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OPINION

Michael Simmons: Great stories about self-transformation in prison distract from greater truths



Benard McKinley, a recent graduate of the Northwestern Prison Education Program at Stateville Correctional Center, is the first incarcerated person in Illinois to take the LSAT. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)



By **MICHAEL SIMMONS**

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Sometimes, seeing one truth can distract from seeing greater and more painful truths. Recently, I saw a great story on "Good Morning America" that brought home this uncomfortable realization.

The [GMA story is about Benard McKinley](#), a young man who turned his life around during his 23 years in prison, who was convicted of a gang-related murder that happened when he was 16 years old. The premise of this segment was that Benard allowed his "incarceration to be a time of (his) self-transformation," and this great story highlighted his academic journey through Northwestern University's Prison Education Program at Stateville Correctional Center, his graduation, release and admission to Northwestern Pritzker School of Law.

Benard is on his way to fulfilling his dream of becoming a civil rights attorney. I swelled with pride when I watched the video of him walking in freedom on Northwestern's campus. He belongs there. This is a great and true story.

I've known Benard for more than 20 years, and I can testify to the truth of his great story. We were teammates on the famed but short-lived Stateville Debate Team, and I can vouch for his substantive discussions with Illinois General Assembly members on reestablishing discretionary parole in Illinois. I know the truth of Benard's great story as presented on GMA, I rejoice in his freedom and I look forward to his work as a civil rights attorney.



The GMA story also featured the founder of the Northwestern program, professor Jennifer Lackey. Her leadership, advocacy and persistence have facilitated new possibilities and new choices for students in her program and students in other programs offered by Lewis University, DePaul University, Northeastern University, North Park University, and the Prison and Neighborhood Arts/Education Project. Northwestern's prestige, prominence and leverage have already changed the story of education in the Illinois Department of Corrections. Lackey has worked tirelessly over the years, initially securing private funding that led to the first class of students in the nation to receive college degrees in prison from a top 10 university.

However, because GMA's great story focused only on one exceptional person in one exceptional program, the greater truths of America's imprisoned generations were not just obscured but altogether ignored as well. By focusing on the exceptional, GMA missed the larger story. The story painted Benard's exceptional accomplishments as a miracle, an impossible triumph, a lesson of the possibility of turning one singular life around through hard work and discipline. The greater story, the greater truth, the reality, is that America's prisons have thousands of men and women like Benard, each somehow already excelling, making much from little, overcoming a hundred hurdles and a thousand barriers and showing transformed lives of rehabilitation and promise. But they lack the opportunities provided Benard and others (including me) who have benefited from the vision of Lackey and many others through the programs they dared to envision, fund and offer.



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GMA presents Benard as unlikely and exceptional. That is the problem. If we restrict the transformational story to the emotionally pleasing and exceptionally positive, we ignore the emotionally distressing and exceptionally negative realities of our prisons. When we restrict our vision to the single and unique good story, we ignore acknowledging and engaging systems and structures of injustice throughout the vast American prison system. When we focus on the exceptionally few programs for the exceptionally few students, we ignore the exclusion, the waste and the wanton cruelty of the punitive regimes experienced by most imprisoned persons. We would do well to invest in this generation of imprisoned Americans, and in so doing, uplift their families, communities and society as a whole.

The promise of rehabilitative programs remains just that — a prospect for most of America's imprisoned generations. With so few programs and with so many restrictions of eligibility and access, the promise of rehabilitation is still seen in the long lists of applicants for the very few and always underfunded academic programs and programs geared towards trauma awareness and healing. These programs are desperately needed to prepare people to re-enter society.

GMA framed Benard's story as a great exception, a miraculous occurrence. But if GMA had asked Benard, or the insightful Lackey, they each would have spoke of the hundreds of Benards still locked up and ineligible for educational opportunities; denied review, remedy or rehabilitation; and excluded by law and IDOC policy from classrooms.

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We all benefit from a good story, but some stories are more productive than others. If we stop at the great story, we may miss the greater story. We need to hear stories that link the exceptional with the daily, the few with the many, the lack of provision for the very great need. We need to be reminded of the very great potential of America's imprisoned millions. We need to see stories about the many Benards currently in prison and work to equip many more to do the work Benard is now well prepared to attempt.

It is time, in the spirit of justice and public safety, to make it possible for more women and men to make their time of incarceration a time of transformation.

Michael Simmons has been incarcerated in the Illinois Department of Corrections for 22 years. In May 2022, he earned a Master of Arts in Christian Ministry/Restorative Justice from North Park Theological Seminary's School of Restorative Arts. Currently, Simmons serves as a teaching fellow with Lewis University's Prison Education Program. He is also a co-founder and board member of the coalition Parole Illinois.

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