

# “Zero Percent,” A Documentary About Hudson Link Wins Silver Heart Award



By Jeff Deskovic

A documentary about the Hudson Link program, which provides college education to inmates, directed by Tim Skousen, entitled “Zero Percent”- a reference to the fact that not a single Hudson Link graduate released from prison was reincarcerated-, recently won the Silver Heart Award at the Dallas International Film Festival.

## Hudson Link

In the 1970’s, the State of New York provided funds for qualified inmates at

Sing Sing State Penitentiary and other prisons so they could take college classes and earn credits toward a degree. Although the program was very successful, in 1995 then Governor George Pataki withdrew funding for college programs in prisons. One year prior to that the federal government withdrew Pell Grants for prisoners. With no funding, college’s left the prisons.

Hudson Link was created in the late 1990s as a means to continue to provide college education in Sing-Sing. Nyack College was first to offer a degree for the

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## TRUTH AND JUSTICE

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students, and afterwards it was agreed that Mercy College would become the degree-granting institution. The first Hudson Link/Mercy College commencement was in 2004. All expenses are covered by individual contributions and grants from institutions, businesses and religious organizations.

The program has been wildly successful. Since 2001 Mercy College has granted 200 degrees. It costs \$48,000 per year to keep one person incarcerated, and the national recidivism rate is 60%. Out of the 46 Hudson Link graduates that have been released, none have been returned to prison.

For every year that the graduates stay out of prison, New York saves 2.2 million dollars.

Interviewed by *The Guardian*, Shelley Alkin, the Mercy College academic coordinator for the program explained that although some people think that curriculum may be watered down for the inmates, in fact they do the same coursework and must maintain the same G.P.A. She related that many professors have shared with her that students in the

classes are as good or better than most students they have taught.

Alkin said, “The program has been successful due to the cooperation of all participants: Mercy College, Hudson Link, and the prison superintendent and staff. The inmates are appreciative, hard working, and a positive role model for the other incarcerated men as well as for their own children and families on the outside.”

Alkin stated that Mercy participates in the program because, “The incentive for good behavior, the chance to change the future for men who will return to society, and the positive feedback from faculty are just a few of the reasons why Mercy College believes that education at Sing Sing is such a rewarding experience for all involved.” She further stated, “Attending the graduation ceremony each June and is one of the most amazing experiences you can have.”

Hudson Link, through a partnership with NYACK College, has expanded to Fishkill Correctional Facility, offering a Bachelor’s Degree in Organizational Leadership. Additionally, they are offering college credit courses at Taconic

Correctional Facility in Bedford Hills, NY and have 61 women enrolled.

#### My Perspective

I have long advocated, since my release, a return of college education to inmates. I therefore applaud Mercy College and Hudson Link for stepping up to the plate and filling a void which really should be done by the government. Not only are they helping to rehabilitate inmates, but they are also making society safer in the process, as well as saving tax payers money.

I attended college while I was wrongfully incarcerated, obtaining an AS in Liberal Arts and completing an additional year towards a BA before funding was cut. The college program gave us hope of a productive future rather than us simply vegetating. It also expanded our horizons. There were a number of secondary benefits as well. The program made the prison safer for both staff and prisoners, as the inmates were focused on college and their future rather than getting caught up in jailhouse politics and violence. An idle mind, as the saying goes, is the devil’s playground.

Attending college in prison enabled me to be that much further along in rebuilding my life than if I had started from scratch. Fernando Bermudez, recently exonerated after 18 years, attended Hudson Link while still wrongfully incarcerated. Similarly, Hudson Link equips other prisoners for a productive future, whether innocent or not, while at the same time being a major crime prevention program that benefits society.

On May 5, 2001, a fundraising event for Hudson Link, entitled “Reaching for New Tomorrows” is being held at the Yale Club, during which a trailer for Zero Percent is being shown. I encourage people to attend or make a contribution, and further, to attend a full screening of the documentary when it is shown. Screen times will be posted on the Hudson Link website [www.hudson-link.org/joomla/index.php](http://www.hudson-link.org/joomla/index.php)

*Jeffrey M. Deskovic is a Criminal Justice Advocate and Exoneree. To learn more, visit his website: [www.JeffreyDeskovicSpeaks.org](http://www.JeffreyDeskovicSpeaks.org).*