

THE ECHO

TEXAS PRISON NEWS

JULY / 2023

SOARING TO NEW HEIGHTS

The ECHO's first
magazine edition!

PLUS:

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Ruettiger at the
Wynne Unit

Urban Farming
on the Roach
Unit

Special
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feature

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The ECHO soars to new heights!

By Todd R. Carman - Staff Writer

The *ECHO* has been inspiring and challenging readers to achieve their potential since its first publication in 1928. Published by and for residents of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), *The ECHO* has been available free of charge for almost 100 years. This near-century of service and tradition has thus far been placed in the hands of readers via traditional ink and paper through a classic newspaper format. *The ECHO* has been a long-term, cost-effective medium to bring agency information statewide to residents and external stakeholders, while also educating, inspiring, motivating and entertaining readers — all the while promoting positive change and growth.

With the completed rollout of Securus tablets to eligible TDCJ residents, *The ECHO* proudly takes a step with the evolution of technology. The *ECHO*'s publication is expanding through a new digital version, featuring convenient information in a colored-magazine format. Designed by *The ECHO* staff, the digital publication will be available through TDCJ's FYI app on the tablets.

The ECHO also reaches beyond TDCJ walls, bringing information to valued stakeholders ranging from family members, friends, correctional leadership, professional organizations, volunteers, state lawmakers and many others. For external readers, a digital version will be available online at the Windham School District website, www.wsdtx.org. Moving forward, *The ECHO* will simultaneously

be published via paper and digitally, and newspaper subscriptions will be honored.

The new digital *ECHO* is vibrant in appearance and user-friendly, featuring photos of residents and quality stories reflecting accomplishments, growth and success stories. *ECHO* favorites like Chow Hound Recipes, Dear Darby, Letters to the Editor, Sports View, Art Expo and others will continue to live on the pages, along with a few new additions. Exclusive interviews, feature stories, personal columns and specially-curated articles will continue to include the best, original work of *The ECHO* writers and graphic designers. Publications will continue to feature contributions from its statewide team of volunteer reporters, writers, poets, graphic designers and artists. *The ECHO* is supported by TDCJ and the Windham School District, and includes new content from both entities.

The ECHO will continue to create, print and distribute a traditional paper version of the newspaper, but the print quantity will be reduced over time. A printed version of *The ECHO* will be available on each unit and may be found in the Windham libraries.

It is the responsibility and privilege of *The ECHO* to report the stories of readers' goals, successes, second chances and steps toward reentry. Readers: you are now invited to view the new digital *ECHO* on the FYI app! Please share your ideas, suggestions and contributions with *The ECHO* regarding its new format and platform. *The ECHO* looks forward to celebrating a future of service, good stories and quality communication with you! ★

The ECHO modifies format to better serve audience - now meeting TDCJ readers on their tablets

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Letters to the Editor



The ECHO
c/o WSD Admin. Bldg.
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To the editor,

While we honor those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for the greatest country in the world, but we do not need to stop there. There are vets still alive who deserve recognition as well as our thoughts and prayers. I have heard tear-jerking stories and details from some of my family members who have served in the military and from residents whom I have known. My heart goes out to these men and women. I'd like to ask all who read this to raise a glass in honor of those who have and those who are willing to pay the price so we can be free. Remember this phrase: All gave some, and some gave all.

Henry A. Jordan Jr.
Gist Unit

To the reader,

Thank you for your letter of support for those who served. Yours is a point well made on any day of the year!

To the editor,

My natural hair color has turned snowy white and a young look has been replaced by an old one. Where once a graceful walk existed, now remains a limp in sharp contrast. I was sent off to Vietnam and forced to become a man while still a boy. I shed my blood on Vietnamese soil and was never awarded a purple heart, nor a thank you for your service. When I came back, I did not make the headlines, I did not come back in a wheel chair or missing an arm or a leg. My limp reminds me every day that in the fight for freedom, there is always a price to be paid. More than 50 years have elapsed since then, and I have never considered this a disability or a shame — but an honor. I earned this while serving my country. America is still safe and sound.

A Vietnam Vet
Robertson Unit

To the reader,

Thank you for writing and for your service. Serving in the military is an admirable accomplishment and sacrifice — your being in prison doesn't take that away. We hope you, and other veterans, take advantage of the veteran programs available in TDCJ. You can contact your unit's chaplain to see what's available on your unit.



Dear Darby,

Every year *The ECHO* hosts a “Write Stuff” writing contest, and I believe that it would be appropriate to provide some writing tips before next year’s contest. Let’s call this “How To Write Good.” My many years of writing has learnt me several rules such as avoid alliteration. Always. Avoid cliches like the plague. Eschew ampersands & abbreviations, etc. It is wrong to split an infinitive. Contractions aren’t necessary. Foreign words or phrases are not apropos. One should never generalize. Comparisons are as bad as cliches. Exaggeration is a million times worse than understatement. Don’t be redundant; don’t use more words than necessary. It’s highly superfluous. One word sentences? Eliminate. The passive voice is to be avoided. Who needs rhetorical questions? Here is an example of how to write “I changed a lightbulb.” “Singlehandedly managed the successful upgrade and deployment of a new environmental illumination system with zero cost overruns and no safety incidents.” I am unquestionably exhilarated that I was able to assist.

Daniel Paul Meehan
Connally Unit

Dear Daniel,

Funny. Very funny! While your humorous lines might not all be original (our supervisor found several similar examples on the internet), they are definitely enjoyable — at least to those who like a little word play and a sprinkle of irony. Anyway, you do include a kernel of inspiration ‘bout writin’ up some writing tips, so we will be including more writer-focused tips and inspiration. From a writer’s corner to a poetry corner, from contest finalists to poems, you’ll find a cornucopia of contributions from around the system, along with tips on how to better express your thoughts through words. Write on! And thank you to everyone who contributes!

Dear Darby,

I’ve been to the Huntsville “Walls” Unit (in transit) for the past five days. It’s been an amazing time of solitude and gratitude looking back at my life. A cellie I had for one night had nine flat on an 18 aggravated sentence, with a brand-new five-year set-off. He was headed to the Ferguson Unit, and he was crying out to God how he couldn’t do this on his own anymore. I got to be that kind voice from a kindred spirit. Then I was all alone again, and over the loudspeaker I hear an encouraging voice, followed by praise and worship music. Suddenly, Truth to Life Ministry came onto the wing, playing music and giving an encouraging testimony. They went cell-to-cell, offering books and prayers. It was a welcome breath of fresh air while in transit. I would like to thank the warden and administration here on the Huntsville Unit for extending this courtesy to residents on the move. Thanks also to you and all the staff that make *The ECHO* happen each month. I thought about sending this letter to the editor, but everybody knows Ol’ Darb is cooler and more “in the know.” Wait, what if the editor and Darby are the one and same person?

Cellie Free Me
Huntsville Unit

Dear Free,

Me and the editor bein' the same person? Please! Everybody knows that the editor is very professional-minded, and that I'm much more, ahem, salty. I do appreciate the spirit of your letter, though — the various ministries serving the TDCJ population really do help folks on their journey, and being in transit is definitely a journey! Good luck to you and your former cellie.

Dear Darby,

I'm writing in reference to one of the letters to the Darbster in the February issue of *The ECHO* regarding Mike Contreras, aka "The Cardio King," and his favorite exercise—burpees with a jump. I do 100 burpees with a jump in four minutes.

Before I go any further, my name is William David Sumpter, but people call me "Sumpter" for some strange reason. I am 59 years old, and my favorite exercise is jump rope. I've been doing it for 24 years, and I do it barefooted on smooth concrete. I do one set for as long as I can with no breaks or intervals. On May 28, 2023, I jumped 4,500 consecutive jumps without messing up, and that is just an average day. Last month, I jumped 8,600 jumps without stopping, which took me a little over one hour to do. Most people find this hard to believe, but my record is 17,140 jumps without stopping or messing up. It took me two hours and three minutes. I did this at the Ellis Trustee Camp on Dec. 16, 2016. Everyone there, including the officers, can attest to that if you want to round them up and ask them. Here on the Memorial Unit, the guys in my housing location can vouch for me on this. I jump 145-150 jumps per minute, and this is my jump rope rate. It takes me seven and a half minutes to perform 1,000 jumps. I have three different styles of footwork I use to help me keep count. I jump 100 times with each style. I know it sounds funny, but after 24 years of jumping rope I have figured out what works best for me, and maybe someone else could benefit from what I have learned. The entire objective in jumping rope is to see how many times a person can do it without messing up, and to develop a pattern of jumping as to maximize the benefits from the exercise. It's been a personal challenge each time I pick up a rope, and I believe that it's a God-given talent. I call it my rope of redemption.

**William David Sumpter
Memorial Unit**

Dear Sumpter,

In the words of Van Halen: "Might as well jump!" Just readin' your letter made me sweat! One hundred burpees in four minutes? More than 17,000 jump ropes in a row?! You might not be a spring chicken at 59 years old, but you are definitely more than holdin' your own. Maybe your letter will inspire our readers. It definitely inspired me — I got 17 jump ropes in a row before messin' up! Now if I can just multiply that success by 1,000, I can get up to your lofty level. Jump on!

Dear Darby,

Thanks for your response to my commissary supply issue in the May issue of *The ECHO*. The following is in reference to feeling like a kid in a candy store. After waiting several long weeks for money to transfer from county jail to my TDCJ Inmate Trust Fund, I was super excited to get some assorted snacks and such for those midnight madness munchies attacks. There was an empty cookie package on the floor and crumbs on the bed, but at least my tummy was happy from the yummy. I washed the cookies down with a healthy massive triple shot of black bag coffee. Of course, this allowed me to stay WIDE awake to greet the morning sun.

**Richard Gawlik
Stevenson Unit**

Dear Richard,

Glad to hear that you were able to make it to the store and no longer feel left out of the commissary experience. A triple-shot of black bag coffee, though?! No wonder you didn't sleep — combine that with a pack of cookies sugar rush and you're wired for sure! While you're up those wee hours of the morning, you can be thinkin' about what educational programs or other activities you can enroll in. Make your time count for more than just a coffee and cookie coma!

Dear Darby,

Greetings ol' thang! I have one simple question: what's in a name? My name is Walter Scott Free, and obviously, I did not get off.

**Scott Free
Bradshaw State Jail**

Dear Walter,

While you did not end up Scott-free, in here you be writin' to me! I'm hopin' that your time isn't related to your name. I have visions of you tryin' to get some freelance work:

"What's your name, and how much will you charge?"

"I'm Free, and it'll be \$50."

"What do you mean \$50? You said you're free!"

"I am! But it's still \$50."

I'm guessin' things probably went downhill from there. Thanks for drop-pin' me a line, though. And even though I'm not Free, my advice is!





**CRIME
STOPPERS**

Missing Person

Christopher Sanders



Christopher “Chris” Sanders was last seen on Aug. 13, 2017, near Monahans, Texas. He was staying in his RV while working on a job. He went for a walk and never returned. Sanders is 5 feet 11 inches tall, weighs 190 pounds, has reddish-brown hair, blue eyes and was 40 years old when he went missing. Sanders was last seen wearing a black shirt, jeans, boots and black hat. He has several tattoos. Investigators continue to seek answers about what happened to Sanders. His family, friends, wife and children deserve answers.

If you have any information on this missing person, please contact the TDCJ Crime Stoppers Office at P.O. Box 1855, Huntsville, TX 77342-1855. Crime Stoppers will pay from \$50 to \$1,000 for information leading to the arrest, filing of charges or indictment of person or persons that committed a felony crime (or is a wanted fugitive). Crime Stoppers guarantees your anonymity. ★

Construction carpentry class helps graduate prepare for a career

From the Windham School District Annual Performance Report
Reprinted with permission

At just 18 years old, Seth Peace entered the Texas Department of Criminal Justice with disappointment and discouragement raging through his mind. His entire life, Peace said he had been written off as illiterate, “stupid” and a lost cause. It wasn’t until seven years into his sentence that he decided to take his education into his own hands, and turn his situation into an opportunity to succeed.

Immersing himself in any instruction in which he could partake, Peace found his calling in Windham School District’s Construction Carpentry course.

“I knew I wanted to do something different, but I didn’t know what that was,” Peace said. “So, I just started taking any class that [Windham] would allow me to take and that led me to Construction Carpentry.”

Although he was comfortable working with his hands, Peace said his Windham instructors pushed him to be the best at whatever task was in front of him. Not only was he taught the necessary skills to succeed in the trade, but he was introduced to essential life skills along the way as well.

“There was one day where everyone else could use power tools except me,” Peace said. “I had to do everything by hand. In the moment, I was wondering, “Why me?,” but I was being taught work ethic. I was being taught how to do things on my own and be good at it.”

Windham courses opened up an entirely new world of education for Peace. Earning his certificate after the completion of the program, for the first time in his life, Peace felt confident in his mind and in his ability to learn. Today, Peace said he’s like a sponge; soaking up any piece of information he can in order to continue learning.

After returning to the Amarillo community, Peace quickly got to work nailing down a job in the construction industry.

Equipped with the skills and knowledge Windham provided, he began building his dream life.

“Working is what kept me busy,” Peace said. “I never went back to the same crowd I was with before I went to prison. I wasn’t reintroduced to the same things I was doing before I left. It didn’t matter that I was the lowest paid man doing more work than everybody else. That was just my work ethic

and that is what kept me busy. You don’t have time for [criminal activity] if you’re always working.”

Today, Peace owns one of the top construction and remodeling businesses in Amarillo, Peace Remodeling, and takes pride in the steps he’s taken since separating himself from his past.

“You know, most people don’t believe me when I tell them that I’ve been to prison,” Peace said. “You wouldn’t know it unless you see all of my tattoos. I have an amazing wife, I have my dream house, I own rental properties and my own business. They can’t believe it because of how intelligent I am, how successful I’ve become.”

Peace believes in the power of second chances. Because of this, he employs several former TDCJ residents as a way to provide them with an opportunity to succeed despite the baggage they carry — the same opportunity he was given by his Windham instructors.

Peace credits the life skills he’s learned through Windham programs for equipping him with not only the chance to use his certificate to accelerate his success, but for allowing him to realize that his education is all his own.

“I am a firm believer that men and women can be great if they just apply themselves,” Peace said. “What I’ve created in my life since then has been because of my hard work. It wasn’t given to me. I’m very passionate about that.” ★



The contradictions that motivate us

Elkanah E. Hendrix

Staff Writer

Twisting the watch on my wrist didn't make the small hand move any faster.

"Come on, come on," I said to nobody listening. Maybe the wall-clock above the doorway showed a time closer to 10:30. It didn't. I had another 15 minutes before I could take my first break and no matter how hard I tried to fast-forward time, it trudged along at its miserable pace. No longer able to focus on work, I aimlessly shuffled a few things around on my desk to feign productivity.

At long last, it was time. Halfway to the exit, I realized I had forgotten my lighter. With a little speed-walking, I still managed to be the first one out the door. Out in the parking lot the wind tugged at my clothes as I cupped the lighter and cigarette. The warmth spread through my body, and I savored the moment. Chattering birds and the beep of car doors being locked or unlocked became melody. I didn't start thinking about all the toxic chemicals sure to one day seal my fate until there was nothing but a butt between my fingers. Still, I lit up a second.

At that particular time, I remember smoking a pack and a half of cigarettes a day. I also recall increasing my intake to two packs. I scaled cigarette summit until I was breathing down two-and-a-half packs of Newport Shorts before I lay down at night to give my lungs an eight-hour break. That was more than six years ago — pre-incarceration.

I'm glad I stopped, even if by force. A plume of emotions arises as I travel down memory lane to the inner-conflict I was experiencing at that junction in my life. I hated cigarettes — yet I loved them. I couldn't stand the smell of it in my clothes or the turning up of noses when I entered a room of non-smokers, but at the moment when I needed one, I didn't care how anybody else felt. This was true for many areas of my life; certainly the reason I'm behind bars now.

What was wrong with me? Why were my beliefs and my behavior at odds? I found the answer in two words — Cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when an individual's thoughts and beliefs conflict with their behaviors.

The theory was first put forward by Leon Festinger. It proposes that people experience discomfort when they take part in behaviors that conflict with the way they perceive themselves. This discomfort persuades us to reduce the discrepancy by either changing our beliefs, altering our behavior, or seeking justification for our decisions.

One negative effect of cognitive dissonance on decision-making is a phenomenon called "justification of effort." When we invest time, effort or resources into a particular course of action or decision, we tend to overvalue

its benefits and downplay its drawbacks. An individual decides to stay in the toxic relationship for no other reason than the time and effort they have invested.

The "justification of effort" phenomenon in prison populations shows itself in ways where we minimize the moral conflict between our actions and societal norms. By adopting attitudes that validate or normalize lawless behavior, such as rationalizing our actions as necessary for survival or blaming external factors, we diminish the dissonance and disharmony between our actions and our image of self. This is disastrous in that it reinforces our engagement in behaviors that hinder rehabilitation.

Another phenomenon produced by cognitive dissonance is known as "confirmation bias," or "selective attention." In order to maintain consistency in our self-perception and alleviate cognitive dissonance, we often seek information that confirms our pre-existing behaviors, while ignoring or dismissing any evidence that contradicts. In the community, the alcoholic leans on the idea that a glass of wine is good for the heart — ignoring the fact that it isn't wine in his glass at all, or that the amount of liquor he consumes can shut down the liver of an adult elephant. In prison, the resident focuses on information that supports his criminal behavior while ignoring the evidence that challenges it, such as the consequences.

Within the prison environment, group dynamics further compound cognitive dissonance. We often form social networks based on shared values and behaviors. In criminal groups, cognitive dissonance is minimized as members reinforce each other's justifications and rationalizations, leading to normalization of criminal conduct. The desire for ac-

ceptance and belonging within these groups reinforces the decision-making processes that perpetuate crime. "Show me who you hang with and I'll show you who you are," is the quote that comes to mind.

One of the most obvious displays of cognitive dissonance in the prison population is the resident who professes to hate prison. This individual claims to detest everything about it, yet is either close to coming up for parole or currently under review and sabotages any chance at going home. This may be because he or she could not control their temper or some other urge to behave in such a way that culminates in being denied. The cognitive incongruity is also noticeable in the person who, upon release, screams they are never coming back, but returns to prison — becoming a numerical increase to the recidivism rate.

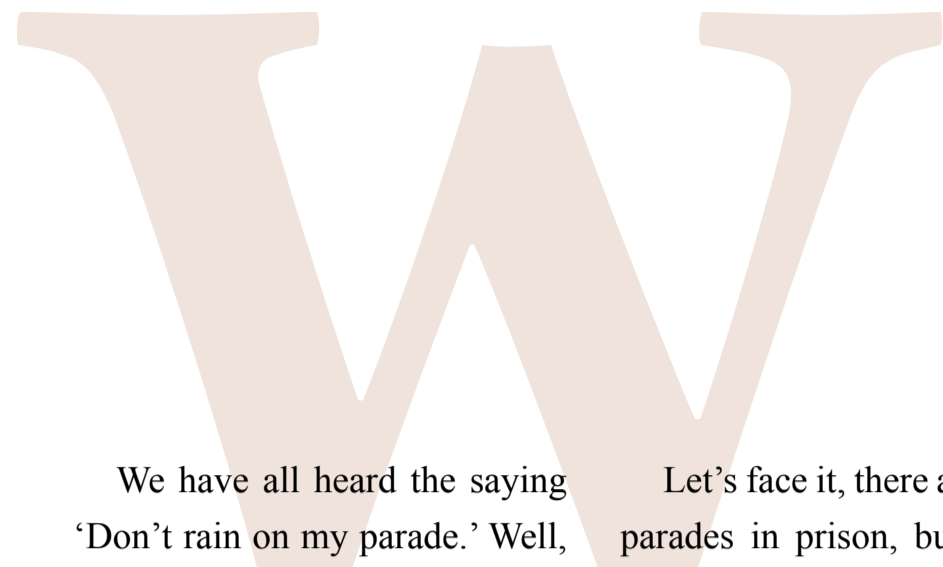
Recognizing and addressing cognitive dissonance is critical for effective rehabilitation. Cognitive-behavioral interventions that challenge our self-justification and distorted belief can help us confront our dissonance, fostering personal growth and a healthy reintegration into society. There are programs like Bridges to Life, Cognitive Intervention, Pure Life, CHANGES, Overcomers and the Change Agent to name a few, that promote cognitive restructuring and provide cognitive coping strategies aimed to reduce the influence of cognitive dissonance on our decision-making processes. No more excuses. No more living in denial. No more procrastination. It is high-time for us to reconcile our beliefs and behaviors. It is time to take action. ★

“
Recognizing and addressing cognitive dissonance is critical for effective rehabilitation.”

Bitter be careful

Brandon Hayes

Contributing Writer, Wynne Unit



We have all heard the saying ‘Don’t rain on my parade.’ Well, this has taken on a whole new meaning now that I have blossomed into a positivity machine. Yes, I said positivity machine. I am thoroughly convinced that a person can choose to manufacture sheer, unbridled positivity. Negativity seems to worm and work its dank way into conversations that were once light and casual then took a sudden nosedive into areas of bitterness and foulness. Not just the requisite shots that are lobbed after you say “How ‘Bout Them Cowboys” in a small group setting. I’m talking about the type of negativity that seems to drench you. I am fortunate enough to have a sphere of influence that runs the gamut as far as cultural and economic backgrounds. I am able to reap the verbal fruit from many different trees operating in an area of gratefulness and contentment. I choose to cultivate these trees, and the harvest is plentiful. Bitterness is not exclusive; it lurks like a dark cloud around all types of people. Its hallmarks are incessant complaining, snide comments, and an otherwise hateful demeanor. Ring any bells?

Let’s face it, there aren’t many parades in prison, but there are things to rally around, and areas that need an injection of well needed levity from time to time. There is a way to navigate around the bitter bugs, and not let their tinge of negativity rub off on you. This is a practiced art, and takes a great deal of personal humility, an objective viewpoint, and a sense of humor. I personally find humor in many situations that can ‘fry’ the next man out. Folks, it’s all about how you look at it.

The chow hall seems to be an area of hot contention, volatility and complaining — especially in the summer time. A wizened friend of mine once told me to go into the chow hall with low expectations and you will never be disappointed. I’ve often mistakenly gone into the chow hall with the expectations of a Five-Star Michelin-rated restaurant and find myself whining about the runny gravy. Do you whine about the gravy? Every one of us are guilty of evoking mild displeasures, small things that can rile us, akin to a pebble hitting our windshields while we are cruising down the freeway. And then there are those who seem to

be soaked in bitterness. Knocked over a full cup of coffee lately? Have you been caught up in an excruciatingly long count lately? Relax, you are human! These scenarios, and a host of other snafus, have the potential to throw anyone off their game. Recently, I accidentally poured a whole bag of coffee into the cup I was drinking out of. How does that even happen?

Navigating the terrain of prison takes a load of patience and the right perspective. It also takes the right fuel. The fuel I’m talking about is your motivating force, the force to repel the bitter darts that come at you from all directions. Many times, it is how you look at



something that can make all the difference. Oftentimes I have heard complaining and found the exact opposite to be true. Complainers enjoy complaining, and, let’s face it, we can always find something to complain about if we choose to. Having a positive mind-frame requires us to focus on the positive elements in the environment that we are in at each and every moment. Carrying around a load of bitterness is not only cumbersome for you, but equally as taxing for those who come into contact with

you. Some situations just require a deep breath and a slow scratch of the head. Joy and contentment can and will serve as rocket fuel that propels you as you serve your time.

Choose Joy

Bitterness doesn’t just happen overnight; it takes on a marinating effect, a brewing, fermenting, effect if you will. Allowing past slights and wrongs to spoil your mood today is not only shortchanging yourself, but limiting your potential to shine. You can choose to be

joyful. You can actually choose to be full of joy and take a proactive stance, deflecting negativity when you smell it. Or you can opt to be full of negative energy, amassing a laundry list of complaints.

The former will season your surroundings, while the latter will taint and foul the air you come into contact with. Here is a sure-fire cure for repelling negativity.

Say the phrase, “God is good.” This simple phrase can totally change the atmosphere and vibe of a potentially negative situation. “God is good” sends a conversation on towards positive things, and chances are someone within earshot can use this dose of positivity. Bitter be careful, your attitude just may stay that way! ★



**It is how
you look at
something that
can make all
the difference.**

Prison molded me

Landon Brook

Stevenson Unit Reporter

P

Prison, often seen as a source of despair and punishment, can surprisingly serve as a life-altering experience for some individuals. As unconventional as it may sound, my time spent behind bars became a cornerstone for constructing a better version of myself. In this reflective article, I will recount the lessons learned and the personal growth I experienced during my time in prison, highlighting how it helped me build good character.

