

An Alternative Odyssey: Stories from Behind the Walls  
New Arts Venture Challenge Grant Proposal  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Officially established in 2013, the Oakhill Prison Humanities Project (OPHP) provides free evening classes to inmates at Oakhill Correctional Institution (OCI) on topics such as creative writing, fiction, poetry, drama/theater, history, and African-American studies. Our proposed project will showcase the creative work produced by the men who take our classes through a public reading, a multimedia exhibition, and a small publication.

In an effort to bridge gaps between diverse communities in Dane County that face major socioeconomic disparities, we would like to bring the participants' art out from behind the walls of the prison and to make it available to a much broader audience. We will gather stories, poems, memoirs, and other writings over a period of several months for an exhibition that will be held in public spaces, such as the Madison Public Library and the Oregon Public Library. The exhibition texts will be grouped into categories (such as Family, Childhood, Travel, Time, Identity, Humor, Change, and Love) for display on 6-8 high-quality posters in order to provide some thematic unity while allowing for a diversity of voices and narratives. The sum of these pieces will be "An Alternative Odyssey: Stories from Behind the Walls."

Additionally, we will feature artwork produced by inmates alongside the texts; these drawings and paintings will "illuminate" the words and connect directly to the themes mentioned above. Recordings of the authors reading their work, along with music written and recorded at OCI's music room, will be made available for listening on headphones as part of the exhibition. For the opening reception, local writers as well as students from the UW Creative Writing Program will be invited to read samples of the exhibiting artists' texts to the audience. This event will be an opportunity for community members not only to witness the inmates' multi-faceted artwork but also to discuss pressing issues such as education (in prison and in general), the role and power of art in individuals' lives, and the state of incarceration in Wisconsin and the nation. Finally, a chapbook of approximately 30-40 pages featuring the stories and art chosen for the posters, and other works as space allows, will be made available at no cost to attendees of the exhibition. Selected writings, artwork, and recordings will also be hosted on *The Madison Review's* website (<http://english.wisc.edu/madisonreview>). We hope to allow as many people as possible to experience this multimedia endeavor.

This project aims to have a tremendous impact on both the participants and the local community, including the university. Contact with the outside world is of immense importance to those who take our classes. Whether they write about their own lives or not, these are artists and thinkers who often feel invisible; the opportunity to be acknowledged through their art will provide them with a powerful outlet for self-expression and creativity. Having a piece displayed will grant these artists a more tangible "benefit" to our classes on the way to re-entry, one by which the outside community will also be enriched. The audience will come to see art from perspectives to which they rarely, if ever, have access. Much of the public's perception of prisons is derived entirely from media such as television and Hollywood films. This project will offer a more humanistic perspective that illustrates the many talents of men deemed unfit for society. Likewise, it will directly address the importance of engaging inmates' voices in Dane County, which has the most racially disproportionate incarceration rates per capita in the US. Rather than exoticizing the prison experience, our project seeks simply to provide a public space where the humanity of those we seldom see may be reflected in creative collaboration between the artist and the viewer.

Appealing to our contacts among the university, partner organizations, writing groups, and the local press in Madison, we will be sure to reach a very wide audience. We will also make extensive use of social media and other online resources to spread the word about our worthwhile venture.

## EXHIBITION PLAN

Our first summer session of classes at Oakhill will begin in mid-June. At this point the instructors in the Tuesday Writing Workshop class, including Megan Kennedy, Ron Kuka, and Michael McDaniel, will start introducing the project to inmate participants, providing writing prompts designed to produce interesting stories, and revising submissions in a collaborative workshop setting. In addition to this writing component, we will be launching a new art class with a focus on portraiture in the fall and will incorporate pieces from participating students in the exhibition, too. (Any inmate taking one of our

classes will be eligible to participate, but these two groups will naturally cull the majority of entries.) We will gather works and refine them as necessary over a period of eight months (June 2015 to January 2016). Inclusion in the exhibition and chapbook will be fairly competitive as we aim to foster teamwork, determination, creativity, and flexibility in the participants. We want them to produce their very best possible work and to grow as artists.

