



# Thinking Back & Looking Forward



## Part 2

John Valverde &  
Cheryl Wilkins



## Introduction:

**Thinking Back & Looking Forward is a multipart conversation series that serves two allied purposes.** First, it reminds us of the vulnerability of public funding in higher education in prison. Second, it highlights the importance of shared investment and leadership from multiple stakeholders. In Part I of this series, we chronicled the responses of two corrections leaders, Brian Fischer and Elaine Lord, to the decimation of higher education in prison following the ban on incarcerated people's access to Pell Grants as part of the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Enforcement Act.

Part II of this series features two formerly incarcerated leaders from New York, Cheryl Wilkins and John Valverde, and their roles in re-establishing college programs after the financial aid ban. Cheryl Wilkins helped to found the Bedford Hills College Program in 1997 with the support of a broad coalition of other incarcerated leaders, correctional

leaders, educators, and funders. One year later, John Valverde contributed to the launch of Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison at Sing Sing Correctional Facility based on the Bedford Hills model.

These two programs still operate, providing high-quality education, equipping alumni for economic and social success, and have an immeasurable ripple effect on students, families, and communities. With Pell eligibility set to be restored for incarcerated people by 2023, Hudson Link Executive Director, Sean Pica, sat down with these two pioneers to highlight the beginning of their programs, the power of community, and advice for groups starting out.



Sean Pica (SP): I'm out and about every day talking about Hudson Link and am constantly reminded that there are so many different pieces to our founding. If any one of those pieces were different, none of this conversation would be happening today. All of these pieces really led to who Hudson Link is 22 years later. It is because the two worlds of Bedford and Sing Sing overlapped that Hudson Link was born.

■ What were you both thinking at the time of the founding of your respective programs?

**Cheryl Wilkins (CW):** For the women, the college program was not the first example of women inside prison heading a leadership program. It was ACE, an HIV and AIDS education program, before that. It was having a Senate hearing and uplifting violence against women inside prison and talking about their experiences of how they survived and were punished. It was the Family Center and Children's Center where women were able to talk about their experiences as parents.

A group of amazing leaders inside prison looking at adoption and women who were losing their rights to their kids during incarceration. It was a bunch of amazing stuff going on during that time, even before the college program was introduced and asked the superintendent for permission.

*For the women, the college program was not the first example of women inside prison heading a leadership program.*

As you said, none of this would have happened if we didn't have the right superintendent or if we were not in the right county. If you look at the larger picture, we were in a period where mass incarceration was growing. That phrase 'mass incarceration' rolls off our tongues now, but it wasn't rolling off our tongues then. Everything was about punishment and policies that put people in prison forever.

There were these pockets of folks inside who were fighting back. It was that fight in women that really amazes me. I didn't have any doubt that we could do it because I had examples and I had mentors.



My mentors taught the history of things that happened within that prison. Before that, I didn't know anything about the Omnibus Crime Bill, and I didn't even know how that intersected with higher education in prison.

Then I got schooled on what that meant for folks inside prison, how we lock them up, throw away the key, and give them as little as possible, leading to a higher recidivism rate. They educated me that all this was connected.

*There were these pockets of folks inside who were fighting back. It was that fight in women that really amazes me. I didn't have any doubt that we could do it because I had examples and I had mentors.*

**John Valverde (JV):** It is helpful to be reminded of all the amazing work that was happening before college.

The leadership and the partnerships with staff and volunteers already existed in different ways. When college was pulled out of Sing Sing, we didn't first jump to Hudson Link.

We first were just trying to rebuild the certificate program and relaunch it inside to fill some of the void left behind when Mercy and Bronx Community College pulled out of the prison.

I believe everything happens exactly as it needs to for the highest good. I've been saying that since I was incarcerated and

that's a hard thing to say in the conditions that many of us endured during our incarceration.

But it took the right people with the right shared mission, vision, values, and commitment. It was the right leadership, both among the incarcerated population but also among the volunteers and staff.

I sometimes wonder if we had been five years before or five years after, whether or not it would have been able to happen. I think we were the right people at the right time. Ironically, in the right place to create something that has made such a difference in so many lives.