Reflection and Self-Analysis:

Prison stripped away the distractions of the outside world, leaving me with ample time for self-reflection. Facing the consequences of my actions head-on, I began a process of deep introspection. I analyzed my past choices, examined my behavior, and identified the root causes of my mistakes.

Ownership of Mistakes:

Prison taught me the significance of taking responsibility for one's actions. I learned to acknowledge the harm I had caused, not only to others, but also to myself. This newfound sense of accountability allowed me to develop a heightened sense of empathy, recognizing the pain and suffering I had inflicted on others.

Patience and Resilience:

Behind bars, time seemed to stretch eternally. However, I gradually discovered the power of patience and to have love for those who looked down on others. I learned to embrace the lengthy processes within the prison system and adapt to the slow pace of rehabilitation. This cultivated patience also helped me to cope with adversity and build resilience. I became stronger, more determined to succeed and better at weathering life's storms.

Growing Through Education and Rehabilitation Programs:

Prison provides various educational and rehabilitation programs, turning incarceration into an opportunity for personal growth. I eagerly enrolled in classes, devouring knowledge like a thirsty mind in a desert. This thirst for knowledge allowed me to expand my horizons, develop critical thinking skills, and lay a foundation for a brighter future.

Developing Integrity and Gaining Trust:

Prison life can be brutal, and reputation is paramount. To thrive in such an environment, I understood the importance of integrity. I consciously made choices that aligned with my newfound values and consistently acted with honesty and respect. By doing so, I earned the trust and respect of fellow inmates and prison staff.

Conclusion:

While prison is inherently designed to punish, it possesses a unique potential to transform lives. My time behind bars was undoubtedly challenging, but it allowed me to rediscover my true self and build good character. Through reflection, taking ownership of my mistakes, cultivating patience and resilience, participating in educational programs, and developing integrity, I forged a stronger version of myself. By always reflecting on the confines of prison, I am determined to seize the second chance that life has given me. The lessons I learned, the character I built

continue to shape my decisions and actions as I strive to live a meaningful and responsible life, make amends for the past and positively impact the world around me. Prison may have confined my body, but it also liberated my spirit, enabling me to emerge as a better person with a newfound sense of purpose.★

“

My time spent behind bars became a cornerstone for constructing a better version of myself.

Poetry Corner

My past is not my today

By Ruby Reynoso

The mistakes of yesterday are calling my name,
whispering, and I turn my ear their way.
They begin a conversation with me
filling me with regrets;
they say they're who I am and
I'll never find good breath.

I call them liars but they keep taunting,
my palms cover my ears and
I refuse to allow their haunting.
My mistakes soar up high and circle right before my
eyes like a swarm of stinging bees;
they laugh in my face and tell me
they're all I'll ever be.

I yell, "Shut up!" I know that I'm not defined by you.
I'm a human who went wrong
but now wants to do good.
Hearing my determination, my mistakes
are taken by surprise,
and they halt a little, they take a step back
and plot their next missile.

I cannot succumb to my past
and walk through life with shame,
so I'm reaching out to God and calling on His name.
At the sound of my prayers, all my mistakes retreat
back to where they come from — the past.

This present won't be dark; it will be bright —
brightness that lasts.

I put my mistakes in their place now —
they can't rob me of my happiness; they are gone.

I reach out to God — yes, I do,
all the healing answers are in Him — that is true.
My mistakes were yesterday.
Today, I'll begin anew.

A poem with no words

By Bobby Thompson - Stiles Unit

They said that if I wrote a poem
with no words,
it wouldn't make any sense.

To take out every noun and every verb,
would make it too intense.

With no subject matter or title,
it would never withstand the time.

And without a predicate or an ending,
you can't complete a line.

With no words plural
and without a single vowel,
there'd be no A's or E's, no I's, O's or U's.

Or a consonant for them to go between,
they cannot do their do's.

Without a topic that you can plainly see,
what would it be about?

And without a period or a question mark,
what would be left to figure out?

So to even say that I would start this poem,
to most would be the words of a nerd.

But here it is, you've read a poem,
that doesn't have a word.

Not defeated

By James Broussard -
Dominguez State Jail

At times life can be hard,
and help — at some point we
will all need it. When you
fall, get back up and dust
yourself off, because my brother,
you are not at all defeated.

We all face tough times
in life — we know this is
true. But those tough times will
never last — it's the tough people
who do.

Today I know that it's up
to me, if I want to get
my life together. And I'm
not a bad man getting good —
but I'm a good man getting better.

So don't be ashamed to ask
for help — my brothers, at some
point we all will need it.

When life knocks you down,
get back up and dust yourself off
— because you are not defeated.

**Perfect**

By Justin Strait - Roach Unit

People are stranger and
stuck in their ways.
Life is anything but perfect.
Nothing changed — it's the same
night and days.

I look to the future,
but the present defines
what's going to be.
The past is the reason
for my present;
there is no difference
between the three.

As I sit and think,
I begin to ponder:
a life with no evil —
only good intentions.

Where free thought is legal
and everyone listens.
No room to cry
because life is perfect now.

Wishes, immediately
turn into reality,
Dreams no longer appear in sleep.
Life is perfect —
perfection is what I reap.

Greeting the night

By Jonathan Rosario -
Coffield Unit

Guaranteed is the greeting
of the end.

Once one endeavors upon
a journey of vitality.
The sands begin their silent lament;
for all things, inevitably,
must come to fruition.

How one meets their eternal night,
is how they shall be remembered
forevermore: a craven's
trembling cower

or with a knight's
powerful dour:
a king of vast greed
or as someone
with simple dreams.

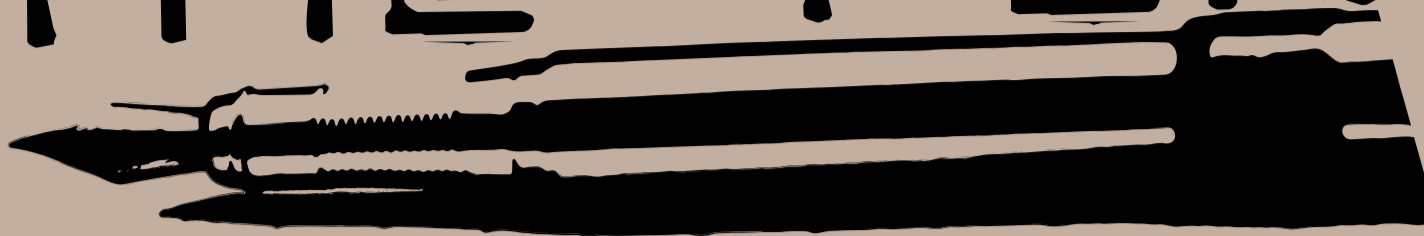
How shall you be
in History's memory?
If my destiny is naught
but the journey to death,
I shall not run.

I will not cry;
for I alone then,
shall choose how to live.
Only I decide how to be
when I greet my night.



THE PEN

Writing tips
made simple



It's all write with me

Andrew R. Reynolds — Wynne Unit

Welcome to the first edition of The Pen, a collaborative column created by and for ECHO readers and residents of TDCJ. Here, aspiring writers of fiction, journalism, poetry — and everything in between — will be able to learn writing tips, display their own work and uplift others struggling with the craft.

Many people say they would like to write — they just simply don't have the time. The people saying this are likely not incarcerated. Because, in here, the complaint is the opposite.

Too much time; nothing to do with it.

See where we are going here? Take that time you have too much of and make use of it. Pick up a pen. Plug in your typewriter. Get scribbling and get clacking. Tell your neighbors it's going to be a long night.

One of my earliest memories is of attempting to write a science fiction story and getting frustrated when I couldn't quite spell "engine" right — and the plot falling straight out of orbit. Over the years, I would pen a handful of articles for the high school newspaper, and not a few political diatribes à la Hunter S. Thompson, my erstwhile favorite journalist and author.

For years, however, my real passion eluded me — fiction.

My reticence towards storytelling stemmed from several stigmas, ranging from confidence issues to drug addiction; from inability to conjure a meaningful plot to the basic mechanics of the English language seeming so esoteric that they would forever be out of my reach.

With time, things changed. Like many, it took a prison sentence to get my pen scribbling. While in county jail waiting for the chain bus, I had a meaningful conversation with my mother. In it, she reminded me of how I had once loved

to write. The underlying question scratched between the lines was blatant: "What happened to you? How did that creative and hopeful child become a suicidal drug addict on his way to prison?"

On my journey back to life, I recalled the urge. I use the definitive article, because if you are a writer, you know exactly what urge I am talking about. The urge to create. The urge to write. To conjure worlds and people and plots from thin air. To drop into that magical state where you forget yourself and your surroundings and become intimate with characters that seem to form out of the other and not from your own thoughts. I don't hesitate to call it magic — no sarcasm or hyperbole here. If you have ever sat back and read something you created and said to yourself, "Where did that come from?," then there's no doubt that you know what I mean.

Over the past six years of my incarceration, I have developed my hobby into something akin to a craft. The craft, as Stephen King likes to call it. It took practice. It took sweat and tears and pure anguish. Still, I know my writing is not good enough — and will never be.

Yet I continue on, and I would like you to, as well.

It has been said that everyone has a book inside them,

”
To become a
writer takes
work ethic,
habits and belief
in one's self.

yet most people lack the initiative and want-to required to pen thousands of words a day. The crowd thins even further with the knowledge that only a hundred of those words will be used — and that is only if every syllable doesn't wind up in the garbage. To become a writer takes work ethic, habits and belief in one's self.

And I guess a little talent couldn't hurt.

Much.

I would like to impart upon the readers and writers out there some tips. Some will come from me. Others will be stolen — as all great art is — from auteurs whose names you actually recognize. And, with hope, some from you, as well.

The first tip is my favorite, and one that has been repeated in every book on writing since Socrates scratched papyrus.

"Show — don't tell."

To me, it is more philosophical than a writing tip. The kernel of the idea is that as a writer, you should be painting a picture in your reader's mind, not throwing crayons at their face. Too abstract for you? Fine!

Here we go.

Never, ever explain anything to your reader. Do not tell them anything. Instead show them what is happening and allow them to infer the truth behind the details from the action and the scene itself.

Let's hit those examples up. I'd rather show you than tell you, after all.

It was August 12, 1980. The temperature was 103 degrees Fahrenheit, and the humidity made it feel like 110. Edward Pleck stood on the porch of his shack, looking across his yard and waiting for his wife to come home. She had been cheating on him that afternoon. He knew it. He knew it because everyone knew it.

Not bad, right?

Not long ago, I would have had trouble finding any-

thing at all wrong with that paragraph. Is anything wrong, with it, per se? Nothing all that concrete. As a piece of writing goes, however, it is a pretty far cry from engaging. Can the same imagery and story be expressed through observance of detail, rather than a third-person-point-of-view stumble-thumbs who has never before wielded a pen?

Let's see.

Edward Pleck wiped the sweat off of his forehead and sighed. His front porch sagged beneath him, and the air coming off of his yellowed yard came up in waves. As he lowered his hand, his wedding ring caught a glimpse of light. He froze. Heat rose into his face.

A ragged curtain swung aside in the window of the house across the street and a pale face appeared, frail and witchlike. He made eye contact with Becky Lynn, and she looked right back at him. Contempt in her face. Pity, too. And why shouldn't she pity him? Anna would be home soon, and Mrs. Lynn and everyone on the block knew where she had been and so did he.

If you can't tell me that the second version is better, then you are reading the wrong column.

Ernest Hemingway. The late, great Cormac McCarthy. James Joyce. Stephen King. Name a renowned author, and it is likely that their writing ascribes to the same philosophy.

"Show — don't tell."

This translates also into several more practical pieces of advice. An oft repeated one, the former's near twin, being: "Avoid use of adjectives and adverbs."

Instead of telling your readers that a woman is a "fast runner," fast being our adjective to avoid here, describe — that is to say show — her winning a foot race. Instead of saying a man is tall, show him hitting his head on the doorway. Simple things that paint a much better picture because they enable the reader to envision the events of your story in their mind's eye as they unfold.

Do you struggle with dialogue? Then check this out: dialogue can both show and tell at the same time.

After a long time, his cheeks got even hotter, and he looked away. He flipped his hand over and studied the ring, then he grabbed it with his other hand and tugged. It stuck on his knuckle, but his sweat helped it pop. He gripped it in his fist and cocked his arm back, but hesitated.

