

FIRST DEGREE

The expression, “sent up the river,” was coined by convicts who were sent up the Hudson River to do their time at the infamous Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, NY. FIRST DEGREE finds hope in this seemingly hopeless place by investigating an unusual college behind bars that is successfully preventing Sing Sing inmates from being sent back up the river after their release. Nationwide, over half of released inmates return to prison within 5 years, but for the past 14 years, less than 1% of the inmates that received a college degree at Sing Sing returned to prison.

FIRST DEGREE takes viewers inside this notorious maximum security prison and introduces them to some unforgettable inmates. We first meet Sean Pica, who was 16 years old when he went to prison in 1986. Sean’s high school friend, Cheryl Pierson, told Sean that her father was sexually molesting her, so Sean helped plan and carry out his murder. After receiving a 24-year sentence, Sean thought his life was over until a prison education program called Hudson Link gave Sean an opportunity to earn a Bachelor’s Degree. After serving 16 years, Sean was released, but he couldn’t stay away from Sing Sing. Unlike most of the paroled prisoners that Sean met at Sing Sing who reoffended and quickly returned to prison, Sean came back to Sing Sing to run their college program. He takes us through his early days in prison as a hopeless 120-pound, 16-year-old inmate to his discovery that college could open up an entirely new world of opportunity and possibility.

Next, we meet Jermaine Archer, a former drug dealer who was sentenced to 22 years to life for murder. Jermaine talks about how his prison reputation changed from being a feared gang leader from the streets of Flatbush, Brooklyn to being a role model for students attending college at Sing Sing. We attend Jermaine’s college graduation ceremony and watch as he, for the first time in his life, brings tears of joy to his mother’s eyes.

Lastly, we meet Clarence Maclin, who received his college degree along with Jermaine. Shortly after graduation, we catch up with Clarence, who is on parole and participating in Hudson Link’s re-entry program. We watch as the staff and volunteers at Hudson Link help Clarence acquire work-appropriate clothing, write a resume, search for jobs, and train for interviews. Ultimately, Clarence is hired by a nearby residential treatment program to work as a counselor with juvenile offenders. He relishes the opportunity help the young people he mentors avoid some of the costly mistakes he made as a teenager.

Although FIRST DEGREE is primarily an intimate portrait of three Sing Sing inmates who discover the transformative power of higher education, their stories are emblematic of larger challenges facing our society. Since launching the war on drugs in the 1970s there has been a 700% increase in the prison population. The land of the free is now the world’s biggest jailer with almost 7 million Americans in prison, in jail, on probation, or on parole. Although America has 5% of the world’s population, it has 25% of the world’s prisoners. We are shelling out 75 billion dollars a year for mass incarceration and devastating entire communities and families in the process. The three men we profile in FIRST DEGREE make it perfectly clear that higher education in prison can save lives as well as money. Nationwide, every dollar we spend on prison education programs saves five dollars on re-incarceration costs. But, Congress withdrew prison education funding in 1994, and the number of prison college programs dropped from 350 to about a dozen.

FIRST DEGREE is produced and directed by Roger Weisberg, whose 31 previous documentaries have won over a hundred and fifty awards including Emmy, duPont-Columbia, and Peabody awards, as well as two Academy Award nominations. FIRST DEGREE builds on Weisberg’s extensive body of work and represents the culmination of almost four decades of documenting the struggles, aspirations, and achievements of disadvantaged Americans.