

## 'The Dr. Muhammad Experience'

By: Erin Perry



Howard University Assistant Professor Bahiyah Muhammad is not afraid of prisoners or ex-cons. She grew up in a family that embraced individuals with criminal records and even welcomed them into their home back when her family lived in the Far Rockaway neighborhood of Queens, New York, in the '70s.

"I was raised humanizing individuals that the world thinks about as throwaways," said Muhammad, who has been an assistant professor of criminology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Howard University since 2013.

On a mission to change the typecasting of incarcerated individuals, she is the mastermind behind the "Inside Out Experience," a curriculum comprised of three groundbreaking courses: "Policing Inside Out," "Prisons Inside Out" and "Juve Inside Out." The courses allow outside/Howard students to go into correctional facilities, where they learn about crime, justice, freedom and juvenile delinquency alongside members of law enforcement and inside/incarcerated men and women as well as juvenile delinquents.

Most of the Howard University students granted seats in the courses make a 30-minute-plus trek to the DC Jail or a youth detention center in Laurel, Maryland. Splitting Uber fares, driving their own vehicles or even renting cars – they do whatever they have to do to get there.

### Creating dialogue

Muhammad's work – which recently earned her a Global Teacher Prize nomination – has focused on encouraging students to extend themselves into the community and into the world as the world is happening.

Early in the fall 2016 semester of "Policing Inside Out," the group discussed the historical underpinnings of minorities and police-involved shootings of Black men around the U.S. Muhammad detected students were psychologically disconnected, frustrated and distressed. Through tears, some students explained that they, themselves, felt ill-equipped to handle the turbulence between police and Black communities – let alone go into those communities to help others endure.

"I had to help them to identify real-life solutions that they could implement to go back and be of service to their community," Muhammad said. "It's my job to pull out the pieces of them that are the most engaged or the most happy and use that for a starting point on a career path."

Howard student Chantel M. Smith works in law enforcement. She signed up for "Policing Inside Out" to challenge her perspectives about policing. It's been intense, said the second-year doctoral student from Waldorf, Maryland.

Because of her professional background, Smith understands the law and police policies.

"But, above that, I am a mother to three African-American sons," she said. "My belief entering the class is that enough is enough, and policies and practices need to change. That still holds true."

To ensure students are comfortable expressing their opinions in class, Muhammad encourages and requires open dialogue. So, outside/Howard students sit next to inside/incarcerated students throughout the semester.

Tanya Pace of Washington, D.C. is a Howard psychology major enrolled in "Juve Inside Out." The course's inside students have lots of questions about college because higher education seems so out of reach, she said.

"Some of them have not even been outside the neighborhood – and I don't mean the District of Columbia – I mean their neighborhood," Pace said. "So, all of this is new to them, too."

As the mother of a college-age son not much older than the inside students, Pace said she feels a sense of responsibility to help them because they are part of her community.

"The incarcerated students are my son's peers," she said. "We have to form a bond with the people who most need us in our community."

### Challenging stereotypes

Howard University student William Parker said his impulsive views of the inside students were diluted the day he met them.

"Before we went in, they told us the inmates were dangerous and told us what not to do and say – things like don't lend them your pencils or paper and don't hold one-on-one conversations with them," said Parker, a graduating senior from Stone Mountain, Georgia, who is majoring in administration of justice.

"So, we had preconceived notions about the inmates, but when we got in there, after we did the icebreakers telling each other our names, cities and what we expect to get out of the class, I could see those ideas start to be broken down."

Parker, who is enrolled in "Prisons Inside Out" and "Juve Inside Out," described the inside students as regular people who made bad choices, but "a lot of them have brilliant minds," he said.

And no mind – especially a brilliant mind – goes unchallenged in Muhammad's courses, which are collectively known around campus as "The Dr. Muhammad Experience."

### Changing lives

Rolanda Taylor, a Howard senior from Washington, D.C., studying administration of justice, appreciates that Muhammad asks thought-provoking questions of all students. She recalled Muhammad asking inside students in "Prisons Inside Out": "What can you put in front of you for you to not re-enter the prison system?"

"Some of them said my daughter, my family or my religion," recalled Taylor, who also is enrolled in the "Juve Inside Out" course. "But we talked about if in the heat of the moment, are you really going to do that? And they said, 'Yeah, because I don't want to be back here.'"

Interacting with the inside students has helped Taylor decide on a career path. After she graduates in May, she wants to work as a counselor at the DC Jail, preferably with re-entry or rehabilitation.

"I want them to have some type of hope," she said of the inside students. "It's me doing my part."

Parker, who plays football at Howard, said Muhammad has changed what he thought since boyhood would be his career – an NFL running back. Plagued with injuries to his knee and ankle in the last few years, Parker said he's found a more exciting career path because of the Inside Out Experience.

"I found myself getting more excited and passionate about Wednesday classes than playing football," he said. "I'm more excited about talking about grad school and getting my doctorate than talking about football. ...I hope I can talk to Dr. Muhammad for the rest of my life. She's one of the dopest people I've ever met."

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