Down the road, a plume of dust rose, a nearing cloud. He watched it for a moment, then put the ring in his back pocket and stepped down off the porch and got into his pickup. He unhooked his keys from his belt and held them in his hand. Then, he pulled out his cellphone and scrolled for a minute, searching.

Two rings.

“Eddy? Eddy? Is that you?”

“Ma, it’s me.”

“Oh, gosh, Eddy. It’s so good to hear your voice. When are you coming to see me? You know it’s been two —”

“She’s done it again.”

“... Who’s done what, Eddy?”

“Anna. She did it again.”

“Oh, Eddy.” A beat of silence. “You remember I told you she couldn’t be trusted.”

“I know, Ma. You were right. Is that what you want to hear?”

“It doesn’t hurt.”

More silence.

“What are you going to do, Eddy?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you just come see me?”

“She promised, Ma. She promised me.”

“Eddy?”

“I love you, Ma. Sorry I ain’t never come to see you.”

“Eddy? Eddy, wait —”

He hung up the phone and adjusted the rearview mirror. In it, he watched the dust cloud draw near.

Hardly the best writing I’ve ever done — but not the worst either. I find some things I like about it immediately. One being that I have no idea what is really happening. Even as the author, I could come up with several likely scenarios, but each is too obvious. His wife has been cheating on him. Bzzrt. Try again. Been done before, and way too many times. Drug binge? Fresh out of jail? Joined a cult? Started a cult? What could she have done that would hurt him so, but not enough to make him stop loving her? Is he angry at her? Brokenhearted? Does he think he needs to save her, in maybe a midwestern American Gothic damsel-in-distress kind of way? And what about our point-of-view character, Edward Pleck? Is he a weak-willed character or a strong-willed one? It’s obvious he has been pushed to his limits, but by what — and what does he mean to do about it?

These are all questions that, as a storyteller, I feel should be avoided until there is no other choice but to answer them.

Why?

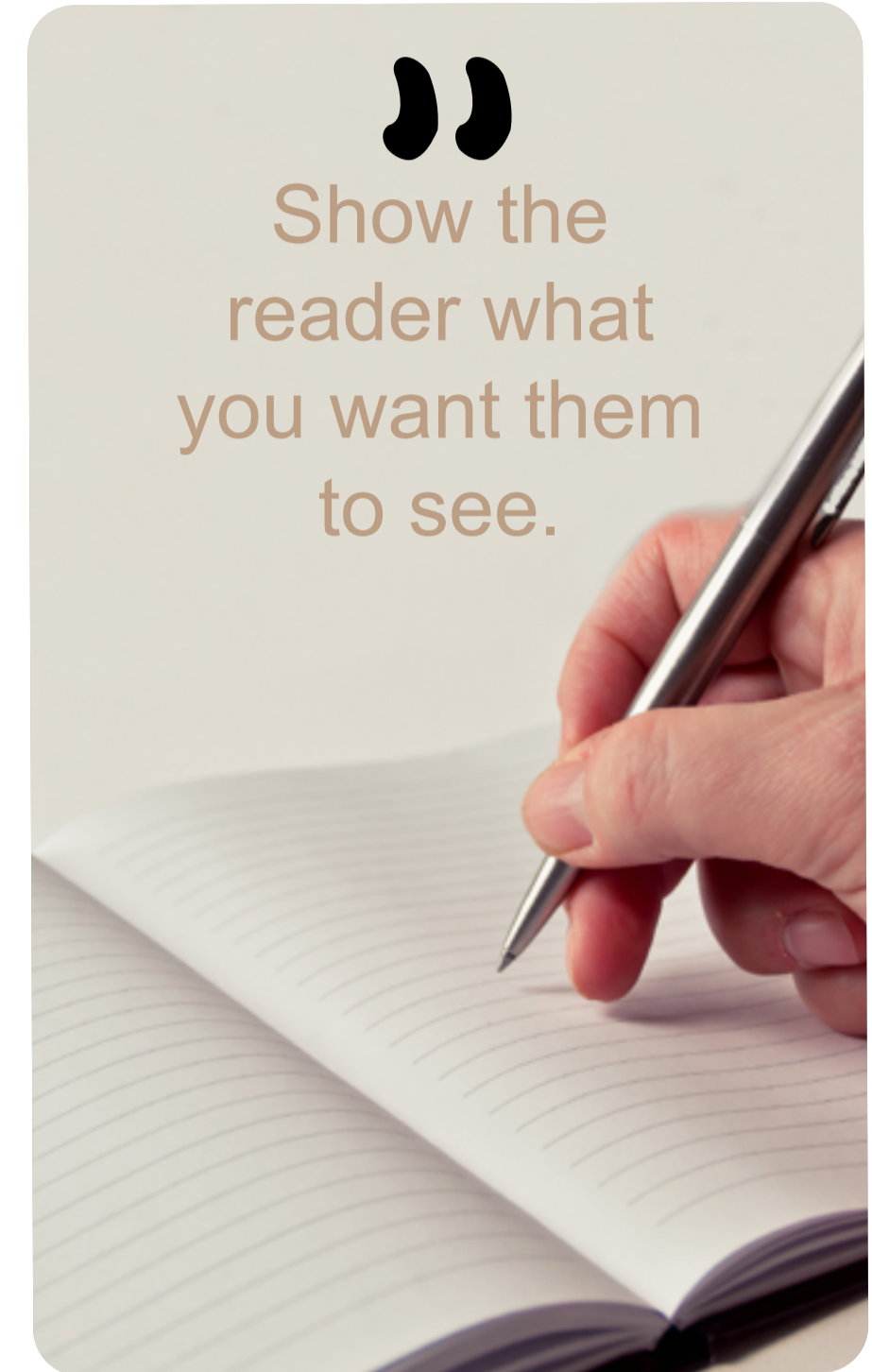
Because good stories are about suspense. Good stories hide in the shadows and around corners, waiting to reveal themselves, to show their truths, rather than simply explaining an order of events. To that end, the practice of showing and not telling naturally breeds conflict and suspense.

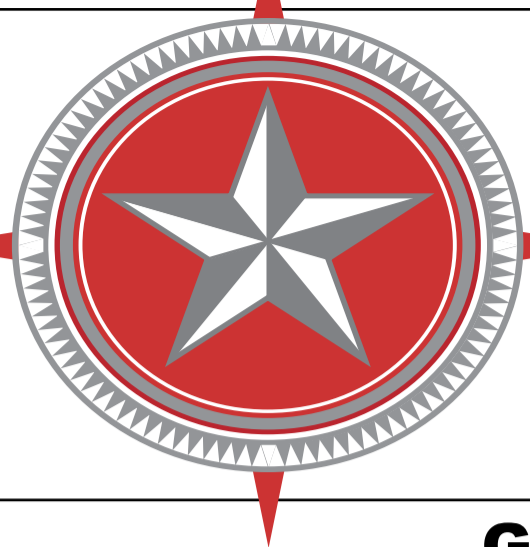
Prison is a fertile breeding ground for aspiring authors. The idea for this column began with the belief that anyone can write. Anyone includes you, reader, whoever you are. Pick up a piece of your writing. See if there are any areas where you can show a little more and tell a lot less. Never written anything? Now’s the time to start. Show the reader what you want them to see. Watch as your writing skills transform. ★

”
Pick up a pen.
Plug in your
typewriter. Get
scribbling and get
clacking.



”
Show the
reader what
you want them
to see.





LEE COLLEGE



Lee College graduate Christopher Ruth:
Associates of Applied Science,
Business Management, Microcomputer;
Magna Cum Laude; Alpha Beta Gamma

GRADUATES FOR SPRING 2023

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Allen, Robert S.	Cano, Higinio C. Jr.	Eckel, William	Griffin, Sherman
Amaya, Adrian	Cantu, Mark	Elbe, Bassett	Guerra, John
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Anderson, Erric	Carlock, Michael W. Jr.	Elmore, Andre	Gustave, Jerome
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Bailey, Quinton	Clark, Bryan O.	Fretwell, Christopher	Hernandez, Christopher
Baker, Angelo	Clark, Gary Vaughn	Garcia, Amador Q.	Hernandez, Joseph
Ballard, Jedediah	Clark, Stephen	Garcia, Anthony	Hernandez, Marco A. Jr.
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Blair, Foy	Cullum, Timothy	Gilbert, Jordan	Hooks, Corey Randall
Bothne, Leif	Dang, Hai	Ginter, Robert	Horace-Spears, Isaac
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Brewer, Damon	Dawkins, Nakia Jonathan	Godbolt, Gregory Darnelle	Horton, Jonathan
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Broussard, Edward	Dean, Michael	Gomez, Rene	Hull, Jarrod Michael
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Brown, Trent	Diaz, Danny	Gonzalez, Jose De Jesus	Jablonowsky, David
Brown, William D.	Dickson, Ja'Mond	Gonzalez, Ruben	Jackson, Tio
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 Jones, Brandon Ray
 Jones, Jessie III
 Jones, Kevin
 Jordan, Jerry
 Jordan, Joshua
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 Kasavage, Robert Charles
 Keller, Christopher J.
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 King, Cena A.
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 Langley, Steven
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 Lester, Charles
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 Martin, Jonathan
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 Miles, Hiram
 Miller, John K
 Miller, Justin
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Miranda, Jon
 Mjaseth, Ronald
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 Montoya, John
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 Morris, Michael
 Munoz, Ruben
 Murray, Jarrett
 Music, Justin
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 Nicholson, Richard
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 Ortega, Jose
 Ortiz, Juan Manuel
 Ortiz, Marcus
 Owens, Richard Lelon
 Parrish, Douglas
 Payton, Brandon
 Peddy, William
 Perez, Efrain
 Perez, Ruy Enrique
 Perkins, Mai Tan
 Perrin, Christopher
 Philley, Michael Taylor
 Phillips, Shelton
 Pierre, Walter
 Polen, Conner
 Prudhomme, Kenneth L.
 Purvis, Scott Daniel
 Rainey, Mitchell
 Ramirez, Jonathan
 Ramirez, Jonathan
 Ramirez, Luis
 Ramirez, Oscar David
 Ramos, Julian L.
 Ramos, Nelson Alejandro
 Ratliff, Joseph
 Reese, Robert
 Reeves, Ronald
 Reeves, Whitney Lee
 Resa, Adam
 Rideau, Curcy A. III
 Rivera, Arturo

Robinson, Patrick L.
 Robinson, Richard
 Robles, Mario
 Rodriguez, Alejandro
 Rodriguez, Felix
 Rodriguez, Joe
 Rodriguez, John H.
 Rowen, Jessie
 Russell, Shawn
 Ruth, Christopher
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 Salinas, Jeffery J. Jr.
 Samora, Bruce Lee
 Sanchez, Cosme
 Sanchez, Jesse Jr.
 Sanchez, Oscar
 Sansom, Charels Ronald
 Santos, Victor
 Sazo, Edgar Arturo
 Screws, Logan
 Segura, Devon
 Senig, Richard
 Sesma, Richard
 Sheddan, Michael A. Jr.
 Sheppard, Waldron
 Sigsworth, Daniel
 Silverstrim, Gary M.
 Simmons, Terry
 Sirles, Marlon
 Slocum, Brent Reid
 Smith, Jacob
 Smith, Kevin
 Smith, Tevori
 Sonneveld, James
 Sorrells, Scott
 Soto, Christopher Lee
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 Stanley, Terry
 Staudt, Thomas
 Stephens, Antone Demone
 Sterling, Adante
 Stewart, James
 Surginer, Derek
 Tamayo, Isaac
 Taylor, Adrian
 Taylor, Bruce L.
 Terrell, Thomas
 Thomas, Isaac

Thomas, Michael Joshua
 Thomas, Nicholas Von Eric
 Thomas, Torrando
 Thompson, Marvin Lee
 Thompson, Timothy E.
 Tickner, Douglas Neil, III
 Torres, Daniel
 Torres, Oscar Gerardo Jr.
 Trevino, Sr., Robert Lee
 Trinh, Steven Tri Dung
 Tuton, Wesley Michael
 Valero, Andrew
 Vasquez, Antonio
 Villarreal, David Jr.
 Villegas, Albino
 Vining, Christopher
 Vodochodsky, Kenneth
 Wade, Kenneth A.
 Walton-Fowler, Terrance
 Walton, Charles
 Ward, Roy
 Ward, Thomas
 Washington, Marcus D.
 Watkins, Chace
 Watts, Leon
 Weatherbee, Raymond
 Weedman, Michael James
 Weiner, Brian
 Welte, Brandon
 Wenzel, Joshua
 Werner, Vince
 Wesley, Quintavious
 Wilkinson, Willison
 Williams, Christopher
 Williams, John
 Williams, Vernon
 Wilson, James G.
 Wilson, Miles Jr.
 Wilson, Sherman
 Wisniewski, Curtis
 Yates, Seth Andrew
 York, Robert
 Young, Christopher
 Zamora, Patrick
 Zubia, Jaime Jr.
 Zuckero, Jacob J.



