

Clemente courses spread “the life of the mind”

written by Jean Cheney, Associate Director, Utah Humanities Council

Last fall, during his plenary talk at the Federation Conference in Chicago, Don Randel argued for the importance of the humanities to all people, everywhere. “You don’t have to be rich to live the life of the mind,” he said. “Education is the greatest liberation from poverty there is, but not only because of the economic status it makes possible. It frees the mind from impoverishment.”

Robin Smith would agree. Five years ago, she graduated from the Utah Humanities Council’s Clemente Course in the Humanities in Salt Lake City, a free college course offered to people living on low incomes. In June, she will receive her bachelor’s degree as a McNair Scholar at Westminster College. Next year, she is headed to graduate school in social work. Like thousands of Clemente students across the country, Robin found in the study of the humanities a way to greatly expand the possibilities of her life. Whether they continue in college or not, Clemente graduates describe lives that have been changed by wider reading, deeper reflection, and greater commitment to their communities.

When Randel said “Let everyone know that living the life of the mind is thrilling,” and that “a fundamental human right is the exercise of the intellect,” he might have been describing the mission of Clemente. The late Earl Shorris began the course in New York City in 1995, with the intention of bringing the riches of philosophy, art history, literature, American history, and critical writing to those who have not experienced them. The life of the mind, he argued, was a life of reflection, the only way out of the closed rooms that poverty creates. It enables people to become engaged in their neighborhoods and to use their voice for change.

Wrestling with big questions that break down walls is the hallmark of any Clemente class, whether in Chicago, Illinois, or Ada, Oklahoma, and whether discussion focuses on the Declaration of Independence or a poem by Pablo Neruda. These engagements also help people feel, often for the first time, empowered to give back to their communities. A Clemente student in Port Townsend, Washington, put it this way: “Clemente teaches altruism. Most of us, when we come in, are on the needing end of everything. We are down, have minimal resources, and feel pretty powerless. What we learn from Clemente is that we have something to give to our communities, and we want to do that. It’s pretty empowering, and it changes how we see ourselves.”

Humanities courses modeled on the Clemente concept are being offered in the District of Columbia, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin.