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On the One

Inmates make honest attempt at preparing for life after prison

By **Jessica Langdon/Times Record News**
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The cold grayness of the February day seeped into the hallways and outdoor walkways of the James V. Allred Prison Unit.

Inmates bundled up in jackets as they went about their jobs and trekked from one area to another.

The North Texas winds sweep the seasons' extremes across the unit, sending palpable signs to the men of some of the most basic events in the world outside the prison's walls. The weather is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the sea of changes constantly happening in that world.

"Think of the changes that have occurred in your lifetime," said Rex Taylor, principal of the Windham School District's campus at Allred. "We have guys who've never seen a Wal-Mart."

His mission is to make the transition as smooth as possible when the men leave the prison. The goal is to turn each man into a productive member of society, to give each the tools that will help him travel along a path that doesn't lead back to prison. The school has about 650 students at any given time.

One of them is Willie Jackson, whose intense eyes hold a spark of confidence when he talks about his future.

He's been incarcerated for seven years. It will be eight when he reaches his parole date.

With that date set firmly within his grasp, he's making plans. He already has a job lined up in Houston. His list of goals includes working for what he needs, living as a "moral citizen" and never returning to prison, he said.

"It's given me a lot of time to think about who I am and what I really want to do in life," Jackson said.

Words from his grandmother, mom and dad echo in his mind.

The streets aren't where it's at.

He knows a lot of people who grew up wanting the finer things in life. But now he knows the fast lane isn't necessarily the one that will lead to those achievements. He knows getting there takes hard work and dedication.

"I can't wait to go to work out there - and actually get to leave," he smiled.

He looked straight ahead in a classroom a few hours later, surrounded by other men who are within two years of being released, drinking in details about establishing credit and stepping out on the right foot financially.

"Changes" teacher Sue Statser answered questions and helped the men fill out forms.

When Statser stands at the front of her classroom, she doesn't see a sea of men in white.

She sees men who could be her brothers, her loved ones, her friends. She sees men who will walk out the doors



Jeffrey Haderthauer/ Times Record News

Inmates Renzell Washington, right, and Patrick Jeffrey work on an engine Thursday morning during a small engine repair class inside the James Allred Unit.

someday, able to shake off their association with the word "offender," she said.

That attitude breaks the ice in her classes. The courses she teaches mix with other educational, vocational and spiritual opportunities that reach out to men serving prison terms. The lessons they pick up give them a chance to start fresh, no matter how long they've served, and no matter how long it may be before their sentences end.

Start at the very beginning

Linda Fleming sees it all. As a Literacy 2-3 teacher, she works primarily with men whose literacy skills fall between the fifth-grade level and the point where some are eligible to take the test to earn their GED.

Some of Fleming's students were within months of graduating from high school. Others read and write at levels years below that.

The Windham School District works on a system of three academic levels. Literacy 1 equals fourth-grade level and down.

"Some of the guys are completely illiterate when they come," Principal Taylor said.

Literacy 2 works with skill levels from fifth-grade to seventh-grade. Seventh-grade through 12th-grade levels make up the Literacy 3 program.

No matter where each man stands along that scale, the Windham School District's educational programs have a place for him.

One man's story still strikes Fleming.

The man began his courses under a different teacher, who is no longer there. He started in Literacy 1.

"He couldn't read or anything," Fleming said.

That student applied himself, and within a couple of years, earned his GED.

"He responded and thanked everybody here," Fleming remembered.

"I remember at the GED graduation, all he could do was pat himself on the chest and grin real big," she said, patting her own chest with her hand as she recalled his reaction.

Not all the stories have an ending like that man's, but successes leave a lasting impression on the instructors, as well as on fellow inmates.

Seeing others achieve their goals inspires others to make strides, themselves.

"Whenever the GED results come back, that really gets some of the others motivated when they see someone they know that's been able to obtain a GED," Fleming said.

Some enter the academic programs reluctantly. They might have run into roadblocks in the education system before.

No matter what a student's background might be, it's encouraging to Fleming to see results.

"When they start achieving, it thrills them," she said.

Cognitive Intervention

Many men also choose to learn more about themselves.

Before a question was even formed, several men jumped in with answers about the time they've spent in Andy DesAutels' classroom.

"Mr.. D," as DesAutels is better known, teaches Cognitive Intervention, a course plenty of men will tell you has changed their lives.

A lot of people view Cognitive Intervention as an anger management class, Principal Taylor said.

"But it's really not," he said. It's more a way of getting the men to look at things in a different way.

"I feel like every prisoner should go through this class," Rashad McBath said.

McBath has had time to think and reflect on "the negative things I was doing that landed me in prison,"

In the roughly two months he's been in the class, he's seen his old ways transform into something new, something he notices in the letters he writes home to his wife and children. He sees his own changes mirrored in the communication he gets from them now, too.

Before, he looked at the world from a more selfish standpoint, he said. Today, he tries to make it a goal to look out for everyone's best interests.

Jaton Harris started the class in October.

"It's giving you a lot of different examples, making the most of a bad situation," he said. "My way of thinking was zero-tolerance. I had zero tolerance. It was my way or no way."

