

# Rikers Debate PROJECT

## NEWSLETTER

Issue 2 | Spring 2018

### Contents

Class Updates... pg. 1-2 | Events... pg. 2-6 | RDP Musings... pg. 6-9 | Campaign... pg. 9

## CLASS UPDATES

### **GRVC** - By Brian, Volunteer

At the George R. Vierno Center (GRVC), a team consisting of debate stalwarts Juel and Terrell reached the final round of our Tournament of Champions. They were matched up against debaters from the Eric M. Taylor Center (EMTC), and they debated whether Confederate monuments should be torn down across the United States. After a vigorous debate that raised issues of regional pride versus racial subordination, a close decision went to the EMTC team. More recently, GRVC students have been debating topics like public funding for space exploration, jury nullification, and net neutrality. In December, two classes were canceled because of lockdowns. Since then, clearances for our volunteers and call-downs for our students have been going smoothly, and attendance has often been in the double digits. GRVC volunteers and students are looking forward to plenty more debate and discussion in 2018!



Artwork By Camilla, Fortune Society

### **EMTC** - By Ben, Volunteer

At the Eric M. Taylor Center (EMTC), our team captains, Eric and Tony, participated in a demonstration debate about confederate monuments. With the help of their fellow students, they prevailed in both rounds of the tournament and took home the Rikers Debate Project championship belt! Since they are both home with their families now, we elected new captains. Thanks to Eric and Tony's recruitment efforts, there were many strong candidates. The class chose Maldonado, Q, and Gonzo, who will do an excellent job leading our team and defending EMTC's championship status. Recently, EMTC has switched to more nebulous debate topics such as Black Lives Matter, cultural appropriation, and social media. Students have excelled in taking these abstract topics and creating concrete case statements, leading to polished debate rounds. We look forward to continuing to give our students an outlet for their thoughts and feelings in a place where they are often silenced.

### **RMSC** - By Ana, Volunteer

At the Rose M. Singer Center (RMSC), we have spent the last few months working with new and experienced students alike. Students have mastered critical skills ranging from public speaking to clash. Our class has also tackled big issues from Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA) to bail reform. Although two classes were cancelled due to Department of Corrections staffing issues in December, we have jumped right into the New Year. Attendance has been comfortably in the double digits, with a growing roster of new students recruited by their friends. We are excited to continue tackling new and polarizing issues, and to work with the women at RMSC to prepare them for a huge and exciting 2018. After last year's Tournament of Champions, we also look forward to another face-off against GRVC, EMTC, and the Fortune Society.

### **VCBC** - By Mary, Volunteer

The Rikers Debate Project launched its first Spanish-language debate class on December 9, 2017. Not only is it the first RDP class taught in a language other than English, it's also the first class at a jail outside of Rikers Island. Our Spanish class takes place at the Vernon C. Bain Center (VCBC), also known as The Boat, in the Bronx.

We chose The Boat for our Spanish class for several reasons: First, half its population is Latino, so we knew that we would find students who primarily speak Spanish there. Secondly, The Boat is severely lacking in programming options for its population, especially programming in Spanish. When we first canvassed facilities to begin planning of a Spanish class, there were no other classes being provided in Spanish on The Boat.

### **Fortune Society** - By Jamie, Volunteer

As the first semester of the Fortune Society class came to an end in December 2017, we reflected on five successful months of class. Lectures were typically filled with 10-13 students, all eager to learn and debate. Throughout the semester, students were able to address the weekly topics in composed debates. They learned about the structural components of a debate, case writing, logical fallacies, and refutation. Students also enjoyed discussing and debating a wide range of topics including animal rights, the death penalty, and closing Rikers Island. In class and extra practice sessions, students engaged in numerous practice debates and received invaluable feedback from fellow classmates. It was incredible to witness the students develop their public speaking and critical thinking skills throughout the semester. The Rikers Debate Project is grateful to have had the opportunity to collaborate with the Fortune Society, and we look forward to reentry classes starting again soon!.

## **PAST EVENTS**

### **Bronx Freedom Foundation Fundraiser**

In September 2017, the Rikers Debate Project hosted a fundraiser on behalf of the Bronx Freedom Fund to contribute to the bail fund for under-resourced individuals charged with low-level offenses. We raised enough funds to free 125 from pretrial detention over the next five years.

We had a lively debate about whether the United States should eliminate cash bail. The debate featured Jalil from the Fortune Society and Camilla, a Rosie's alum and our first RDP fellow. Each student partnered with two former college debate champions. Ultimately, the opposition team won the round, although both sides gave compelling arguments and speeches.