As administrative staff must approve all materials taken out of the prison, pursuing a long-term plan such as this one is beneficial on both sides: prison administration may process submissions gradually, rather than in one lump sum, and we will be able to prepare materials for the exhibition with greater attention. The approval process will involve a participant submitting a completed work to either the Education Director or Deputy Warden at OCI. They will then make sure that there is no issue with the piece being displayed and pass it on to us. As we receive approval for individual works, we will set up monthly or bi-monthly recording sessions at the prison for the authors to put their words on tape. This flexibility will allow us to deal more easily with any challenges that occur along the way.

We have a complete infrastructure within the prison to support the project thanks to the classes we offer, but we are now seeking the resources to take the work of the inmates outside the walls. Although the OPHP has previously received other grants, those funds are limited to material, administrative, and logistical costs.

The project will naturally involve close collaboration with Oakhill Correctional Institution and the WI Department of Corrections. While the OPHP was formally founded in 2013, many of our volunteers have been teaching there since at least 2010 and the roots of the organization go back to 2007. Consequently, we have very positive relations with staff at OCI. In the past we have been able to host a small public reading of class participants' poetry and likewise to share some of this work on WSUM. A documentary, *Dostoevsky Behind Bars*, was produced in 2014 about the OPHP. The film's director, a former volunteer, was given unprecedented access to the prison, demonstrating that the OCI administration trusts our organization and recognizes the value of our work there. At a recent volunteer appreciation dinner, Warden Daniel Westfield spoke very highly of both the film and our programming. In short, we have had great success with permissions in the past. We now hope to implement a much larger, comprehensive project that emphasizes multimedia opportunities, connections with the community, and, most importantly, the wide range of talents at Oakhill.

We will also work with public venues that are willing to host us, such as city and university libraries and museums. We have spoken with Trent Miller, the Madison Public Library Program Coordinator, and Alexandra Lakind, who helps coordinate the IMLS grant "Bubbler @ Madison Public Libraries: A System-Wide Approach to Learning through Making," and they both expressed enthusiasm about the possibility of partnering with us. We plan to launch the exhibition with a reading at Central Library Branch and then take it to other MPL branches and the Oregon Public Library throughout April and May 2016. We then hope to find a permanent home for the exhibition contents, or at least as many of them as permitted, at OCI. Its presence there will inspire other inmates to develop their creative abilities.

Our project will produce several service-learning opportunities for UW students interested in the arts, social justice, and public humanities. Nancy Buenger of the School of Library and Information Studies will be working with us to place some of her students in volunteer positions to help with various aspects of the exhibition, including design and archival duties. Such partnerships further our goal of connecting the needs and interests of incarcerated people with the outside community, furthermore offering opportunities for future information professionals to learn hands-on about service to traditionally underrepresented populations.

To complete our project we will require audio recording and playback equipment, digital editing and layout software, arts supplies, and poster printing. Fortunately, we will be able to outsource much of this technology at no cost from partner organizations, such as *The Madison Review*, and our volunteers who specialize in audio recording. The undergraduates who edit *The Madison Review* will design the chapbook and host texts and audio recordings on the journal's website. Samantha Link, in collaboration with the journal's incoming editor Alissa Valeri, will coordinate our design, web, and archival needs.

### AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

Our audience will be very diverse. The project by its very nature should be of interest to people affiliated with the university, local public service organizations, and creative writing organizations. It touches on issues of critical importance to these areas, as well as many others, and reveals the interconnectivity of these seemingly disparate communities. We will encourage past OPHP participants and the families and friends of the exhibition's contributors to come see the great work produced by these men seeking to use their time constructively while in prison.