The ECHO writing contest

Third Place Fiction

Outdated blessings

by Christopher Elmore

The ECHO writing contest

Finalist

The barn

by Steven McCain

My favorite teacher

by William E. Hill

Dry pancakes

by Andrew R. Reynolds

Special Writing Feature

THIRD PLACE FICTION

Outdated blessings

Christopher Elmore — Released

TI. Texas Department of Rehabilitated Justice Virtual System Virtual Server: The Beach
Visitation Start Time: 03/12/2342, 1:00 p.m.
Virtual User: Aximus Neptune
Virtual visitor: Nova Sweeney

Aximus and his girlfriend, Nova, sat side by side on an empty beach and watched the sunset over the watery horizon. Nova had mentioned on a couple occasions during their visit how she thought the server they were in was so peaceful and romantic.

Aximus though, didn't find anything about virtual reality to be peaceful or romantic. However, he knew Nova, like the rest of virtual users, considered virtual reality to be a necessary part of life. He had not planned on saying anything against Nova's views towards virtual reality, but every story she told during their visit dealt with her being synched

into the virtual world. Out of concern, Aximus asked, "Nova, how many days at a time do you stay synched into the virtual world?"

"Usually for a month straight," she answered. "It just depends."

"Isn't a month a bit much?"

"No. Everybody is staying synched in virtual spaces for about a month now."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Times have changed since you were out. Two

weeks isn't the average anymore."

"Still, Nova, people shouldn't be synched in for that long."

"Are you serious right now?"

"Isn't it obvious this isn't natural for our minds and bodies?"

"Aximus, wherever you're trying to go with this, save it. Don't forget: when you weren't locked up, the aver-

age time you stayed synched in was close to three months."

"I haven't forgotten, but —"

"No, Aximus!" she said, standing up.

"I'm glad prison got you to come to your senses, but don't start sounding like those crazy physicalists. There is nothing wrong with staying synched in for the authorized amount of time."

Aximus nodded away the urge to ar-

gue and instead calmly stood up.

"So let's not talk about virtual reality."

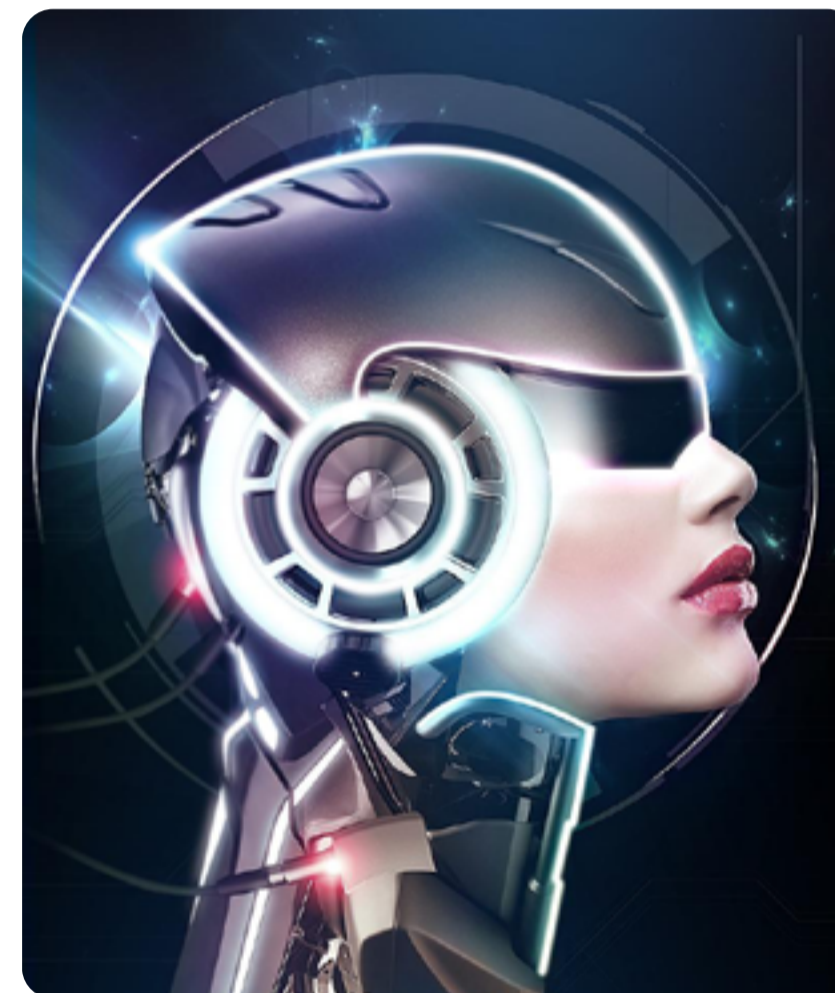
Nova nodded in agreement.

"How are you and Tori doing?"

"Me and Tori are doing fine. I call her every day from whatever virtual server I'm on. It's your mom that's annoying me."

"What's she doing now?"

"She keeps telling our daughter all this physicalist nonsense about how it's more important to be in the



physical world than in the virtual world.”

“What’s wrong with doing a few things in the physical world?”

“Come on, Aximus. You and I both know the physical world is outdated.”

“Even if it is, at least we have my mom to watch over Tori while you’re synched in.”

“Sometimes I wish I could find another caretaker for Tori.”

“My mom can’t be that bad.”

“Aximus, just today she took Tori to a freakin’ church!”

At the mention of church, Aximus genuinely frowned. Even though he had become somewhat of a physicalist since being in prison, religion and the idea of God was one of the harder ideas for him to accept as a physicalist.

“You should have seen the dress your daughter had on. It had way too much color for a physical event.”

Before Aximus could respond, a door materialized off to the side of them.

“Why couldn’t they have forgotten about us?” Nova groaned.

“Because that’s not how prison works.”

“Right,” she said sadly, then gazed out to the setting sun.

“What’s on your mind?” Aximus asked.

“Your mom.”

“Let it go, Nova.”

“Could you at least talk to her before she ends up brainwashing our daughter?”

Aximus brought Nova in close.

“I’ll talk to her, but if I do, please try not to stay synched in for such long periods of time.”

“Then what am I supposed to do when I’m in the physical world?”

He grinned.

“I don’t know, go to church.”

She playfully hit his arm.

“Aximus!”

“I’m joking,” he said, “But let me get out of here before they cut off our server.”

“Okay then,” she sighed.

The two exchanged their final goodbyes, kissed, hugged and then Aximus hurried across the sand to the doorway leading back to the physical world.

II.

Aximus awoke in a daze and tried to move, but could not. Around him was a lab full of unconscious inmates, sleek machinery tubes and monitors connected to them.

Aximus suddenly realized he was no longer in a virtual server, but back in the unit’s virtual center.

“Just relax Mr. Neptune,” a voice said calmly from nearby.

A moment later, Aximus felt thin metal rods retract out of his spinal cord. He winced, not out of pain, but because he was no longer used to the feeling of metal prongs sliding in and out of his back.

“Mr. Neptune,” the unit’s virtual director said as he walked over to Aximus. “I noticed you rarely take advantage of the unit’s virtual capabilities.”

“Only when I get a virtual visit,” Aximus said.

“But why? Your record of good behavior over the years qualifies you for nearly 100 hours of virtual recreation.”

Aximus then felt the sensation of hot needle prickles throughout his body, which was a side effect of extreme nervous-system damage due to prolonged time connected to virtual reality equipment. Sometimes, the painful prickles passed after a couple minutes, sometimes the pain didn’t pass for hours.

“I have my reasons,” Aximus finally said. “Now can I get unhooked from this machine?”

The director nodded to the guard, who began unhooking the IV’s and monitors from Aximus. Once he was completely unhooked, he put his shirt back on and said, “If we’re done here, can I go? I have a phone call to make.”

III.

By the time Aximus was escorted back to his single-man cell, the needles of pain had passed and not wanting to waste his pain-free time, he called his mom on the cell’s touch screen computer mounted on the wall. A minute later, his mom appeared on the screen, smiling and waving.

“Hi, Honey!”

“Hey, Mom.”

“It’s so good to see you, Aximus.”

“It’s good to see you too, Mom, but we need to talk.”

“Ok, but really quick! I have someone who wants to talk to you.”

Suddenly a beautiful little girl hurried into the camera view. “Hey, Daddy!”

Aximus smiled warmly at the sight of his daughter, Tori. She looked so healthy and full of life. He hated that she was already 10, because now she was only two years away from being legally allowed to synch into virtual communities. Once that happened, it would only be a matter of time before she looked drained and shrunken up — like the rest of virtual users.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Aximus said, keeping his smile up.

“Guess where we came from?” Tori asked.

“Where?”

“Church,” she whispered.

“Yeah,” he whispered back playfully.

“Yeah, that’s why I’m wearing this dress!” she said, and showed off the canary-yellow dress she was wearing.

“You look wonderful, sweetheart.”

“Thanks, but Mom says people shouldn’t get so dressed up for things in the physical world.”

“Well, how do you feel about being dressed up in the physical world?”

“I feel good.”

“Then that’s all that matters,” he said. “So, what did you like about church?”

“Umm, I liked how everybody there all sung and clapped together. I’ve never seen so many people singing together.”

Aximus smiled. “What’s one more thing you liked about church?”

“Well, I really liked the stories they told. Did you know there was a man named Jesus that walked around the physical world helping people?”

“Yeah, but sweetheart, Jesus would have never helped people if virtual reality had been around back then.”

“Aximus, don’t say that!” his mom scolded.

“What?” he said playfully.

“I don’t agree with you, Daddy.”

“No?”

“Nope. I think if Jesus were here today, he would still be walking around the physical world, helping people.”

Before responding, Aximus considered not only his daughter’s statement, but also how he had not deterred her extreme physicalist ideas. He knew once Nova found out about this conversation, she would be furious, but he didn’t care. The thought of his daughter in the physical world clapping and singing and having a good time now seemed worth so much more to him.

Aximus then smiled peacefully and said, “You know what, sweetheart? I think you’re right about Jesus.”

Aximus’ mom smiled at him and then said to Tori, “Why don’t you tell your dad what you want to do.”

“Oh, right! So, Daddy, I’ve been thinking and I want to physically come visit you.”

Stunned, Aximus said, “For real?”

“Yep, and Grandma’s coming with me.”

“I would like that, but you know, sweetheart, physical visits are outdated.”

“I don’t care,” she said. “After going to church, I think physical moments are way more special than virtual ones.”

Aximus nodded and smiled. “Well then, I can’t wait to really see you and give you a big hug!”

“And I can’t wait to really see you too, Daddy.”★

The barn

Steven McCain – Wainwright Unit

If the barn could talk, what tales it might tell. But it is not the teller of tales. It is rather an astute but silent witness, a confident and faithful diary, ever secure in its secrets. Though clearly visible from the front porch of the old home, the barn's gaze has of late become resolutely avoided.

The pigeon began appearing a week or so ago, watching and being watched, providing and providing company, offering of himself all that he could offer. With each visit, he brought with him pieces of straw, with which he built a mound of some sort before his perch. He'd drop his offering, peck at it for the briefest of moments, then look up and coo. Each day, his stay was extended a little longer. Moments would pass, and they he would be gone.

Not so today. Today, he was not content to come and go quietly. No, he was, today, intent on drawing attention—not to himself, but to his creation, which he appeared to have finished constructing. He stared towards the porch swing, cooed and quivered, and cooed again and again. His eyes — could it be? — were glossy, and over wet. A tear — truly — splashed against his breast, as he cooed... or

cried. He beckoned and he would not, could not, be ignored.

The swing creaked as it was vacated. The pigeon leapt up to the banister, ever watching. The creation to which this bird was so dedicated was not a straw at all, but a picture: a tattered, torn, and faded picture of a bicycle. It was carefully placed at one end of this bird's sculpture. Pigeon cooed. Eyes met eyes, both pairs wet. He cooed again, then turned and looked at the barn. He looked back to make sure his lead had been followed. There could be no doubt.

