

# Doris Buffett pioneered prison education in Culpeper and beyond

By MICHAEL ZITZ For the Star-Exponent Sep 9, 2020

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Doris Buffett chats with Germanna Community College student Julius Berger. As an inmate in Coffewood Correctional Center in Culpeper County, Berger was schooled by the prison education program that Buffett's Sunshine Lady Foundation funded there, along with similar programs across the nation.

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Warren Buffett says his late sister Doris had her own “internal scorecard.” She always did what she thought was right, regardless of what others said.

A prime example is her dogged support of prison education.

Shortly after she passed away on Aug. 4 at 92, Douglas E. Wood, director of the Aspen Institute's Criminal Justice Reform Program, wrote a piece titled "When It Came to Educational Opportunities in Prison, Doris Buffett Was Ahead of the Curve."

From 2011 to 2018, Wood was a program officer at the Ford Foundation's Youth Opportunity and Learning team; for nearly two years, he served as acting lead of the foundation's global Higher Education for Social Justice initiative. He got to know Doris through that work.

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"With Doris leading the way, (prison education) philanthropy has stepped up significantly in recent years," Wood wrote.

Big foundations followed in her footsteps. Wood listed the Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundation, Gates Foundation, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Art for Justice Fund, Ballmer Group, and Bank of America Charitable Foundation as heeding Buffett's example.

## **To the rescue**

When it passed the federal Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, Congress banned incarcerated individuals seeking postsecondary education from accessing Pell grants, Wood noted.

Within a year of that action, the number of participating students dropped by 44 percent. In the ensuing decade, more than 90 percent of college-in-prison programs across the country folded.

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“But thanks to advocates, grassroots organizations, investments from the private sector and foundations, and Doris’ work, the momentum has steadily grown for the development and implementation of such programs,” Wood said.

This July, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to lift the ban on Pell grants for individuals in state and federal prisons, he noted.

## **A visionary**

It’s no exaggeration to say that much of this progress can be attributed to Doris Buffett’s clear-eyed determination. Despite many naysayers, she helped inmates across the nation, including those in the program at Coffeewood Correctional Center in the Mitchells area of Culpeper County, earn degrees.

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Those degrees reduce recidivism by helping former inmates get jobs and become not only productive citizens, but good parents. Doris saw this as something that improves the lives of not only the inmates and their families, but also will have a ripple effect for generations to come.

Doris was a visionary. When she began prison education programs across the country, some people said she was a ‘crazy aunt’ who didn’t know what she was doing in philanthropy.

She lobbied the Virginia General Assembly to get behind education throughout the state penitentiary system and she was close to getting something done before the Tea Party wave came. It’s not a stretch to say she was one of the leaders whose efforts culminated in national prison reform.

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After Doris’ passing, Wood wrote, “She filled the void for many years as one of the only funders of college-in-prison programs in the U.S.”

## **Reducing repeat offenses**

Education for incarcerated adults reduces the risk of recidivism by 43 percent, saving five dollars in recidivism costs for every dollar spent on educational programs in prison, Wood said, citing an analysis by the RAND Corp., a nonprofit think tank.

“Although more research is needed with respect to long-term outcomes for participants in college-in-prison programs after release, data such as these are promising,” Wood wrote.

“My grandmother had an eagle eye for people in real need with nowhere to turn,” Alex Buffett Rozek, Doris’ grandson, told me this month. “Everything she did was around helping to pick people up after they tripped and fell, helping them to get back on their feet.”

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“When she saw that recidivism rates fell to zero (at New York’s Sing Sing prison) for the formerly incarcerated with college degrees, she knew this was a program worth doing,” he added. “Access to education was a cornerstone of her philanthropy, and she built that into everything she did.”

Doris told Ted Schubel, news director of WFVA radio in Fredericksburg, in 2015: “You know, there are supposed to be second chances in this country, and a lot of these people never had a first chance, when you get right down to it. And I’m not your average bleeding-heart liberal. This is just the way I feel as another person occupying part of the Earth’s surface.”

At a Sing Sing graduation ceremony, she told a reporter: “I’m perfectly willing to put money where the greatest need is. I’m where I want to be. And how.”

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Doris was always excited to attend inmates' graduation ceremonies and was over the moon when her brother, billionaire investor Warren Buffett, attended a Sing Sing graduation with her in 2010.

## **Germanna's role**

Locally, Germanna Community College teaches the inmate courses at Coffeewood funded by **The Sunshine Lady Foundation**, which Doris founded.

Germanna associate professor Denise Talley said of such courses: "Teaching at Coffeewood has been one the highlights of my career. I've taught at the community college level, at state universities and at private colleges. The students at Coffeewood were by far the most grateful ones in my career. They would actually thank me at the end of class."