By taking the exhibition to several neighborhood library branches, we wish both to reach as wide an audience as possible and to provide arts programming to communities that often do not see this type of work. As explained in the Executive Summary, our project will provide an invaluable look into the work of men who traditionally have no such outlet to the outside arts community or even to the world at large. We hope that this exhibition will, at the very least, challenge the visiting public's conceptions of prisoners, art, education, and incarceration. By giving a forum to underserved and unheard voices, we will unlock an entirely new segment of the arts for the local area, while fostering dialogue and highlighting commonalities between different segments of the highly diverse, yet divided population in Madison.

### TIMELINE

Our project will build upon the substantial work and efforts already conducted by the OPHP. For example, the Writing Workshop, one of our longest-running classes, meets with inmate participants to develop and craft their texts every week. This proposed project will be a natural step in the evolution of the courses we currently offer and will allow us to work with other OCI programs (arts, music) in a way that is organic and beneficial to all. Our courses typically run in eight-week sessions with two-week intermissions in between and a longer break during December and January. The proposed length of the project provides the added benefit of allowing a greater number of men to participate in our classes and, thus, in the exhibition.

- **May 2015:** Finalize plans with possible venues including the Madison Public Library.
- **June 15 - Aug. 7, 2015 (Summer Session):** Begin workshopping, collecting, and submitting texts for prison administration approval. Finalize plans with venues if necessary. Record readings and music following approval. Begin organizing and archiving submissions.
- **Sept. 8 - Oct. 30, 2015 (Fall Session):** Continue workshopping and collecting texts for prison administration approval. Record readings and music following approval. Edit and prepare any materials approved for display at exhibition and online. Begin designing chapbook.
- **Nov. 9 - Dec. 11, 2015 (Fall Mini-Session):** Continue workshopping and collecting submissions for prison administration approval. Edit and prepare any materials approved for display at exhibition and online. Continue designing chapbook. Begin contacting press and local writers for opening reception reading.
- **Jan. 25 - March 18, 2016 (Winter Session):** Finish workshopping and submitting texts. Finish editing and preparing any materials approved for display at exhibition and online. Have display posters with texts/artwork printed. Finish designing chapbook and have copies printed. Continue contacting press and making radio appearances.
- **March 20 - March 31, 2016:** Set up exhibition at first venue. Continue contacting press and making radio/newspaper appearances.
- **April 1, 2016:** Opening night reading and reception.
- **April 1 - May 31, 2016:** Exhibition on display at various locations. Texts and recordings made available on *The Madison Review's* website.

### KEY PERSONNEL

**José Vergara** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literature. He has regularly volunteered and led classes at Oakhill Correctional Institution since May 2011 and has served as Project Coordinator for the Oakhill Prison Humanities Project since June 2014. In this position he has

managed all communication between prison staff and volunteers, designed class posters for use within OCI, and organized and promoted events including a screening of *Dostoevsky Behind Bars* at the Marquee that featured a Q&A session with the director and instructors. He was recently awarded the Exceptional Service Campus-Wide Teaching Assistant Award.

**Megan Kennedy** is a graduate student in the department of Slavic Languages and Literature. She has volunteered at Oakhill Correctional Institution since September 2013, and has been a regular instructor in the Writing Workshop since the fall of 2014. While her undergraduate background is in classics and philosophy, her current academic interests include modernism and late 19th century literature. She is looking forward to bringing these diverse interests to the future development of classes at Oakhill and continuing to work with the enthusiastic, dedicated students there.

**Samantha Link** entered the UW School of Library and Information Studies in fall 2014 with strong interests in social justice and services to diverse communities. She volunteers with the Jail Library Group and has enjoyed participating in the Tribal Libraries, Archives, and Museums project at SLIS. She is excited to combine her past experience with publications and book arts projects and current studies of information architecture while building bridges with others interested in incarceration issues.

