



2024 TIP Winner
Closing the Loop: Positioning
Formerly-Incarcerated Students as
Co-Instructors in Equity-Focused,
Community-Engaged Decarceration
Courses on Campus

Becca Pickus

LSA - Residential College Social Theory & Practice

Motivation for the Project

- ➔ Support students in **bridging prison-based learning** with their ongoing academic, professional and activist endeavors
- ➔ **Increase accessibility** for more U of M students to learn about decarceration activism with and from formerly-incarcerated or otherwise system-impacted folks
- ➔ **Center the wisdom of formerly-incarcerated students** by positioning them as co-instructors on campus, thereby **redistributing power and disrupting patterns of educational disenfranchisement** that narrowly define expertise and gatekeep access to University spaces



What is the project?

A class, RCSTP 450: "Restorative Justice, Decarceration, Abolition – From Theory to Practice"
A community of learners dedicated to creating and implementing more just, humane, effective and equitable ways of preventing, responding to, and healing from violence and harm.



TA Tore, pictured with his son Cooper, teaches us about supporting incarcerated parents. Cooper was 2 years old when Tore was incarcerated and 12 when he came home last year. Cooper comes to class, too, because he wants to teach us about being the child of an incarcerated parent, and about how much he loves and missed his dad.



Asia, pictured here, teaches us about the criminalization of mental health struggles. About how no human heals in a cage. How each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done, and how it isn't a "second chance" if someone never had a first.



TA Bear, pictured with Becca, teaches us about the inhumanity of solitary confinement – where he spent years, in an adult prison, beginning at age 16. He teaches us that his first puppy in the prison dog training program made him feel human again, and how proud he was to buy his mom a birthday present for the first time at age 37 – after 21 years of incarceration.



Tenee, pictured with her daughter La'Riya, teaches us about pregnancy and giving birth while incarcerated. La'Riya, now 8, comes to class, too, because she loves showing us her baby pictures, taken in the prison visiting room with Mom.

Outcomes

"I never thought of those incarcerated as real people, until Bear was in class sitting next to me."

"I put more effort into participation in this class than any other class I've taken at UM. I loved it so much and found a passion for decarceration activism. **This was a masterclass in empathy.**"

"I learned more from these guest speakers than from any professor I have had at Michigan."

"I hope to become a defense attorney, which means I'll constantly be working with incarcerated individuals. I will always remember Bear, Asia, Mary and Danny, and make sure that my clients know that they are heard and valued. I will lead with kindness and empathy so they may feel human, even for just the short time we have together."