

As a small child, Julie Doochin often accompanied her father to work. On the car ride, they would pass by what she saw as a beautiful castle. One day, she asked her father if a prince or princess lived there. Her father shook his head and replied, “that’s not a castle — it’s a prison.” It was, in fact, the original Tennessee State Prison. Ever since she saw the building, with its Victorian architecture and fortress-like facade, she could not stop thinking about the human beings who were hidden behind the stone walls and barbed wire.

Years later, Julie established the Tennessee Higher Education in Prison Initiative (THEI), a nonprofit that brings degree-granting college programs to prisons in Tennessee. Julie embodies the tenets of the Harpeth Hall Spirit of Service Award, and her accomplishments highlight the impact one person can make through passion, commitment, and perseverance.

Julie believes her Harpeth Hall education, and certain teachers in particular, served as inspiration for her path. “Dr. Art Echerd, my European history teacher at Harpeth Hall, made a huge impact on me,” she says. “His breadth and depth of knowledge was incredible, and his passion for the subject was infectious. Not only did he inspire my love of history and subsequent decision to become a history educator initially, but I also took from him the belief that you must have a deep understanding and comprehensive knowledge relative to your chosen area of expertise, which would serve me well later.”

Dr. Derah Myers’ English class served a pivotal role as well. “In her class, I nurtured a love of literature and poetry, and by providing the incarcerated access to a liberal arts curriculum,” Julie says. “I knew the students would read some of the classics just as I was able to do at Harpeth Hall.”

The love of learning instilled in her at Harpeth Hall drove Julie to advance her own education while simultaneously pursuing careers that allowed her to educate others. Prior to founding THEI, Julie taught high school AP European History and Psychology spanning nine years at Franklin High School, the American School of Milan in Italy, and Germantown Academy in Philadelphia. She later served as Education Director for the Tennessee Holocaust Commission. Along the way, she earned a bachelor’s degree in European History from Vanderbilt University (’94), a master’s degree in secondary education from Peabody Vanderbilt (’97), and a master’s in European history from the University of Pennsylvania (’03). In 2013, she received her doctorate in learning organizations and strategic change from Lipscomb University.



Julie Doochin '90  
2021  
ALUMNA SPIRIT OF SERVICE  
by Paige Ferragina Bainbridge '89



The path to create a college-in-prison program would not prove easy. “I didn’t have a college, I didn’t have a prison, and I had no money,” Julie recalls. “I just had a vision.”

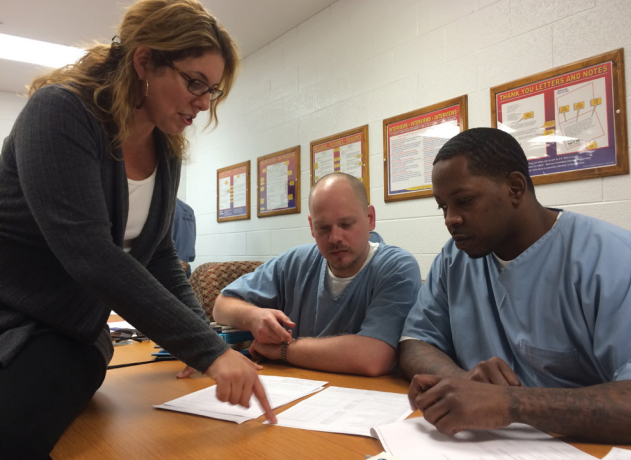
She approached the Tennessee Department of Correction (TDOC) and Nashville State Community College (NSCC), and a partnership was formed where Julie, through the nonprofit she founded for this purpose, would fund and coordinate NSCC degree-granting college courses behind bars. Unlike today, there was no bipartisan support for criminal justice reform and the idea of providing college education to prisoners was minimal at best in 2010. Since federal Pell grants for prisoners were banned in 1994, Julie had to find funding. Julie had to convince a lot of stakeholders along the way, including the state legislature and the department of correction, to support her initiative.

The next obstacle was getting the students to meet the admissions criteria of Nashville State and enrolled to start classes in January 2012. “During all the craziness, something beautiful happened,” Julie explains. “We were all so invested in making it work. The warden, the principal, some correctional officers, and the incarcerated applicants themselves all came together almost every night. I tutored, and students tutored other students.” More than 50 students tested and, in January 2012, 25 newly enrolled Nashville State students, taking English Composition I and World Religions, began pursuing their college degrees behind bars at Charles Bass Correctional Complex in Nashville.