“It’s easy to get overwhelmed by all the injustices in our justice system and hard to find a foothold for tackling them. Participating in the debate for the Bronx Freedom Fund was a way to both highlight the wrongs of the cash bail system while also showing the value of debate for young people navigating the (in)justice system. The event gave everyone present a way to get involved in fighting for a better system and a clear example of how powerful the work of the Rikers Debate Project can be.” -Emily

“I was impressed with the quality of argumentation and eloquence of both teams in the debate! I was particularly impressed by the performance of the RDP participants,

who gave well-prepared, insightful speeches at the beginning of the round. The quality of their remarks were very similar to the junior debaters I recall mentoring when I coached the NYU debate team in 2005. While I’m chagrined at our loss, it was a very close vote and I feel like everyone performed well. If I had a rematch, I would spend more time strategizing about how to make the most effective use of the time allotted. The fact that our opponents - who had to defend the current inequitable cash bail system - won is a testament to the quality of their arguments.” -Patrick



### Tournament of Champions

In November 2017, students from RDP’s Rikers Island classes and reentry class participated in a Tournament of Champions. The topic was whether Confederate monuments in public spaces should be removed. GRVC and EMTC advanced to the final round, defeating Rosie and Fortune, respectively, in semi-finals. Ultimately, the EMTC team was victorious, defending the presence of Confederate monuments as a opportunity to reflect on history.

A reporter and film team from Fox 5 News attended the final round. Their article on the event noted that “debate be used as a tool to help inmates rehabilitate and be more productive citizens when they reach back to the outside. . . . Both teams were well prepared and surprisingly up to speed on the world they are currently not a part of. They weaved current events and history into a narrative. [T]he winning team made the argument that the monuments should stay because we learn the most from our darkest moments.”

Camilla, who debated on the reentry team, shared her experience returning to Rikers and debating in the semi-final round: “Returning to Rikers was an interesting experience, part of me was a bit anxious at the thought of returning to such a miserable place, but it was different this time because I knew I was a guest and could leave whenever I wanted to. I went with several people from the class at the Fortune Society and ended up having a great time. . . . Though my team lost, the EMTC team we were up against went on to win the tournament, and thoroughly deserved that win. They were very well prepared, eloquent, and worked in sync with each other’s strengths. I was a little upset at losing, since I had been on a winning streak; but I realize you can’t always win and that if I had to lose, I’m glad I lost to a team that was so good. In the end, it was a good experience for everyone, and I hope that it can happen again sometime in the future (and I’ll reclaim my winning streak).”



## Ford Foundation Event

In December 2017, the Ford Foundation hosted the #Debate4Justice event, where Fortune Society debaters teamed with social justice professionals to debate whether New York should get rid of cash bail. Senator Michael Gianaris introduced the event, and Senator Jesse Hamilton gave remarks after the debate.

Felix and his partner, New York City Council Member Daniel Dromm, took the Government side, making impassioned arguments about the need to eliminate cash bail. Deyja and Stanley Richards, Executive Vice President of Fortune, opposed, citing situations where cash bail is necessary. The seven-member panel of judges included Assembly Member David Weprin, Queens Borough Director Nick Goulatta, and former Senator Thomas Duane. In a close vote, the Government took the well-fought round.



[Director Josh Morrison addresses the crowd](#)

“[I]t was my intent to speak my piece about what basically is a watershed issue. I had great expectations when I joined initially, and they were all exceeded. Being a participant at the gala debate provided validation for my every redemptive effort and lent me a measure of esteem that was much necessary. I was beyond honored to have been able to represent the

Rikers Island Debate Project and Fortune Society before those present. To be before a crowd of persons all have vested interest in social justice reform, and be able to speak was a chance of a lifetime.” - Felix

## Close Rikers Oversight Hearing

On Monday, December 4, 2017, the New York City Council held the first oversight hearing about closing Rikers Island. RDP fellow Camilla testified at the hearing. Here’s what she had to say:

As someone who was recently released from Rikers Island I see the necessity to close this east coast Alcatraz down. Rikers is one of the most populated jails in the country, and also one of the most notorious.

In the eight months I spent on that island, I saw and heard of inmates getting stabbed, raped, and abused. There is a culture of violence and hatred that goes far beyond the inmates. I know corrections officers who did nothing about it and saw ones who even encouraged this violent behavior. I also met many officers who were amazing and helpful people, but the culture of Rikers Island brings out the worst in people. No human being should be forced to live or work in that environment.