Pigeon turned his eyes once again to the barn, where a bicycle, as red and bright as the barn had once been, was lying on its side before the doors of the barn. Its back wheel still spinning, a dust cloud slowly dissipating. The sounds of laughter rose on the currents of the air.

It was an image formed long ago, a memory, or perhaps a dream. A blink and it was gone. The bird took flight towards the barn, but lighted on the ground just a few feet from the house. It turned towards the porch, and voiced, "Coo, coo," as if to bid a following. Then, he turned and took flight again. ★



My favorite teacher

William Hill - Staff Writer

I HAVE HAD MANY TEACHERS IN MY LIFE. SOME were remarkable, some were merely effective, and some should have selected another profession. However, I would like to tell you about my favorite teacher.

Her name was Laverne. She walked on four paws instead of two feet. She had no formal education; not even obedience school, but she taught me a lot of things about myself. Laverne was a rescue dog long before animal rights groups began using the term.

as a result, I lost everything—not that I had much to lose. In a rare moment of lucid thought, I realized that my best course of action was to take a break and allow the world to spin a few revolutions without me. I entered a Christ-centered rehabilitation center in, of all places, Las Vegas, Nevada. After graduating from the first phase of the program, I entered the second phase located on a small ranchette in a nearby city: Pahrump. It was for those interested in furthering their spiritual development, or those like me who were not ready to

face the big, scary world on their own.

As the detox center's van entered through the gate of the ranchette, the first thing I noticed was a little terrier mix dog that eagerly ran out to greet new arrivals with tongue and tail wagging. After signing several papers, signifying my agreement to abide by all the rules and regulations of the detox center and settling into my room, I went outside to scout my new environment.

I spotted the

In 1992, my life had taken a series of unfortunate twists and turns due to a succession of bad decisions on my part. I had begun using alcohol and drugs, and

same black and white mutt lazing away the day in the shade of a rusting tractor, keeping a watchful eye on the new arrival in her world. My attempts to call her



to me resulted only in her lifting her head, then tilting it to one side, then to the other, as if trying to detect what danger I posed to her. About that time, one of the other residents who had been in the program for a while came around the side of the house and explained that Laverne had been abused by a previous owner; therefore, it took her time to get used to a new person.

My first week at the facility was filled with substance use meetings, Bible studies and various other self-improvement classes, so I didn't have a lot of extra time to befriend Laverne. However, I was always sure to say hello whenever I saw her. One day, after a particularly difficult substance use meeting, I found myself sitting on the back porch and feeling very sorry for myself. The full weight of my desperate situation washed over me like a tidal wave. There I was, 25 years old, and I was a regular "Ph.D.": poor, homeless and depressed. I was so lost in the miasma of my own misery that I failed to notice Laverne get up from her favorite resting spot under the tractor and make her way over near where I was sitting. She stopped a safe distance.

When I finally noticed her, I knew that if I made any sudden movements, she would be gone in a flash. Even with my attempts to befriend her she would run, so I sat perfectly still. As she slowly crept towards me, remaining on high-alert for any threat I might still pose to her, I spoke softly in that nonsensical, sing-song way that people reserve for those occasions when they speak to small children and animals. I knew that she could not understand the words I was saying, but I was desperately hoping that by the tone of my voice, she could sense that I meant her no harm.

This was my first chance to be close enough to Laverne, and I could see the ugly scars that covered her body. They screamed out in silent testimony to the incredible potential of human beings to inflict loathsome acts of cruelty. I could see the fear in her eyes as she skulked towards me, but I also saw something else: compassion. Hesitating for only a few seconds, she approached where I sat and lay down next to me in companionable silence as I began to gently scratch

behind her ears.

I believe in that moment she recognized in me a sort of kindred spirit. We had both experienced the worst the world had to offer — her due to the evil of others and me due to my own unhealthy decisions. I am convinced that in her canine wisdom she knew what I needed the most at that moment was to appreciate that I was not alone in the world. In what I can only describe as an act of incredible courage, she opened herself up to being hurt again to show me that even after suffering incredible brutal and inhumane acts, she was still capable of unconditional love.

I don't remember how long we sat there on that back porch, but I knew by the end of it, we had shared an incredible bonding moment. I spent most of my remaining time at the facility in the company of my new best friend. Whenever I went outside, I always made sure I took Laverne a treat from the kitchen. The director of the rehab center even commented that he had never seen Laverne take to anyone as quickly and completely as she had me.

Finally, it was time for me to leave the safety of the center and take my place in the world. I hated the prospect of having to say goodbye to my friend, but I knew in my heart that the rehab center was where she belonged. There would undoubtedly be more lost souls coming through the program that she could help as she had me.

From Laverne, I learned that pain, grief and suffering are not exclusive to the species of animals that walks upright on two legs. Fortunately for me, however, neither are the emotions of love, joy and acceptance. I don't know if dogs are allowed into human Heaven. Perhaps they have their own version of canine paradise, but I pray that wherever Laverne is today, she knows the profound impact she had on my life. More than anything, I hope that I was as good of a friend to her as she was to me, and that for the short time I was in her life, I was able to make her life a little bit better. Who knows? Maybe when/if she happens to remember me, maybe she will consider me one of her favorite pupils.★

Dry pancakes

by Andrew R. Reynolds

H HE'D PARKED HIS CAR several houses down the street beneath the reaching shadow of an oak

tree; its branches swaying idly over the pavement. From here, he could see the front door of the house, but no one would notice him. It had been 10 years and a day. Would she recognize him? What could she remember? She was only two years old at the time.

His eyes drifted to the brown paper sack in the passenger seat. He started to sweat. Suppose she did recognize him?

Would she run?

He flipped the vanity mirror down. The mirror's dim yellow lights were useless in the brightening dawn, but he gazed into it anyway.

He was no different than he had been yesterday — or the day before — but 10 years of yesterdays had transformed him: gray hair, a folded forehead speckled with liver spots, sagging eyes with sad purple bags and pallid sun-forsaken skin.

He looked like a zombie.

She might run, whether she recognized him or not.

The storm door swung open, and his eyes flew to a flashing glint of sunlight in the glass. He waited, but nothing came through the open gap except for a feminine voice



warning someone to hurry — or they'd be late. Then, a small flash of color appeared, perhaps around four foot high.

He quickly glanced down, every breath heavy. He put his hand to his chest and waited for his arm to go numb. Even when his heart didn't explode, he still waited some more, just to be sure. When the spots cleared from his eyes, he stepped out of the car with the paper bag gripped tightly in his hand.

Then he walked toward the house.

A scream, a girlish giggle — and the door swung open again. Three houses away now, he had to resist the urge to sprint. After all this time--all the thinking and dreaming and planning, steel doors and dry pancakes; all the unseen sunrises and sunsets. He was finally back, back to do what he should have done a lifetime ago.

Dirty-blonde hair in pigtails. A pink backpack. Princesses. Unicorns, maybe. Even at four feet, she seemed too tall. His throat dried up, hellbent on choking him. Sweat dripped from the fold of this forehead into his baggy eyes. His body trembled to the point of failure with each step closer.

One house now. Less than a hundred feet.

His grip tightened.

Her back was towards him, one small hand wrapped around the latch of the car door, the other fidgeting with a pigtail. He couldn't have planned it better.

She didn't even notice him.

"Mom!" she shouted over her shoulder. He jumped in stride. "You're going to make us late!"

"I'm coming," the same feminine voice from before replied, sweet as honey and oh, so familiar. She would be much more difficult, he knew.

"Hold your horses!"

He stepped off the sidewalk on to the spongy, dew-flecked grass, and then stopped. A 10-foot gulf lay between them.

It was now or never. It was an irrational absolute, but he'd never been all that rational. The bag felt like a brick of iron in his hand.

"Anna," he tried to call out, his throat so dry her name escaped from his lips as a mere croak. But it was enough.

She turned with big blue eyes wide, and her mouth slightly agape. She stared at him--a tiny deer with dirty-blonde antlers frozen in front of headlights.

He brought the bag from behind his back and removed its contents. It floated away on the cool wind and tumbled cartwheels across the yard. He didn't know what to say — or if he should say anything at all —so he just repeated her name, this time louder and clearer.

"Anna."

He took a step forward.

He stretched out his hand.

Then she screamed.

"Daddy!"

She ran to him and collapsed into his arms. He bent down and hugged her, careful not crush her. With her face buried in his neck, he could feel the warmth of her tears as that melted on his skin. This was one moment he could live in forever.

After a long time, he broke away, finally broke away, and gave her the birthday present he had been unable to give her in the past.

He realized only too late that she had grown too old for a teddy bear.★



INSPIRING THE NEXT GENERATION

Daniel E. 'Rudy'
Ruettiger inspires
Coffee Bean
graduates

William E. Hill
Staff Writer



“RUDY”

“My teammate, Joe Montana, won four Super Bowls. I made one tackle in my one and only game, and they make a movie about me!” Daniel “Rudy” Ruettinger said at a recent graduation celebration at the Wynne Unit. Rudy, the subject of the major motion picture “Rudy,” was positive and relaxed, looking back at his unique career and providing inspiration to the large assembly in the unit chapel.

Serving as an enthusiastic keynote speaker for the fourth graduating class of the Change Agent program, Ruettinger told the men, their families, incoming program participants and Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) employees and leadership that a person must have two things to be successful in life: a dream and hope. His message echoed the Change Agent theme and program: 16 weeks of training based on the best-selling book of the same name by Damon West, a former TDCJ resident, who was also present at the event.

Ruettinger grew up in blue-collar Joliet, Ill., a community known more for the prison than college athletes dreaming of playing college football for the Fighting Irish of the University of Notre Dame. However, his road to Division 1

college football was filled with naysayers, twists and turns. Deemed too undersized to play major college football, he did not receive any scholarship offers after high school, so he enrolled in the Navy at the height of the Vietnam War.

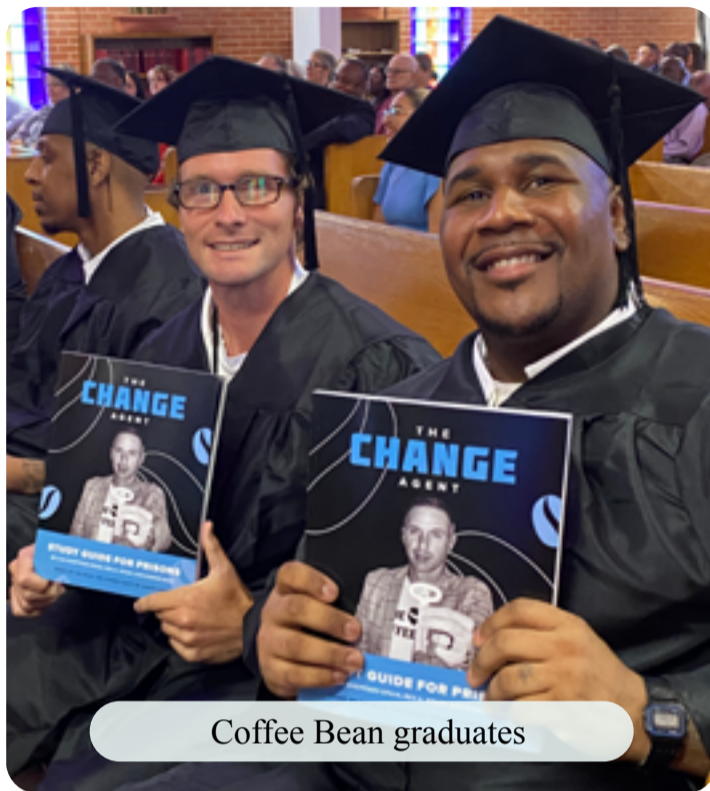
“We all make choices,” Ruettinger said. “My life changed when I made the choice to think good thoughts, but first I had to stop thinking goofy thoughts. The first thing I would tell you is quit listening to the goofy things that control your mind; get good thoughts in your mind and your life changes for the better.”

Ruettinger complimented graduates for demonstrating they were ready to make real and lasting life changes.

“To really change, you have to be committed,” Ruettinger said. “Did you see how Damon [West] came up here to speak to you? He ran! He is committed to you guys.”

After serving his country, Ruettinger came home and went to work in the same steel mill where his father was employed. It was during this period that a tragedy involving his best friend, Pete, made him realize that life was too short to give up on his dream of playing for Notre Dame.

“My friend, Pete, made a choice to take a shortcut with his life,” Ruettinger said. “Do not take chances with your life; take chances on your dreams.”