■  
**SP:** People often think that it's an exaggeration when I say that the stars align. But that is truly part of our journey. I was in nine different maximum-security prisons and had never even seen a superintendent before. At Sing Sing, Superintendent Brian Fischer would come down and plop down without an escort and sit with John and say, "What's going on? Are you missing anything?" This worked because of Brian Fischer and Superintendent Elaine Lord at Bedford, and then because of guys like you, John, seated as a clerk. When you started Hudson Link, you were the youngest guy at that point to have ever gone through the Master of Professional Studies through New York Theological Seminary, right?

**JV:** I was 25 when I completed the Master's program while at Sing Sing, and I felt a responsibility to pay it forward and give back in different ways. I think a lot about what success means to those of us who've served time, who've overcome that process and been on that journey. I realize that success is

not just about being out of prison. You could be out of prison but struggling to survive, out of prison but homeless, unemployed, or living in constant fear of judgment and rejection from the world or addicted to substances or without a network of support.

For me, success is about the sense of belonging and worthiness in society that we all need to feel and experience. Ideally, there's been some healing from past trauma. Guilt and shame do not overly influence one's identity and decision-making. One has sufficient self-confidence and agency to use one voice and advocate for oneself. One has humility, compassion, empathy.

And you know what? That was the environment that the college program created: a safe and brave place for people to work out their trauma, begin to heal, and it just so happened the vehicle was education, and it could result in a college degree. It was that kind of environment which contributes to people's success, and that's how I'll always remember the college program.

*That was the environment that the college program created: a safe and brave place for people to work out their trauma, begin to heal, and it just so happened the vehicle was education, and it could result in a college degree.*



*I have the power now to speak to a gang member or a board member through my education. That's what education will do, give you that power.*

**CW:** I agree with you, and it's so important to talk about the power of community and peer mentoring. I argue all the time that peer mentoring, which the government has adopted as a strategy, started in prison. Peer mentoring is happening now because those inside are now home and understand its power and use those experiences to derail the school-to-prison pipeline, homelessness, and other pipelines that lead to prison. People who do not have that experience can't go into a neighborhood or get buy-in from somebody to really transform their lives.

I have the power now to speak to a gang member or a board member through my education. That's what education will do, give you that power. But also understanding where you come from, to get others who did not have that experience to know what this population needs and community needs.

I'm always excited about stepping into these boardrooms. And saying, "No, I know your intentions are good, but here is another way of thinking about it."

**JV:** Yeah, something else that comes up for me is the importance of family. At so many graduations that I've attended with Hudson Link, you could see the importance of family members, seeing it in the children of the graduates. You can see what it means to a parent to see their son or daughter graduate from college even though it's during incarceration.



John Valverde



**SP:** Can you talk about what was meaningful about being part of restarting the college programs in prison?

**JV:** I think it's important to say out loud it was a desire to make a difference for sure, but there was self-interest here as well. When I was able to rebuild my relationship with my father, he said to me, "Say yes as much as you can to help others, and you will find purpose, meaning, and be free." I still live by that today.

Restarting the college program gave me meaning and purpose. It kept me going. It made me feel each year that I was better than the year before. I was more knowledgeable, more experienced, more able to contribute each year, and it felt like I wasn't just wasting away in prison. Not only did I find meaning and purpose, but I was also growing.

I had already graduated, so this was not self-interest for me to get back into college but, it was a hope that others could have that transformative journey of growth and development year over year. It was the belief that we could all make it home one day and be better than we came in.

**CW:** I came into prison in '97, so there was already a buzz around the women organizing to bring college back. There was so much excitement because they'd seen the evidence for college programs from women who had been educated before Pell was taken away, who went home, and had levels of success.

*Not only did I find meaning and purpose, but I was also growing.*

*...it was a hope that others could have that transformative journey of growth and development year over year. It was the belief that we could all make it home one day and be better than we came in.*



**CV:** These women came back through the prison, not in handcuffs, but to talk to us. To get us to understand the power of education and how it can transform our lives. A lot of programs and organizations tend to think that reentry starts on the outside and what they said to us was: The starting point is now. The things that you're doing now can transform your life. And not just transform your life but transform the lives of your kids and your community.

