

The Humanities Spark Dreams, Open Doors for the Urban Poor

By Ronald I. Habin

Juli lives in an Orlando center for homeless women. She works evenings as a bagger in a supermarket. She also studies the works of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and other great thinkers. They've taught her to reach for the stars.

"The great thinkers were not afraid to go out there into their dark night," she says. Her dream? She wants to

become a college professor.

Juli is one of 11 low income people who have graduated from the Clemente Course in the Humanities, funded by FHC at Valencia Community College in Orlando. The Clemente Program is based on the belief that humanities education can enrich the lives of the "urban poor" and help them

to make the journey from the periphery of society to its center.

Writer Earl Shorris created The Clemente Program on the lower east side of New York City in 1995. In his groundbreaking book, *Riches for the Poor*, he suggested a new educational paradigm: Poorly educated people can gain a better understanding of themselves and their world by becoming familiar with the works of

the giants of philosophy, history,

literature, art, and the other humanities. This knowledge can help them to develop broader perspectives, envision different possibilities, and become stronger citizens who contribute more to

society. The program was named after the Roberto Clemente Community Center

in New York City where the first

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Valencia Professor Elizabeth Eschbach reports that her students in the Clemente course are quick to grasp the ideas of the great thinkers, painters, and playwrights. In fact, they are more adept than traditional college students at coming up with real-life examples of the great thinkers' principles, she says. The Clemente students also show enthusiasm that carries their class discussions out of the classroom and down the hallways, she adds.

Juli (student surnames are withheld to protect their privacy) says one of her favorite books was Plato's *Allegory in The Cave*, because it helped her to understand and appreciate her own value system, an insight that made her feel empowered. Her classmate, Alfreda, says the book helped her realize that she had been locked inside her own cave. It awakened her out of the self-described bondage of her former circumstance and helped her find a "new way out the door," she says.

Their interaction with professors was also inspiring, Juli says. She recalls how some faculty members came to the center for homeless women to talk with Clemente students. That extra effort "restored her faith in humanity," she says. These role models have also affected the way she deals with her own 13-year-old daughter, she adds. Now, instead of nagging about less-than-stellar grades, Juli says she approaches her with the same enthusiasm of accomplishment exemplified by her Clemente professors.

With a grant from FHC, the University of South Florida conducted Clemente courses in Tampa and St. Petersburg in 2001. Several Clemente courses have been developed throughout the United States with grants provided by state humanities councils. John Scolaro, director of The Clemente Program at Valencia, is hoping to offer the course this fall for full college credit.

Perhaps the soul of the course is reflected in a letter sent by founder Earl Shorris to Scolaro last fall for the graduation ceremony: "One need not have a permanent home or a Harvard diploma to engage Socrates. He is always there for those of us who recognize our own humanity and take pleasure in thinking about it."

More information about The Clemente Course (offered to men and women) at Valencia Community College, is available at the website: <http://valenciacc.edu/clemente>