Coffee Bean graduates



Change Agent graduates receive certificates

was being admitted into Notre Dame as a student. He arrived on campus as a 23-year-old freshman, an age when most students were preparing to graduate.

“To be able to achieve my dream of playing college football, I had to do the work academically,” Ruettinger told the graduates. “Education is very important. Get yourself right upstairs, and you can be anything you want to be.”

Rudy then faced the challenge of attempting to make the football team as a walk-on. A walk-on is a college student who is not on scholarship, but who wants to compete in athletics. There are two types of walk-ons: first: a player whom the college or university wants yet there is no scholarship available for them at the time. Often, they will ask the player to play as a walk-on for a season until a scholarship becomes available. That was not the case with Ruettinger. He was the second type of walk-on: a student who loves the sport or the university so much that he simply wants to be part of the team.

It was during tryouts that Rudy’s determination and work ethic caught the attention of an assistant coach named Joe Yanto, who agreed to put Ruettinger on the practice squad. Ruettinger credits his large, blue-collar family for helping him develop a good work ethic.

“My dad worked three jobs to support us, and I guess

Ruettinger submitted many applications to Notre Dame, but was denied admittance every time. While waiting for his acceptance, Ruettinger attended Holy Cross College to improve his academics. Eventually, he achieved his first goal, which

that mindset of getting up and doing the job every day just rubbed off on me,” Ruettinger said. “I knew that no one was going to give me anything, so if there was something I wanted, I had to work for it.”

Life was tough for Ruettinger as a walk-on. He went through all the drills and practices during the week, but he never got the payoff of playing in the game. Yet instead of complaining or quitting, he continued to put in the work.

“It is the same way in life,” Rudy said. “You work and work, and sometimes you don’t reach your goal right away. However, if you don’t quit and an opportunity does come around, you’re ready because you’ve put in the preparation.”

In college football, the last home game of the season is known as Senior Day. It is the time when teams recognize all the seniors on the roster who may not have played very much, or in Ruettinger’s case, at all. Ruettinger did not harbor any illusions that the work he was putting in would make him the star of the team.

“I knew that I did not have the skill set or talent to be a starter on the team, but what I could do was contribute to the tradition of Notre Dame football and in the process, help other people realize their dreams as well,” he said.

Based on Ruettinger’s story of hard work and focused motivation, “Rudy” was the first movie to be filmed on the Notre Dame campus since “Knut Rockne: All-American” in the 1940s. The movie has entertained and motivated millions. Ruettinger also shared the story with listeners that a teenaged basketball player had watched the movie repeatedly, taking



Change Agent graduates



"Rudy" speaks to Change Agent graduates

“

Get good thoughts in your mind and your life changes for the better.

Daniel "Rudy" Ruettinger

in the messages of continually working hard to get better every day. Today, that player is known as Kobe Bean Bryant.

In the film "Rudy," the final scene depicts his teammates defying the coach's orders to run out

score for themselves. However, that occurrence actually gave Rudy a chance to enter the game to cover the ensuing kickoff. He stayed on the field for one defensive snap and also earned his Notre Dame monogram: a varsity letter. In the process, he cemented his presence in Notre Dame history, and more importantly, his story inspired his five younger brothers to go to college and earn a degree.

Ruettinger told The ECHO his message to the Change Agent graduates and to every man and woman incarcerated in TDCJ is to never lose hope--and to keep on dreaming.★



Rockwell Chapel band performs



Change Agent graduates

GROWING OPPORTUNITIES

Urban Farming program offers skills and hope at the Roach Campus



Elkanah E. Hendrix
Staff Writer



Student-made pond in greenhouse

“It was heartbreaking. We went in at seven in the morning and opened the doors — and everything was destroyed,” said Dustan Wise, a Windham Urban Farming and Horticulture student.

Wise’s grief wasn’t without companion. While the freeze at the end of 2022 was not as severe as the historical winter blast that took Texas by storm on Feb. 11, 2021, it was not without tragedy. Temperatures dropped to below six degrees, resulting in the loss of both animal and plant-life. The participants in the Windham School District (WSD) Roach Campus Urban Farming and Horticulture program were among the many who were physically, but emotionally bitten by the frost.

“It was six degrees inside,” Wise continued. “All the plants were frozen solid. Our heads of lettuce were like ice sculptures; you just barely touched them and they shattered into pieces. It was awful. We were so upset that we lost everything.”

Wise said that he felt a sense of pride from all the hard work he had put in — work to which he was deeply attached. His greenhouse was harvesting 128 heads of lettuce per week.

“I’ve always been fascinated with fish and ponds. This class utilizes the fish and water to grow plants, and I think it’s taking it to another level to know that I can grow an entire crop using only fish and water. It kind of makes you numb to see your fish and plants frozen stiff,” Wise said.

For these men, urban farming is more than just a program.

“These plants are kind of like our children. Watching them grow is exciting, but it’s also a lot of work. With all the pruning and training in order to make our vines grow the way

we want them to, producing what we want them to produce is difficult. Plus, it’s kind of sad to trim off something you wanted to keep in order to not stunt the plant’s potential. So, it goes from exciting — to kind of sad — to finally experiencing an awe moment. You can see why we were so angry when we walked in and saw what had happened to our babies,” teacher’s aide O’Brian Duke said.

The students knew that starting from scratch could have been a painful experience after suffering the loss of all their hard work. Instead, they viewed it as an invitation to self-confidence and growth. Horace, the Roman poet (65 B.C.) once said, “Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents which in prosperous circumstances would have lain dormant.” The way the Urban Farming students responded to their post-storm predicament proved the truth in those words.

“Everyone was upset,” instructor Alan Davis said. “But by the next day everybody was digging up stuff, throwing out dead plants and starting all over. We still have challenges. It seems like we get one after another, but with the group of guys I have, we just grab hold of the challenge and do what needs to be done.”

These urban farmers did not look at the mess and allow the frustration to paralyze them. Instead of dwelling on being knocked down, they considered their acquired skillsets and employed them to get back up.

“The only thing that we could do with all the loss was to pick up the remaining fruits and vegetables that had seed-pods and dry them out and use them to start a brand-new harvest from the dead plants that we lost. It was like a phoenix coming back from the dead,” Wise said.

Liz Morris, an education specialist with (WSD) visited the Roach Unit shortly after the freeze, and had coincidentally decided to visit the Urban Farming and Horticulture de-



Dustan Wise tends aquaponics-grown lettuce

partment.

“The first day that we went was Feb. 28, not long after the freeze took place,” Morris said. “Mr. Davis told me how they had lost everything and had just started regenerating.”

After capturing still frames of the early evidence of resiliency, Morris made it a point to follow up.

“I went back in mid-April to teach for a week and the growth was just amazing. They recovered everything,” Morris said.

In addition to aquaponics and hydroponics, the Urban Farming and Horticulture program utilizes aeroponics — a system in which roots are suspended in the air and sprayed with a nutrient solution every few minutes. Duke prefers hy-

droponics, though. His greenhouse has produced more than 720 heads of lettuce, and he has a vision for its use in his future.

“Hydroponics is better for the environment; it uses 30% less water and is more space efficient than any other type of conventional farming — especially with the advent of vertical farming. Imagine repurposing roof-tops, parking lots, old warehouses. You are turning some form of trash into a place

that produces an abundance of vegetables, fruits, herbs, all which have a lot of medicinal properties. There is a huge opportunity here to make a living. I definitely plan on taking this to the world and utilizing every bit of it,” Duke said.

The Roach Campus is currently one of five locations that offer the Urban Farming program — a program that yields more than just book knowledge from classroom time.

“Windham has given us the opportunity to not only get the book smarts but the hands-on environmental part of vocation. Every-

thing we learned in the classroom from the books we also used in a hands-on way,” Duke said. “We learned how to work together as a team when that Arctic blast hit and wiped out all our hard work. Whenever there’s a new class, everybody pretty much wants to do their own thing, but the freeze was an opportunity for everyone to come together. It really built our relationships. We did this together — from the start of the soil to the planting of the seeds. Now we’re reaping the benefits of our harvest. The smiles on everybody’s faces right now speaks volumes.”

The usefulness and need for vocations are often under-appreciated among residents, but Davis says it is a mistake to remain frozen in such a mind-set. Residents are picking

up tangible experience: practical knowledge, understanding and wisdom to help them flourish when they embark on their journey into the next chapter of their lives.

“People sometimes think a vocation is a waste of time. That is a mistake. We aren’t preparing students to go out and push a lawnmower; anybody can do that. Yes, we are teaching them about all the tools we use, but we’re also teaching them soft skills. They are learning the need for showing up on time every morning, and gaining an understanding of how it is that they need to take responsibility for whatever their duties are. We are giving them skills for the future,” Davis said.

The way these men cured despair using action as an antidote captured the attention of the WSD Roach



Teacher's aid O'Brian Duke

Campus Principal Callie Thompson.

“What I found most amazing is how they turned their disappointment into an opportunity to start fresh. They saw it as a challenge and they put all of their learning into action — and they overcame,” Thompson said.

Not only did they overcome — they conquered.

“Because of the freeze, our tanks are now 10 times better. Everything is better. We took a loss and turned it into a win,” Wise said.

The greenhouses at the Roach Unit’s Urban Farming and Horticulture program are now growing more than heads of lettuce.

“There was just something different about this program. At some point in life, a person has to think about what he really wants. Do you really want the same thing you’ve been getting? Because if you keep doing the same thing the results will never change,” Duke said. “I believe it was Abraham Lincoln who said, ‘The best way to predict the future is to create it yourself.’ I’ve entered a new stage of my life. I’ve grown, and I can honestly say that this program is responsible for it. Green thumb or not, I would recommend anybody who wants change to enroll.”

To enroll in the Urban Farming and Horticulture program residents are advised to send an I-60 to their student advisor. Student advisors have access to a district wide waiting list. ★



Instructor Davis examines student projects



Urban Farming and Horticulture program projects



Taste of home

Danny Lott — Wainwright Unit

In 2018, I decided to take a horticulture trade. Mostly to check the boxes and to satisfy parole. I became determined to leave no stone unturned in my efforts to meet parole requirements and make my way back home. I chose to work on my attitude as well. I could become bitter, as so many have done. However, that would only lead to my becoming hardened and detached from friends and family. I wanted to do something creative and productive with my life instead. My goal became to deal with the issue that got me here and to ultimately change my life.

Change became my mantra. Not only to appear changed, but to be changed. That meant putting behind me those things I couldn't change and being grateful I had the breath and the opportunity to make my future a little brighter. Better days and a brighter future meant home to me. Going home has always been my hope and my mainstay. Going home is to reunite with Mom and Dad, my brothers and sisters and all my relatives — to step back into society with a renewed appreciation for all those simple things we all take for granted.

Yet in February of 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, I lost my mom, my rock foundation. For months, I mourned my loss, as my foundation had been shaken. A field minister noticed my pain and reached out to lend an ear and a word of comfort. Mr. Garza was his name. He gave me pause of thought when he asked me a question that changed my outlook, relieved my pain and set my feet back on the right path. His words warmed my heart.

“Danny, if you don't mind me asking, what are some of your favorite memories of your mom?” he asked.

Wow! Thank you, Mr. Garza. Talk about opening the floodgates. Not only the tears, but also the memories. He helped me to

“
Change
became
my mantra.
Not only
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but to be
changed.”

“
Mom always
encouraged me to
touch, taste and smell
the bounty of God.”

understand that her memories were not only in my past, but also in my present. What a gift.

When I think about mom, I think about home, and her on her hands and knees working her garden. Every spring, she turned the soil and planted her flowers and vegetables. She always allowed me to get my hands in the dirt and to feel the joy she felt. I still recall the smell of freshly turned earth and the way she would smile as she'd hold up the earthworms she pulled from the rich soil.

Inside our home, a bay window filled with fragrant herbs welcomed me home from school. That wonderful smell could never be duplicated by candle and will always linger in my mind.

I'm now completed advanced horticulture through Lee College at the Pack II Unit. I even took a moment to enjoy a stroll through the gardens. It was a beautiful spring day, and life was everywhere. With my cup of hot tea in hand, I walked beneath the wisteria and the fragrant ligustrum in full bloom, which brought back so many memories of my childhood.

Passing through the greenhouse, I ran my fingers across the leaves and petals and tasted the purslane.



Mom always encouraged me to touch, taste and smell the bounty of God. She was always hands on. She once made a little wooden sign that read, “Please Walk on the Grass.”