When college came back, the whole conversation in the visiting room changed between mothers and their kids. There was more interest in their homework in the visiting room. There was more interest in going down to the Children's Center and talking to their teachers. The telephone calls all changed, and then there was even a sense of pride from the children themselves. Like, "Okay, so my mother made a mistake, but she's changing her life now she's in school. She's a college student, and things are going to be better when she gets home." I also know some instances where some of the older women, mothers, and kids went through the college process together. It was beautiful to see them studying together, giving each other books and readings.

That is why I got involved. As John said, I also saw a chance for me to transform my life.

From the beginning, it was an-each-one-teach-one philosophy that was going on and you didn't have to be already a graduate to give back. I taught pre-college math while I was still in school because I was good at it. There were some good writing tutors too. We weren't waiting until we graduated; it was whatever you're good at, give back in that.

It's sad to say that folks in these positions don't understand the power of old-timers, the folks who have done a long sentence. If they did, they wouldn't have limited Pell grants to people 5 years away from their board<sup>1</sup>.

Because a lot of what John and I are talking about is the power of those that have done a substantial amount of time. Even if they never went home, they were investing in us so that when we went home, we could make a difference. They found some purpose in their life in giving to their community, and that community just happened to be a prison system.

<sup>1</sup> A reference to an eligibility requirements put in place by the U.S. Department of Education during the Second Chance Pell Experiment.



*Even if they never went home, they were investing in us so that when we went home, we could make a difference. They found some purpose in their life in giving to their community, and that community just happened to be a prison system.*

# *The ability of this community to restore confidence – name the obstacle but face it and not run from it, and then to restore and grow each other's confidence.*

■  
**SP: What were the major obstacles you faced when starting these programs, and what kept you going when facing challenges?**

J.V: Something you learn in prison – all of us who've done time know this – that you can only do one day at a time. Now that we're in society, everyone wants the pandemic to be over like yesterday, and we all do, but we get the importance of taking things one day at a time.

When I think about the obstacles that we faced, I think partly ignorance is bliss. We didn't even realize what it was going to take, so that's part of it. But the other piece is, we didn't look at the 12,000-foot mountain in front of us. We just looked at the next step that we needed to take. And then the next step, and the next step, and the next step.

And before we knew it, you know we were at the peak at the summit of this mountain. But what was so beautiful about it was that we did it together. I think it's critically important to remember that it was the alignment of all the people who had to journey together to get to this place, and that was the key that drove us and kept us going.

I really love what you said earlier Cheryl, about the community. The empathy in the community that was taking this journey together. The ability of this community to restore confidence – name the obstacle



but face it and not run from it, and then to restore and grow each other's confidence. This community's ability to put us back on track for a hopeful future to take that next step.

That one day at a time to keep our eyes on the prize. It's a little cliché, but it's true, and that's what happened. That's what kept us going. Even when we faced obstacles and the challenges were big, we stuck together. I'm just grateful to have been a part of it.

**CW:** It was an interdependent process. We couldn't have done it without the superintendent, and the superintendent couldn't have done it without the community, and the community couldn't have done it without academia.

We were in a time where it was, “lock them up and throw away the key”. We were also in a time when the position and voice of women were not being respected in a way that folks took seriously. Just think about Elaine Lord, a superintendent in a male-dominated position. She had the nerve to go to Albany and ask them to approve a college program being put back into a system where they just took it away.

That took a good amount of strength, that took a good amount of courage to go up there and say, we can do this. We're going to do it through private funding, and we're going to raise money. All we're asking for is your blessings, so let this happen. More or less, step aside and let us do this because we can do it.

I really don't look at them as obstacles. I look at them as experiences that I have learned to overcome. That experience gave Kathy Boudin and me the gall to say to Columbia University that we want to start a Center for Justice to transform another system that has historically excluded poor people and people of color and people with criminal records. We weren't afraid of that.

