Kwai* -- and something clicked.

"Inside the POW camp, there were attitudes and behaviors that were very similar to what you typically see in prison today, with the gangs and **scarcity** mindset," Bryant said. "A small group of men made a different decision, and they decide to look out for each other."

In the book, the characters use the term "mucking" for having each other's backs.

Fellow inmate Ted Gray leaned over to Bryant and said to him, "Jay, we need to muck for a young man to attend Palma School."

They came up with the scholarship idea and soon asked Micheletti to recommend a student in need. He told them about Sy, who seemed like a perfect fit.

It was quickly decided, and five inmates who called themselves the Phoenix Alliance, including Bryant and Gray, went from cell to cell, encouraging fellow prisoners -- most of whom earn less than \$20 a month at their jobs -- to donate what they could twice a year. Bryant and his fellow team leaders told Sy's story to the inmates as they asked for donations.

Over three years, with some outside help, they raised the tuition. They sent the money to the school a few times a year to keep up with tuition bills.

In prison, inmates spend their money at an on-site general store, where they can buy snacks and hygiene items like toothpaste and deodorant. The state provides only soap, clothing, toilet paper and meals. While most prison jobs pay pennies on the hour, a few prison jobs, such as making furniture, pay \$1 an hour, Bryant said.

The \$32,000 the inmates raised includes \$8,000 kicked in by Creating Restorative Opportunities and Programs, a **nonprofit group** that Gray and his father started in 2008. All five Phoenix Alliance members are out of prison and four of them -- including Bryant, the director of restorative programs -- now work at the nonprofit organization, which is based in Folsom, California, and helps former inmates rebuild their lives and rejoin society.

Bryant's sentence -- originally 26 years to life -- was commuted by California Governor Gavin Newsom in March, with Newsom citing Bryant's positive work from prison, although he didn't mention the scholarship program in Bryant's commutation.

Sy got to join the Palma prison book group, usually reserved for upperclassmen, after receiving his first scholarship check in 2017 as a sophomore. He said the first time he met his **benefactors**, they were exceptionally kind and made him feel comfortable.

"You don't know what to expect going into a prison," he said. "You only know what you see on TV. Once I went through those gates, they were all lined up to shake my hand and meet me."

Many of the students at Palma School are on scholarships, and the school said it depends on generous donations. The Green family got some scholarship help from the school, but Palma can give only limited help to many families, Micheletti said.

During the fundraising campaign in prison, Bryant encountered resistance from some men who questioned whether they should raise so much money for just one person.

Bryant told them: We could "go a mile wide and an inch deep ... or an inch wide and a mile deep." If they helped hundreds of kids, they might be able to give them backpacks -- but imagine the impact they could make by investing that money just into one student, he said. Bryant hopes to repeat the scholarship program for another Palma student.

Sy is on a good path. His father got a successful heart transplant last year, and as a college freshman, Sy is majoring in communications. He hopes to play professional basketball and then work in sports broadcasting. He said the experience with the inmates taught him about humility and not judging too harshly.

These men may have done terrible things to get in prison. But they also feel deep **remorse** for their crimes and want to contribute to society rather than take from it, he said.

"You have to have an open mind," Sy said. "If you go in there closed-minded, you're not going to receive the wisdom they want to give to you."

Micheletti said the Exercises in Empathy program is now held over Zoom during the coronavirus pandemic. About 20 to 30 kids and 80 to 100 inmates plus some other community members participate in the sessions, which help motivate inmates to improve themselves and kids to make good choices, he said.

"The level of **civility** that the students and I and all the people who go inside experience far exceeds the civility we see in life in general," he said. "They treat us

with **utmost** respect."

The inmates in the program own and regret the mistakes they have made, and they want to get out of prison and live productive lives, Micheletti said.

"It becomes a great lesson in redemption and hope," Micheletti said. "We will all hurt people and we will fail ... so what comes next?"

## Questions

1) Read the following sentences from the article.

- 1) Sy was thriving and happy at the all-boys Palma School, in Salinas, California, and the school could provide some scholarship help, but not enough to cover the \$12,900 annual tuition.
- 2) Sy, who is now 19 years old and graduated from Palma School in 2020, attends the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, California, where he plays on the basketball team.
- 3) "I think that inherently most people, even those of us who have made the worst decision in our lives, want to be a part of something good," said Bryant, 41 years old, who earned a bachelor's and two master's degrees remotely while in prison.
- 4) The inmates in the program own and regret the mistakes they have made, and they want to get out of prison and live productive lives, Micheletti said.

Which two sentences taken together provide the BEST evidence to support the idea that everyone deserves a second chance?

- |            |            |
|------------|------------|
| a) 1 and 2 | c) 3 and 4 |
| b) 2 and 3 | d) 1 and 4 |

2) Read the following paragraph from the article.

It was quickly decided, and five inmates who called themselves the Phoenix Alliance, including Bryant and Gray, went from cell to cell, encouraging fellow prisoners - most of whom earn less than \$20 a month at their jobs - to donate what they could twice a year. Bryant and his fellow team leaders told Sy's story to the inmates as they asked for donations.

Which idea is BEST supported by this paragraph?

- a) Everyone deserves a second chance in life.
- b) Generosity is valuable no matter how small the gift.
- c) Prisons teach men and women how to rebuild their lives.
- d) Having a goal can help drive people to stay focused.

3) WHY did the author conclude the article by quoting Jim Micheletti?

- a) to show how grateful Sy Green is for Micheletti's help
- b) to offer hope for others who need help paying for school
- c) to challenge assumptions the reader might have about prisoners
- d) to demonstrate the toll the pandemic has taken on the organization

4) Which statement BEST represents Jason Bryant's approach toward raising money for Sy Green?

- a) He had people write letters to people they knew outside of prison.
- b) He asked Jim Micheletti to connect him with wealthy people in California.
- c) He gave everything he saved from his various jobs in prison.
- d) He asked men in prison to make donations throughout the year.

5) Choose an event or phenomenon described in the text. Explain the causes and effects of your chosen topic, using details from the text.