Exposure to prisons was intertwined in the trajectory of Julie’s life. Her family’s business, American Paper & Twine, was located near all the Middle Tennessee prisons. She made a documentary on the oldest prison in the United States, Eastern State Penitentiary, with her 10th grade history students in Philadelphia. Julie also refers to a family history tied to the Holocaust. “I’m a grandchild of Holocaust survivors, and I don’t think my later passion for helping the incarcerated is a coincidence,” Julie says. “There’s something about that barbed wire.”

**‘I just had a vision’**

All of these influences culminated in 2009 when Julie happened to catch a *60 Minutes* segment about the Bard Prison Initiative, Bard College’s program behind bars. Julie knew she wanted to make a meaningful difference in an area where she was truly needed, and the *60 Minutes* piece lit the match of inspiration to do the same thing in Tennessee. “I wanted to bring light to a dark place, and I believed education was the way to do that,” Julie says.



**“I wanted to bring light to a dark place, and I believed education was the way to do that.”**

When Julie created the model for the Tennessee Higher Education in Prison Initiative program, she designed it as a credit-bearing curriculum with on-site professors offering a liberal arts education leading toward an associate degree.

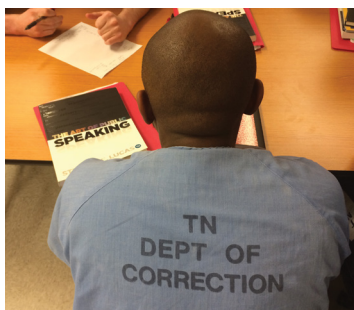
“There’s a level of critical thinking skills in a liberal arts education you don’t obtain through vocational education,” she says. “At Harpeth Hall, I learned the value of a quality, liberal arts education and over time came to believe that access to this sort of education shouldn’t be a privilege for a few, but a right for all, including those living behind bars.”

### Valuable partnerships pave the way

The pilot program was so successful it paved the way for a second college program at Turney Center Industrial Complex in Middle Tennessee, also with courses and credits being offered by Nashville State. In January 2017, a third program bringing college access to incarcerated men in West Tennessee through a partnership with Dyersburg State Community College started at Northwest Correctional Complex.

Twelve months later, in December 2017, 23 incarcerated scholars earned Associate of Science degrees in political science or business administration from Nashville State. Since stepping down as THEI executive director in late 2017, Julie’s initial vision of providing college access to prisoners statewide was realized when THEI, in partnership with Roane State Community College, implemented a college program in East Tennessee at Morgan County Correctional Complex. In 2019, THEI received support from the office of Governor Bill Lee to begin the development of a bachelor’s degree program, and the organization is solidifying college partnerships now.

Since its inception, the Tennessee Higher Education in Prison Initiative has enrolled hundreds of students who have benefited from the program. THEI college programs have been at four prisons statewide and operate actively at three today. To date, 56 college degrees have been awarded through THEI’s college partners and this number will grow to 75 by late 2021. Julie proudly notes, “not one person who has earned a degree has returned to prison.”



### A path forward

Following Julie’s success with THEI, Dismas House of Nashville sought her out. Julie became the Dismas vice president of programs in 2019 overseeing all aspects of resident care for this re-entry facility for men returning to the community from all 14 state prisons and all county jails statewide. In April 2020, Dismas moved from an eight-bed house on Music Row to a 72-bed campus. The program grew from serving 20 men

to 175 men a year, making it one of the largest facilities of its type in Tennessee.

“At Dismas, I have shifted focus from higher education behind bars to helping ‘returning citizens’ successfully reenter the community by facing the multitude of barriers they encounter,” Julie says.

Julie’s goal has been to help Dismas House become a model for reentry success in the state. “In Tennessee, roughly 50% of those who are released from prison will return to incarceration within three years. It’s hard to maintain employment or excel in school if you are suffering from untreated PTSD, bipolar disorder, or have a methamphetamine addiction,” she stresses.

Julie has developed an innovative and holistic reentry program that addresses both the underlying factors to successful reentry such as mental health and substance abuse disorders, in addition to the more tangible barriers such as lack of education and technology deficits, employment discrimination, driver’s license reinstatement, financial literacy, and lack of family support.

Coming full circle, the Tennessee Higher Education in Prison Initiative and Dismas House are now collaborating to strengthen the reentry pathway for THEI college students as they return to the community.

“It has been wonderful and heartwarming to see several college students I knew behind bars walk through the Dismas doors as free men and to collaborate with THEI to support them as they work toward their degree completion on this side of the bars,” Julie says.

Julie continues in her work of “bringing light to a dark place,” and indeed her gift of service shines as an inspirational beacon for us all.