*Just think about Elaine Lord, a superintendent in a male-dominated position. She had the nerve to go to Albany and ask them to approve a college program being put back into a system where they just took it away.*

*That took a good amount of strength, that took a good amount of courage to go up there and say, we can do this.*

*I really don't look at them as obstacles. I look at them as experiences that I have learned to overcome.*



■  
SP: I love it! I know in the conversation we had with Brian and Elaine they said the Commissioner was openly saying, "I don't want to know what you were doing. You want to try some college stuff, I get it, but I don't even want to hear about it" because no one wanted to touch it back then. They knew it was happening, but they didn't want to be informed about it.

Thinking about the program at Sing Sing, there were men like John, Merv, Ralphie, House, Darrel, and Williams. These guys took a role in helping the program because they had their graduate degrees but were incarcerated and lived there. Right now, I have two graduate degrees, and to this day, these guys were some of the best educators I've had. It was a different environment and really meaningful.

JV: I think to your point, Sean, it was the integrity of the programs. It can't be some watered-down version in the prison setting. It's got to be the same quality if it's going to have the impact that we all want it to have.

The professors have to come to it with integrity and full accountability, not a pity or trying just to do handouts. We need the rigors of a real college program because that's the transformative journey that all of us were on, and it's what's serving us today.

I'll always remember, tell us the size of the problem you're trying to solve, and I'll tell you the size of your life. That's true here in society, but wow, was it true during our incarcerations. The problem we were trying to solve was huge but worth it. It made our lives so meaningful and the lives of so many others meaningful.



*We need the rigors of a real college program because that's the transformative journey that all of us were on, and it's what's serving us today.*

## Biographies:

**John Valverde** is President and CEO of YouthBuild USA. He joined YouthBuild in 2017 after decades of work as an advocate for creating access to opportunity and removing barriers for formerly incarcerated and marginalized people.

John began working with imprisoned individuals in 1992 to ensure access to HIV/AIDS counseling, high school equivalency instruction, alternatives to violence programs, and college education. In 1998, he co-founded Hudson Link for Higher Education, the first privately funded accredited college program in New York's prisons.

As a leader of lived experience who was incarcerated at the age of 21, John is a true reflection of the importance of healing and equity of second chances and example for the young people of YouthBuild who are seeking their own second chance.

John is a Marano Fellow of the Aspen Institute's Sector Skills Academy, a Pahara-Aspen Education Fellow, co-chair of the National Service, Civic Engagement and Volunteering pillar of the Partnership for American Democracy, member of the New York State Council on Community Re-entry and Reintegration, and member of the Council on Criminal Justice. He holds a Master of Professional Studies in Urban Ministry from the New York Theological Seminary and a bachelor's degree in behavioral science from Mercy College.

**Cheryl Wilkins** is one of the founders of the college program at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Currently, she is the Co-Founder and Associate Director at Columbia University's Center for Justice (CFJ) where her work is committed to ending the nation's reliance on incarceration, developing new approaches to safety and justice, and participating in the national and global conversation around developing effective criminal justice policy. She is also an adjunct lecturer at Columbia University School of Social Work and director of Women Transcending.

Cheryl is a consultant for Healing Community Network and has been instrumental in developing the Justice in Education Prison Program, a project that facilitates Columbia University professors teaching inside Bedford Hills, Taconic and Sing Sing Correctional Facilities.

In the community, Cheryl is a board member with the Women's Community Justice Association, a co-convenor of the Justice 4 Women's Task-Force, an advisor with the Survivors Justice Project and the formerly incarcerated Women's International Commission, a senior advisor with the Women & Justice Project, and co-founder and executive team member with Women Building Up. She holds a graduate degree in Urban Affairs and is the recipient of the Brian Fischer Award, Davis Putter scholarship, the Sister Mary Nerney Visionary Award and the Citizens against Recidivism Award.



2018: John Valverde with Flor (his mother) & Vickie (his wife) at the Hudson Link 20th Anniversary Gala  
Photo Credit: Babita Patel for Hudson Link

Thinking  
Back &  
Looking  
Forward