In the mental health housing area, detainees are left without adequate attention or medication. Over time, their conditions deteriorate. The lack of programs, in education and job training, is alarming. Our system should be designed to rehabilitate people, not cage them. Rikers Island has become a revolving door, even though there are concrete steps we can take to change this. Many jails have their problems, but the deep-seated problems on Rikers Island need more than just good will to fix. Closing Rikers is official New York City policy. All elected officials and city wide agencies need to do what is best for all New Yorkers and close Rikers now. We need to address the reasons people go to jail in the first place - such as homelessness, substance abuse, access



[RDP alum Jasmine \(right\) also testified at the hearing](#)

to education, and over-policing communities of color. We need a plan from the Mayor's Task Force with clear outcomes and a timeline that includes reporting the progress on closing the jails. Our city officials must be more transparent on their next steps to close Rikers Island. We also must create smaller, safer jails designed to rehabilitate and return people to their communities. This means more programs, including therapy and training programs.

New York City can't be known by this black mark on our record. The fact is that many of us must come home one day and, in order to make our reentry beneficial to society, certain steps need to be taken. Closing Rikers would be a huge step towards ending mass incarceration in New York State.

## Lobby Day

RDP's inaugural Lobby Day was held on March 14, 2018 in Albany, New York. Throughout the day, nine RDP volunteers and students met with members of the Assembly and legislative staff. Each meeting included background about RDP, a proposal for opening an RDP chapter in Albany, a discussion of voting rights for incarcerated people, and a request for sponsorship of our voting rights bill.



In addition to meeting with key legislators, we hosted a public debate in partnership with Assembly Member David Weprin, the Chair of the Committee on Correction. The topic was whether people in prison should have the right to vote. The two teams were Josh and Felix on the Government side versus Mary and Camilla for the Opposition. By audience vote, the winner of this demonstration debate was the opposition team, defending the position that people in prison should not have the right to vote.

RDP students and volunteers with State Assembly Member David Weprin.

are incarcerated or not," said Pat, an RDP co-founder who assisted in organizing the event. "The Lobby Day gave them a meaningful opportunity to discuss the very same ideas we've debated in the classroom with legislators who hold the power to make real change."

## Candidate Forum

On February 26, 2018, the Rikers Debate Project held its first candidate forum featuring Zellnor Myrie, a young lawyer who is running for New York State Senate in District 20. This district includes parts of Crown Heights, Prospect Heights, Park Slope, and Sunset Park in Brooklyn. Mr. Myrie is challenging Senator Jesse Hamilton, who belongs to the Independent Democratic Caucus (IDC), a group of Democrats who vote with the Republicans in the New York State Senate. This has provoked much controversy, and Mr. Myrie is running against Senator Hamilton to throw the Republicans out of power and create a unified Democratic majority.

The forum gave debaters an opportunity to ask Mr. Myrie questions on policy decisions that affect their lives. It covered topics like housing,



Camilla interviews Zellnor Myrie

immigration, healthcare, and criminal justice. The moderator, Camilla, described Mr. Myrie as genuine, personable, and thoughtful. “Although it was a small venue and audience, he gave us his full attention,” she observed. “He took every question, and helped us all understand complicated issues like the Independent Democratic Caucus, tenant and housing laws, and immigrant representation.”

Before the election, we hope to host another candidate forum with Senator Jesse Hamilton, and, if both are willing, a debate between the two candidates.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

APRIL	JUNE	JUNE
<b>25</b> <u>Petey Greene Debate</u> Debate Topic: “ <b>What’s in a Name?</b> ” <b>- Political Correctness and Naming Conventions in Criminal Justice -</b> <u>Location / Time</u> - 3:30 - 5:00 NYU Kimmel Center Room 5 60 Wash. Sq. S., New York NY 10012	<b>TBD</b> <u>ACLU Debate</u> NYC-DOC has approved our proposal to partner with the American Civil Liberties Union for its next public debate at Rikers Island! The topic is expected to be the <b>Abolishment of Pre-Trial Incarceration</b> and the debate will be held at EMTC.	<b>TBD</b> <u>Fellowship Program Fundraiser</u> We are hosting a fundraiser in June with the goal of raising \$30,000 toward our fellowship program. The fundraiser will feature a public debate in which Camilla, our very first fellow - who has been leading our organization’s advocacy efforts, will be a guest of honor.

