

Princeton professor Cornel West visits N.J. prison inmates, urges funding for reentry programs

By **Chris Megerian/Statehouse Bureau**
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Patti Sapone/The Star-Ledger

Princeton Professor Cornel West speaks to inmates at New Jersey State Prison in Trenton today, Malcolm X's birthday.

TRENTON — Princeton scholar Cornel West asked his audience today to raise their hands if they ever made a mistake. Given that his venue was the maximum security New Jersey State Prison in Trenton, many hands went up.

"I know some of you have made some very bad mistakes. But that doesn't fundamentally determine who you are," West said. "Your potential can never be snuffed out."

About 100 inmates sat on folding chairs in the prison gymnasium as West urged them to "deal with the funk" in their lives and urged public officials to help inmates make the transition back to life outside of prison walls.

But as the state plans to slash the Department of Corrections budget by \$74.6 million, officials said at least 140 education workers will be laid off.

"Those numbers keep growing," Assistant Commissioner Lydell Sherrer said, requiring prisons to rely more on volunteers.

Today, West bonded with his audience, comparing his afro to an inmate's — "Your front is better than my front" — and asking another to help pin his microphone.

"I come here to learn. I come here to listen," said West, whose visit was sponsored by local chapters of the NAACP. "Most importantly I'm here because I love you."

He was constantly on the move, gesturing and waving and crouching as sweat beaded on his forehead. He paced back and forth, ignoring his podium until someone finally took it away.

In his speech, he wove together references to famous musicians such as John Coltrane and Sly Stone as well as civil rights legends Dorothy Heights and Martin Luther King Jr. He paid homage to Malcom X, whose birthday was today, describing how he improved himself during his own prison sentence.

West also shared the story of Jacob, a Biblical figure who wrestled with an angel. "He emerges with a wound but he got a new name," West said. "I pray that all of you are wrestling in that way."

He urged inmates to cast off their "gangster proclivities."



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West, center, hugs an inmate at New Jersey State Prison after a speaking engagement at the prison. "You don't stand by player hating. You don't stand by back stabbing," West said. "You stand with integrity."

After his speech, West took questions from the inmates. One fired away with queries on nuclear proliferation, President Obama's campaign promises on offshore drilling and even merit pay for New Jersey teachers.

"Brother you got a whole list," West joked. "You came ready."

He answered the question on campaign promises, saying Obama can't always speak his mind now that he's president.

Another inmate asked for a recommended reading list. West suggested James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time," Toni Morrison's "Beloved" and Anton Chekov's short stories.

West, who has spoken several times at New Jersey prisons, said he was concerned about budget cuts, but said he would "keep on the pressure" for more reentry programs for inmates.

"We need massive programs," he said. "We can't continue to deny what's going on in the prison-industrial complex."