He gave an example of a disagreement with an officer.

Instead of blowing up, having a conversation would likely lead to better results in the long run.

That's the goal, Harris said, "Whatever you do, will it meet your needs over time?"

That opened Willie Jackson's eyes, as well.

"I've learned how to control myself, first of all," he said. "I'm in control of me."

That attitude gains a lot of respect, he said.

One lesson this winter focused on "Scared Straight 20 Years Later," a sequel to the 1978 documentary that introduced several juveniles heading down troubled paths to life in prison.

The film struck Matthew Walkner, who saw that many of the people in the original film went on to become productive members of society.

Linda Cook, who also teaches Cognitive Intervention, said every day begins with a lesson in mind, but many times, other lessons break through first.

"Today's lesson, I never got to it," Cook said. She needed to chastise a group for talking, she said. The goal is to offset any negative learning experiences they've had in the past by doing things in positive ways, and a question at the end of this lesson was right on track.

"So Mrs. Cook, you mean that for us to learn these skills we need to reach out?" she quoted her student.

She said the classes have as much of an impact on her as they do on the men.

"So many times, these people get complacent where they are, and they give up all initiative," Cook said. "We need to

teach them that initiative again and why it's important to learn."

It's also important to teach them that they have the ability to put things together for themselves, she said.

"This is a small drop in the bucket, but none of us are going to be any better until we help through education," Cook said.

Changes

Sue Statser has seen education make heartwrenching changes over her years as an instructor.

She recalled a man in his late 60s who could not read, write, or add.

"All he wanted to be able to do was read a letter his mother had written to him," she said.

By the time he was ready to be released, he was able to write home to his mother.

She passed away, but before her death, "She had gotten to read a letter that her son had written to her," Statser said.

In her Changes classes, Statser works with men who are within two years of their release dates, and she focuses on real life lessons geared at helping them stand on their own feet when they get out.

Statser keeps a picture of Spencer, Wichita Falls '

arson-detecting dog, on the board in the front of her classroom.

Every guest who speaks to her Changes classes has something unique and important to offer, Statser said.

When Fire Marshal David Collins comes in to talk about safety with groups of men who are about to re-enter the free world, some after years in prison, he brings Spencer along.

As Collins talks, Spencer roams the classroom, weaving through the aisles. Hands reach out to the dog, Some of the men have spent decades in prison, and it's been 25, 26, 27 years since they've petted a dog, Statser said.

Making things work

With the sounds of engines starting around him, Robert Paul Martin sat alone at a desk, buried deep in study materials for his certification test.

He was ready to take the test after going through William Rogers' small engine repair class through the Windham School District at Allred.

"I think," Martin said, "It's imperative that you use your time wisely in prison. If you have a positive outlook on what you're doing, I think you can help change how prison is perceived on the outside."

You can make your time productive, or you can make it hard on yourself, he pointed out. It really takes being willing to take that step forward, he said.

He seizes opportunities when he can. You never know when a chance won't be there anymore, especially with policy changes or cuts to programs, he said.

"I have past experience with engineering," he said.

"With a felony now, it's going to be harder for me to get into electronics."

The goal of the small engine repair class is to give the students a competitive edge when they step into the professional world, Rogers said.

Many walk into this class -- and the other vocational courses Windham offers -- never having used these types of tools and materials before.

Nerves kick in as they start to tear an engine apart and put it back together.

Then they realize it's going to work, Rogers said.

"Suddenly, they have a little confidence," he said.

The men have opportunities to earn national certification, and they work with materials that are up-to-date and in use in most dealerships, Rogers said.

"There's nobody in this world that can learn too much," Martin said. "You can't be overeducated."

A few rooms away, scraping sounds echoed wall to wall in Steve Nielsen's bricklaying/masonry course.

He has contacts in many areas, and keeps current on where jobs are available so he'll know how to help when one of his graduates needs to find work.

"There's money in it," he said. "There's always a need for bricklayers."

This, too, is a skill many of the men have had no experience with before they walk in, but by the time they're ready to leave, they can put together just about anything.

Nielsen pointed out projects in the workshop ranging from a simple wall to a fireplace to a small building.

"I'm getting pretty good," Lonnie Thomas said, taking a brief break from his project to talk. He's been at Allred since 1998, and started the course in September.

"It looks hard," he said. "Once you get the idea, it gets pretty easy."

The work requires lots of measurements, and there's quite a bit of brick-cutting.

"I already told my mother I'm going to build her a barbecue pit," Thomas said. He plans to build her a mailbox, too.

He said she's excited about the positive moves he's making as he serves a 30-year sentence.

"I just like to work with my hands," Thomas said, and that's the reason he signed up for this class. He hopes to land a job in this field someday.

Safety is always a priority in the vocational courses, and that's true in Lewis Josefy's auto mechanics course, which focuses largely on air conditioning and heating.

The men do real repairs on real vehicles, and it gives them a sense of satisfaction "when they see the vehicle go out of here as something they made repairs on," Josefy said.

He enjoys watching the men walk in and start with a blank slate and leave as decent mechanics.