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"They were also driven to succeed," Talley added. "They always completed their homework, asked thoughtful questions and even asked for more practice. One of my Coffeewood students attended Germanna once he was released."

That student's name is Julius Berger. He continued to be successful and transferred to the University of Virginia after graduating from Coffeewood and Germanna. Berger was assistant manager of Culpeper's Goodwill store for a time while a student at the University of Virginia.

Brian Fischer, commissioner of the New York State Department of Correctional Services, was surprised when Doris came to meet with him at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility on the Hudson River in Ossining, N.Y., to discuss funding inmate education in 2005.

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First of all, not many of the sort of people Doris would refer to with a smile as “charitable ladies” were willing to help prisoners. For that matter, few philanthropists were interested at all.

And Sing Sing is not just any prison. It’s a maximum security prison, and a legendary one. The terms “sent up the river” and “the last mile” originated there.

But then few, if any, wealthy ladies were like Doris Buffett.

When I was writing her biography, “Giving It All Away,” Fischer told me that years before, he had met one of those charitable ladies. “She was a very wealthy person from a very well-known family and she was wearing a necklace with pearls so big you couldn’t take your eyes off them,” he recalled. “Then Doris comes in with her running suit and sneakers and she puts everyone at ease.”

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When she first came to his office, Fischer told Doris that every man at Sing Sing had had a miserable childhood, a poor education and little or no parental guidance. These men had made bad choices. Some had even committed murder.

Did they deserve to be helped? She had doubts.

Then she attended her first Hudson Link-Mercy College commencement ceremony at Sing Sing and was so moved that she knew prison education was something she wanted to fund on a big scale. Soon, she was supporting educational programs at a dozen prisons through her Sunshine Lady Foundation.

Doris compared graduating from Sing Sing's program to giving birth: "There's a lot of pain. It takes a long time. But in the end, there's new life."

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## Redemption

Diane Grimsley, a Sunshine Lady Foundation Board member who attended a Sing Sing graduation with Doris, said: "She felt like she watched redemption. Not in a religious sense, but real human redemption."

Doris' grandson, Alex Buffett Rozek, was opposed to the program at first. "Screw these people," he said to himself 15 years ago.

Then he learned more than 2.3 million people are in prison and that education programs greatly reduce recidivism.

And he realized it often costs as much to keep someone in prison for a year as it did to send a student to an Ivy League college for a year. Didn't it make sense to spend a tenth of that cost to prepare inmates to get a job and be productive citizens so they didn't end up back behind bars?

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Rozek also realized that the prisoners in education programs are so determined, they often study at 4 a.m., the only time they can have peace and quiet in their cells.

"(Doris) envisions herself as a tow truck," Jody Lewen, founder and executive director of the Prison University Project, which implements San Quentin prison's college program, told me a decade ago when I was researching the book. "She sees herself not as a rescue operation, not in the sense that she's going to pick you up and carry you to safety, but that she's going to get you out of the ditch."

Lewen said then that other philanthropic organizations judge causes by who else is supporting them. "Doris judges you by who you are," she said.

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She said Doris and Mitty Beal, who continue to run The Sunshine Lady Foundation today, asked “incredibly sharp, incredibly detailed questions,” made well-informed decisions, then acted boldly.

“Most philanthropists are like sheep,” Lewen told me. “She’s extremely different, even compared to the Gates Foundation. Very few will give money to support people that almost everybody hates. Doris doesn’t care what others think and say about her.”

## **Her own scorecard**

Her brother Warren Buffett told me: “She’s got her own scorecard. It’s that simple. If she’s doing something with someone at San Quentin, she doesn’t care what anyone else thinks about it. ... It’s a little bit like how I invest. I do it my own way. And Doris is investing in people. We got that internal scorecard from our father.”

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“She has changed the landscape of prison education nationwide single-handedly,” Lewen told me. “... She’s very aware of the currency of the name... She’s giving the person the opportunity to say, 'Doris Buffett gave,' and that’s very powerful.”

Germanna Community College President Janet Gullickson said Buffett’s mission paralleled the college’s, in many ways.

“She wanted to make a difference for those who don’t have the advantages many of us do. She believed everyone deserved to be treated with compassion and respect and everyone should have an equal chance to succeed in life,” Gullickson said of Doris. “If people were willing to work hard to better themselves, she wanted to help them build a good future for themselves and their families and for future generations. She wanted to give good people faced with difficult circumstances in a life—single mothers escaping abusive relationships, for example—a second chance.

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“She saw the education program at Coffeewood and other prison education programs she supported around the country as a way to turn lives around,” she said.

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