#### FINANCIAL PLAN/BUDGET

ITEM	COST	EXPLANATION
Venues	\$0	We plan to use spaces, such as the Madison Public Library, made available to us at no cost.
Writing Workshop materials	\$0	The Tuesday Writing Workshop has a short story reader already on stock at OCI for use by participants. We have never been required to provide any writing materials to students.
Art supplies donation	\$650	We would like to donate art supplies (paints, brushes, pencils, paper, canvases, etc.) for use by participants in our art class as well as the regular OCI arts program, with which we will be collaborating closely. This program has recently undergone budget cuts, making inmates responsible for paying more for supplies than previously. This is a true burden for the majority of artists there. A donation will provide them with much greater access. We will work with the OCI Activities Coordinator, Marilea Groves, to determine which materials are most needed at the prison and in our new class.
Audio playback devices (6) and headphones (6)	\$120	We will set up stations for visitors to listen to the recordings of the inmates' readings and music.
Chapbooks (design and printing)	<i>Design: \$0</i> <i>Printing: \$500</i> <i>Donation: \$300</i>	<i>The Madison Review</i> staff will donate design labor, which would normally cost a significant amount, as an in-kind donation. They will also donate \$300 toward the production of chapbooks that will be distributed to the public.
Display posters for texts	\$750	We would like to print the texts and artwork on high-quality poster boards. The final number (6-8) will depend on the submissions received. We will continue researching prices around Madison for the best possible deals until closer to the event, but Bob's Copy

		Shop, for example, offers the following options: color print on pliable poster stock for \$5/sq.ft. A 3' x 5' will cost ~\$75/ea. or 4' x 5' will be \$100/ea.
Flyers/posters for event promotion	\$50	We will advertise the reading/exhibition around Madison with flyers and posters. See below for more details.
Recording (service/device)	\$0	One of our volunteers has experience with audio recording and can provide this service/equipment at no charge. Based on our research and needs (3-4 hours of labor/recording), the market rate for such services would be approximately \$300-600.
Comment book for exhibition	\$15	A comment book will allow us to gather feedback that may be used to advertise our project, connect the artists and audience, and provide a space for visitors to reflect on the exhibition.
Opening night reception	\$150	We would like to provide snacks from Just Bakery ( <a href="http://www.emum.org/justbakery.html">www.emum.org/justbakery.html</a> ) at the reception. The Madison-Area Urban Ministry's Just Bakery is "a vocational and employment training program specifically designed to meet the needs of men and women returning to the community after incarceration."
<b>TOTAL - COSTS - DONATIONS</b>	<b>- Costs: \$2,265 - Donations: \$300</b>	Due to the nature of the program, we cannot charge for viewings or chapbooks. However, we will gladly accept donations that can then be used by the program to support further programming and projects such as this one in the future. Sustainability is one of our primary goals.

### MARKETING

- **Wisconsin Public Radio:** Criminal justice reporter Gil Halstead has been a major supporter of our program and others like it throughout Wisconsin. He will definitely cover our exhibition for WPR.
- **Wisconsin Public Television:** WPT featured one of our volunteers as well as the director of *Dostoevsky Behind Bars* on *Director's Cut*. José Vergara also knows a producer/director, Bob Trondson, who may be interested in producing something about the project.
- **WSUM:** Several of our volunteers have been interviewed on WSUM in the past, and some texts by inmates were read on air. Prior to our opening, we will seek an interview.
- **WORT:** We will arrange an interview and coverage on WORT as well.
- ***Isthmus* and *The Cap Times*:** Our project has previously received coverage in both the *Isthmus* and *The Cap Times*. See the "Press" page on our website.
- ***The Madison Review*:** This local journal will publicize the entire project through its website and Facebook page. Ron Kuka, a regular Tuesday night volunteer, is the journal's faculty advisor.
- **UW FIGs:** There are always a number of First-Year Interest Groups that cover topics relevant to our project (criminal justice, literature, creative writing). In the past the FIGs Director helped promote our *Dostoevsky Behind Bars* screening to instructors and students.
- **UW Programs and Listservs:** We will ask UW programs to promote the event via listservs and websites. Programs that have helped us in the past or are home to volunteers include: Legal Studies, Criminal Justice, Restorative Justice, CREECA, Slavic, English, Comparative Literature, History, and the Center for the Humanities. Some, such as CREECA and the Center for the Humanities, reach quite far since they are highly interdisciplinary.