The courses are open to men who have not reached college, he said, and the goal is to give them the tools they need to not return to prison.

Reentering society

The days leading up to an inmate's release are filled with more than eager anticipation. A high level of anxiety often plays a major role as the men think about what lies ahead.

"They worry about whether society is going to accept them. They're nervous about whether they're going to succeed," said Sandra McClelland, Project RIO work force specialist.

RIO stands for Reintegration of Offender, and it's been running for about two decades. It aims to prepare offenders who are nearing their release dates for employment. They meet with program representatives about every three months for their final 18 months of incarceration.

The program helps arm the men with the proper documentation they'll need in the work force, and also works with them on the steps to take toward finding jobs.

Employers have come to the units and talked with the men, and McClelland has seen people land jobs in the fields that correspond with the courses offered through the vocational program at Windham.

Project RIO works with the inmates to get them to be able to describe their assets and experience, and to make sure things look good, including correct spelling, as the men prepare for the work world.

Spiritual needs

A view from the top of a block of cells offers a glimpse at just a few of the physical differences between life in the Horizon program and a day in a more typical unit.

The 48 men who take part at any one time in the Horizon in Prisons program sit at round tables, as opposed to the rectangular tables in the neighboring lounge area.

Bookshelves hold reading materials related to their programs.

A sign on the wall reads "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Another banner makes it clear this is the Horizon area.

The physical surroundings set the program apart on a basic level, but the program's aim is to reach inmates in a much deeper way.

The participants' days are normal, and they complete their jobs. They volunteer for more hours of work when their day is over. Horizon's programs take place at night, with each evening focusing on a different theme.

Community, anger management and parenting are some of the focuses, said Judy Taylor, who helps operate the Horizon program at Allred.

Allred has the only Horizon program in Texas, and those who have seen it in action here say they would like to see it expand to more prisons.

"They really get to know each other during that year,"

Taylor said. "They get to be more real... We tear down some walls during that year."

Donald Barker, who has been at Allred since 2001, said part of the experience he's been through in prison is making peace with your past, and also building bridges with others.

"It helped us learn how to get along with people of other faiths without being critical," he said of the Horizon program. It allows participants to build character, he said.

The spiritual program works toward helping them make better choices, and applies both inside and outside the prison, Taylor said.

The program always needs volunteers to come in and work with the men, Taylor said. Married couples may volunteer on Tuesday evenings, and men may volunteer at other times. Those interested in volunteering may call Allred at (940) 855-7477 and ask for the chaplaincy program, which takes volunteers for other programs, as well.

The chaplaincy program offers classes and services for three major groups -- Catholic, Christian non-Catholic and Islamic, said Jeff Smith, who is one of two chaplains at Allred.

"Everybody comes to that point of time in their life when religion becomes a lot more important," he said.

The chaplaincy program provides for the religious needs of the inmates at the unit, and there is also crisis ministry, which reaches out during difficult times, such as death or critical illness in the family.

The men can choose to attend Bible studies and different rehabilitation programs.

"All our programs do have some kind of spiritual component to them," Smith said. The program works with help from thousands of volunteers and nine volunteer chaplains.

Putting lives together

Hart Wilson came to Allred Aug. 5, 1998, and he's been with its Alcoholics Anonymous group since then. The program has been at the prison since it opened.

Wilson now works as the inmate coordinator for Allred's AA group.

"I think it's extremely important," he said. "I think it makes a real difference."

The group meets officially on Tuesday nights, and its members often take time to think and talk about things and work on their program outside that window.

"I think it's a real lifeline for a lot of the guys who've been in alcohol and substance abuse," Wilson said. "They come because they want to be here."

Some haven't seen success in other programs, and many became involved in crimes that led to prison sentences.

This gives them a place where they can talk freely and openly, Wilson said.

Four volunteers come in from other AA chapters, and Wilson said he believes having this kind of support network now will be a positive factor when members leave prison. Having a link to AA chapters in the communities where they'll live is also vital, he said.

In an era that has seen plenty of cuts programs statewide, Wilson said AA is one of the vital programs for the people who want to take part. It gives the men the ability to trust and share and even to develop communication skills.

Anyone in minimum security custody can take part, and the group usually sees about 16 people each week. He'd like to see the program expand.

"When you see people go home, they don't come back,"

Wilson said. "I don't see them coming back."

Reducing the risk

Reducing an inmate's risk of returning to prison is a major goal behind the programs offered at Allred.

Several participants in the programs said their own goals include living lives that won't lead back to prison.

Robert Paul Martin said he's accepted responsibility for his crime, and he wants to grasp opportunities to do better by helping himself and other people.

Life here doesn't mirror Hollywood, he said. It's not like "Prison Break." It's largely what you make of it, he said.

Donald Barker knows a lot of people have a certain perception of prison.

"A lot of people think that the programs are a waste of time," he said.

He sees a different side, having seen how serious people are about succeeding in the programs they choose.

"They do work," Barker said. "It's hard for the people on the outside to see that. They see all the negative that's going on."

Barker said these programs offer something positive that can one day become a part of the community.

"If we didn't have these programs, think about what you're going to get back," he said.

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