## RDP MUSINGS

### Student Reflection

**By: ShawnaKay, Fortune Society**

During high school, I never spoke in front of class. My first time speaking in front of the debate class, I just lost my words and kept laughing nervously. But, as time went on, I found that I was so excited about debating a topic that the nervousness went away on its own. We had a topic about animal rights where we had to conduct research and prepare our speech at home. I was so excited to present the speech, not only because I’m passionate about animal rights but because I had so much confidence in my speech I simply didn’t have enough room to be nervous.

In every debate, winning was my top priority, even if I didn’t necessarily agree with the side I was arguing. I didn’t taking losing well until one day I lost a debate because I didn’t have a lot of background on the topic. That day helped me view losing in a different light - not just taking it has a disappointing loss but as a learning experience, gaining knowledge that I didn’t have previously.

I know that in life, I may face obstacles and come across bridges that seem uncrossable. Over time, I’ve learned that change and new experiences aren’t necessarily a bad thing.





## **Volunteer Reflection**

**By: Palak**

Recently I had the opportunity to volunteer as a lead teacher at the Rosie Center, an all-women's jail. The debate topic was whether the United States should implement a maximum prison sentence. This topic was inspired by the prison system in Norway, where the maximum sentence is 21 years, regardless of the crime. In Norway, this policy serves as a tool to ensure that offenders are not only being punished but also rehabilitated.

Students were separated into three groups: the government, the opposition, and the judges. The government side argued against maximum sentences, and the opposition side argued for maximum sentences. The government team discussed whether justice would truly be served with a maximum 21-year sentence. They questioned whether such a policy would be fair to victims, and whether we should allow mass shooters and terrorists responsible for the deaths of many back into society. The opposition team argued that a maximum sentence would be a radical step forward in alleviating our country's extremely high mass incarceration rate. They argued that since the criminal justice system disproportionately targets black and brown communities, the prison system has turned into a modern-day version of slavery. Participants who served as judges listened objectively to both sides. After an intense debate over the morals and logistics of maximum prison sentences, the government side won.

Although the topic was complex, it put a lot into perspective for the students and volunteers. It sparked a conversation about the purpose of sentencing, whether incarcerated people change after they serve their time, and the role prisons should serve. Whether the students agreed or disagreed with each other, they listened to understand each other's arguments and create stronger counter-arguments.

In our post-debate reflections, the judges agreed with the idea of a maximum sentence policy. However, they felt that the government team made stronger arguments. Interestingly, the students on the government team really wanted to be in the opposition. Yet they challenged themselves to argue against what they believed.

It felt incredible to be in a space where such a complex topic was discussed both emotionally and intellectually. The class started as strongly opinionated, then slowly evolved into an environment where students were willing to challenge their mindset, listen, and confidently engage in a dialogue over a very personal topic. By the end, it did not really matter who won and who didn't. The goal was to ensure the students left class feeling more informed, more engaged, and more connected.

## **Food For Thought**

### **Student Poetry By: Kali, EMTC**

The truth is like an onion  
Layered, bitter, multi-faceted, and raw.  
When sliced whether it be ringed then battered or diced  
and used as the main component of a miraquá,  
which by another name is a menage-a-trois of carrots, celery, and facts.  
Let the essence of this truth bring tears to the eyes of the bearer of the knife  
who does their diligence to provide sustenance  
to those who come to feast at the dinner table.

## Ford for Thought

The truth is like an onion  
layered, bitter, multi-faceted  
and raw. When sliced, whether  
it be ringed, then battered  
or diced and used as the  
main component of a  
minapua which by another  
name is a minag-2-tois  
of carrots, celery and facts.  
Let the essence of this  
truth bring tears to  
the eyes of the bearer  
of the knife who does  
their diligence to provide  
sustenance to those who  
come to feast at the  
dinner table.

R. Barron  
aka  
KAF

### #2MillionVoices Campaign

Just Leadership USA (JLUSA) runs a New York City-based campaign to close Rikers Island, a statewide campaign to reform criminal justice laws, and a national campaign to reduce the number of people in prisons and jails by half by 2030. JLUSA is founded on the belief that the people closest to the problem are also closest to the solution. For that reason, the organizers are currently working to recruit as many currently incarcerated members as possible.

The project is called the 2 Million Voices campaign because there are about two million people incarcerated in the United States right now. We have enclosed a new member form, and membership is completely free for anyone who is currently incarcerated. If you or other people at your facility are interested, you can send the form to JLUSA at 1900 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10035.