- **Madison College Writer's Life Series:** Michael McDaniel, a Writing Workshop volunteer, has worked with this lecture program and will promote our project there.
- **Madison Public Library/The Bubbler:** As one of our primary partners, the MPL will advertise the exhibition through various channels, both online and at its numerous branches.
- **Jail Library Group:** This group, which is well-connected on Facebook, will help with promotion as they have in the past. Samantha Link has regularly volunteered with the JLG since fall 2014.
- **Social Media:** We will use social media such as Facebook and our website to promote the project. Our partners, such as *The Madison Review*, which has over 800 likes on its Facebook page, will also help on this front.
- **Flyers/Posters:** We will post flyers and posters in libraries, grocery stores, coffee shops, and other public spaces as well as on campus.

### TROUBLESHOOTING

The primary challenge for any project such as ours is typically receiving permission from DOC administration to use and display works produced by inmate participants. Fortunately, when speaking with Deputy Warden Paul Ninnemann and Warden Westfield about the project, we received a very supportive, welcoming response. Moreover, we have had success with similar, though smaller, requests in the past. By designing this project to be gradual, we hope to overcome any stumbling blocks that come up. We will provide ample time to prison administration for approval, which always goes a long way.

Please note that a letter of commitment is pending from Oakhill Correctional Institution. This request has been made to the Deputy Warden and the Warden, and the letter will be forwarded as soon as possible. In short, we should not have much difficulty proceeding with our long-term plans.

Another challenge will be selecting a space (or spaces) that will host our exhibition. Again, we do not feel that this will be a major issue as all the libraries we have in mind regularly hold such events, and we have already discussed our project with the Madison Public Library about a partnership. A support letter from MPL Program Coordinator Trent Miller is attached.

### RECENT WORK SAMPLE

- Our website ([oakhillprisonhumanitiesproject.wordpress.com](http://oakhillprisonhumanitiesproject.wordpress.com)) hosts more information about the project, its classes, participants, and past collaborations. Links to press coverage can also be found here.
- The trailer for *Dostoevsky Behind Bars*, the documentary about our program, can be viewed here: [www.imdb.com/video/wab/vi3777866009](http://www.imdb.com/video/wab/vi3777866009). The film includes interviews with inmates, volunteers, and prison staff. It features samples of participants' writing and music.
- Two past OPHP inmate participants were published in *The Madison Review* 35.2 (pp. 89-98) and *Verse Wisconsin* 113 (pp. 17, 36). See attachments 4 and 5.
- One of our volunteers, Anne Helke, recently produced an audio story on Oakhill's music room for WPT: <http://www.wisconsinlife.org/story/gathering-spaces-prisoners-gather-music-oakhill>.
- *The Madison Review's* latest online issue can be viewed here: [http://issuu.com/themadisonreview/docs/the\\_madison\\_review\\_fall\\_2014\\_86ed36a349c2b2](http://issuu.com/themadisonreview/docs/the_madison_review_fall_2014_86ed36a349c2b2).

### ATTACHED FILES

1. Project Proposal
2. CV: José Vergara
3. CV: Megan Kennedy
4. Résumé: Samantha Link
5. Writing Sample: Personal essay by Melvin Boone
6. Writing Sample: Two poems by Daniel Brandt
7. Letter of support from Madison Public Library
8. Letter of support from Nancy Buenger (SLIS)
9. Oakhill Prison Humanities Project brochure