That was my mom. I was aware then that Mother's Day was coming up, and something deep in my soul felt her presence that morning as I took in the sights and smells of the miraculous events of spring.

From the greenhouse, I passed through an arbor which led to an abundant herb garden. I began to feel my heart race as I looked across the row of lavender, mint, sage and chamomile. Chamomile was Mom's favorite. I pulled several leaves from the chamomile and placed them in my tea, along with a couple of leaves from the sweet stevia plant--as well as a blade of lemongrass. I sat in the cool of that morning and enjoyed God's little gift to me. I then remembered the busy honeybees. With a smile I thought, “maybe next time.” As I sat enjoying that perfect spring morning, I felt Mom's presence.

“Good morning, Son!” For a moment, I felt at home, free and living in the present.

King Solomon said, “There's a season for all things. There's a time to live and a time to die.” However, spring tells us there's also a time to be reborn.

We all hope for a second chance and a new life, and it just so happens, nature favors second chances. The sights and smells of spring can remind us of home and freedom, and a new life for ourselves. Your change is coming sooner than you realize.

Right outside, new life springs up in rows and rows of lavender, lemongrass and chamomile--tended by a gardener with unseen hands. Those same hands that beckon us to come alive again. Thanks, Moms, for reminding us that the next chapter of our lives have yet to be written.★

ART EXPO



Cardinals / R. Trevino, Sr.
Watercolor on
Illustration Board / 15" x 20"

“ I believe that discovering our innermost talents is God’s way of giving us the strength to not only escape our innermost darkness, but also to overcome all things. ”
- R. Trevino, Sr.



Willie | M. Curry
Graphite on Illustration Board | 15" x 20"

Want your art featured in the ECHO? Send it to:
The ECHO c/o WSD Admin.
Bldg., P.O. Box 40, Huntsville,
TX 77342-0040.
Drawing pads and/or
illustration boards preferred.
Half and quarter boards welcome.
Artwork cannot be returned.



Faith | J. Lyssy
Mixed Media on Illustration Board | 10" x 15"



Sphynx Cat | J. Perez
Graphite on Illustration Board | 10" x 15"



My View | R. Hernandez
Colored Pencil on
Poster Board | 15" x 20"



Eat Up!



Rice & Pork Skin Special Delight

Treola Hawkins - Marlin Unit

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| Ingredients: | Directions: |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ½ bag pork skins, semi-crushed 1 bag rice 1 bag BBQ chips, semi-crushed 2 pks. cream cheese 2 pks. chili soup seasoning ¾ spoonful onion powder, or to taste ¾ spoonful garlic powder, or to taste | <p>Mix all the ingredients together in a large bowl. Add water, then place in two empty rice bags. Place in hot pot and let cook for five to 10 minutes. Enjoy!</p> |

Tastes Like Home Tuna Salad

R. Constance - Ramsey Unit

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| Ingredients: | Directions: |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 pk. jalapeño tuna 2 heaping spoonsful sandwich spread ¼ - ½ pk. ranch dressing 2 spoonsful salt-free seasoning ½ ramen soup, cooked, drained, cooled (optional) 2-4 hard-boiled eggs (optional) | <p>Cook soup for five minutes. Drain and let cool. Add tuna, egg, and the rest of the ingredients. Mix well and enjoy! Optional: jalapeño chips, snack rounds, saltines, or regular chips as a dipper. Those are my favorites!</p> |

A1 Nachos

Arron Ivy - Hughes Unit

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| Ingredients: | Directions: |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 small bags Doritos (Sub 2 ½ handfuls tortilla chips) 1 pk. chili-no beans 1 pk. turkey bites, diced 1½ cup instant chili beans (sub refried) 1 pk. chicken chunk, diced 1 summer sausage, diced (sub Klements sausage) 2 pks. cream cheese 3 jalapenos, diced 1 pk. ranch dressing 1 bag pork skins, crushed squeeze cheese, to taste | <p>Take chips and put in a bowl. Put chili-no beans in a big chip bag and add instant chili or refried beans. Add the diced turkey bites, chicken chunks, and summer sausage to the chili in the chip bag. Add the two cream cheese packs to the bag. Mix it and place in the hot pot for 30 minutes. When done, take and pour over your chips. Add squeeze cheese on top. Then add your diced jalapenos. Finally, drizzle the ranch dressing on top. Eat and enjoy!</p> |

Delightful Chocolate Cheesecake Cookie Sandwiches

Bobbie Grubbs - Allred Unit

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| Ingredients: | Directions: |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 pks. instant milk 1 pk. hot chocolate mix 4 pks. cream cheese 2 pks. M&Ms (plain or peanut) 1 pk. chocolate chip cookies 1 bowl 1 hot pot insert | <p>Mix both packages of milk with dry hot chocolate mix. Add cream cheese and mix until solid and shiny. Add both packages of M&Ms to cheesecake mixture and mix again until solid. Take insert and use as a cookie cutter. Cut out cheesecake and place between two chocolate chip cookies and enjoy. Makes 10 cookie sandwiches.</p> |

Pound Town Cake

Jeremy Moon - Connally Unit

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| Ingredients: | Directions: |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 pks. duplex cookies 2 pks. pound cake 2 pks. maple & brown sugar oatmeal 1 spoonful Nutella 1 pk. M&Ms | <p>Separate cream from cookies. Crush chocolate side of cookies, then mix one pack of oatmeal with it. Put eight spoonsful of water with it. Form dough in bottom of bowl. Then, put both pound cakes on top of the chocolate dough. Take vanilla side of cookies and crush them up. Mix one pack of oatmeal with it, then add eight spoonsful of water and form dough. Flatten dough and put on top of pound cakes. Take one spoonful Nutella and mix with cream from duplex cookies, with two spoonsful hot water and mix well. Spread on top of vanilla dough. Crush M&Ms and spread on top of Nutella. Cut and enjoy!</p> |

Chapo's Can't Get Enough Chocolate PB Cake

Stephanie Garcia - Marlin Unit

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| Ingredients: | Directions: |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 pk. cream cheese 1 pk. vanilla Chike 1 pk. milk 2 pks. sweetener (sub 3 spoonsful creamer) 1 pk. chocolate cream cookies 2 spoonsful peanut butter | <p>Separate cookie pieces in one bowl and chocolate filling in another. Crush cookie pieces very fine, pour water slowly over them until it's a dough-like consistency, and mold them together in the bowl. In the bowl with cream filling, pour powdered milk, Chike, sweetener, cream cheese and peanut butter. Use your best whip game until batter is thick. If your whip game is strong, there should be no lumps. When done pour into crust, then wait until cake is set. Enjoy!</p> |



POLUNSKY UNIT

CAROL YOUNG MEDICAL FACILITY

The Rehabilitation Programs Division (RPD) took the lead to reinvent how TDCJ approaches end-of-life care.

RPD's No One Dies Alone (NODA) program utilizes TDCJ's Life Coaches, who are trained resident counselors, to offer companionship and support for residents who are terminally ill. These individuals stay by the patient's side each day and help them with daily tasks and offer emotional support.



NODA Life Coaches

KPM Ministries, Polunsky Unit veterans develop leadership academy

By Robert A. Arroyo

Volunteers Kent and Priscilla Pate of K&P Ministries (KPM) are working to reach all incarcerated military veterans systemwide, starting with those at the Polunsky Unit. "You fought for us; we will fight for you!" Priscilla said, addressing members of the Polunsky Veterans Incarcerated Support Group (VISG) and bringing hope to veterans in attendance. Relationships with, and caring for America's veterans comes naturally to the couple who are both children of U.S. Marine Corps veterans. Introduced to the Polunsky VISG in November of 2020, the couple's warmth, sincerity and enthusiasm won over even the most skeptical of veterans at the unit. In addition, these volunteers brought stability, structure, excellent resource materials, motivation and commitment into the unit. They give the veterans purpose, and in some, replaced the hardness in their hearts with hope. Instruction began with the initial selection and certification of Round Table Facilitators (RTFs)—those Veterans who will guide and control discussions during lessons and periods of instruction. Next, each RTF was assigned four or five students, with a total of 42 participants in the initial class. The curriculum began with "Beyond Success" and "Six Tires, No Plan," and it culminated with "15 Invaluable Laws of Growth." Demand and enthusiasm for these programs necessitated additional programs such as "Toast Masters" and "Leadership Within You 2.0".

Sam Houston State University conducts wellness interviews

By Robert A. Arroyo

A research team from the Sam Houston State University's Department of Criminal Justice conducted voluntary interviews with residents and staff members. The information compiled will be submitted to the Bureau of Justice and Assistance (BJA) to enhance prisons and jails by designing new programs for prison reform. According to one team member, most studies focus on either residents or staff, but rarely both groups. Utilizing a prepared questionnaire, the topics included living and working conditions, staff interactions, prison culture and the effects of COVID on the prison population.



HUTCHINS STATE JAIL

Hutchins State Jail holds Kairos, Kolbe retreats

By Matthew Myers

The presence of God was felt at both the Kairos and Kolbe events at the Hutchins State Jail. Participants said they had an awesome time and thank unit administration and staff for allowing these events to be a success.



Hutchins State Jail Kolbe #12



Hutchins State Jail Kairos #31

MOUNTAIN VIEW UNIT



The 1st National Braille Conference Behind Bars at the Mountain View Unit was a success. Ms. Billman, staff and transcribers presented to TBCJ Member, Ambassador Siv, the braille transcript of his book "Golden Bones." Thank you to Manufacturing, Agribusiness, and Logistics; Correctional Institution Division; Windham School District; and everyone who made this conference possible.

TERRELL UNIT

UTMB providing outstanding service at Terrell Unit

By James A. Harris

The Terrell Unit is a single-level unit with a 24/7 emergency response team offering continual care for residents in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Since the Terrell Unit is a medical facility, it can present a challenging job environment for the medical department and staff who work diligently to ensure good health and effective treatment. The University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) staff's relentless work ethic and high spirits continue to educate and help residents with advice on how to stay healthy, eat good, and most importantly, how to stay hydrated to avoid heat-related illnesses. The residents of the Terrell Unit offer thanks & appreciation to the UTMB team for its hard work.

Urban Ministry Institute brings first graduation to Terrell

By James A. Harris

The Urban Ministry Institute (T.U.M.I. — pronounced 'two-me') has come a long way in TDCJ, says Pastor Charles Anderson. TUMI started on the Terrell Unit in 2017 with 12 students. After many years and pushing through the COVID pandemic, TUMI has grown inside of TDCJ with a total of 23 different units and about 300 students. Anderson has been dynamic in promoting the positivity and persistence to residents for rehabilitation and reentry.

"When I started TUMI, my only prayer was, God, please do not let me start these guys and then run out of money before they are

able to get their certificates in Christian Ministry," Anderson said in a previous *ECHO* interview (Nov.-Dec. 2022; Vol. 94, No.10). His prayers were answered positively.

"We need to make sure these graduates are put to work in leadership to change the lives of people who need help," Anderson said.

TUMI curriculum is college-level seminary academic work. This work is in a three-phase model and takes four years to complete. Areas to study in this model are in four groups: Christian Leadership, Theology and Ethics, Biblical Studies and Urban Mission. It takes about 90 days to work through a module text, and there are 16 modules.

When TUMI student Jonathan Wingate was asked if TUMI was easy, his reply was "No, not at all. It's very challenging to learn and apply at the same time in an environment like this. It's above and beyond just a Bible study; it's a new life, and I will never regret taking it."

"TUMI has broadened my scope," student Kenneth Davis said. "At one point, I was just a believer, and

now I'm a follower. There's a difference. I've realize what the TUMI family has done. It's a strong brotherhood, and I thank all the facilitators for their time and effort in allowing this to happen; it's a game changer."

If you want to know more about TUMI, please contact your unit chaplain.

Pictured below: J. Tucker, J. Harris, K. Davis, A. Smith, M. Saucedo, J. Wallace, G. Gomez, B. Bond, M. Meraz, D. Mycye, E. Olvera, M. Tracy, F. Reed, I. Roberts, J. Wingate, D. McMillian and Pastor Charles Anderson (in hat).



FT. STOCKTON UNIT

Every day is Family Day on Ft. Stockton Unit

By Jamie Stewart, Unit Reporter

The Ft. Stockton Unit recently held its first Family Day and the result was a lot of smiles, laughter, hugs and tears by the participants. The day began when visiting family members saw their loved ones enter the room. Many of them had not seen each other in person in as many as four years (a result of the COVID pandemic). When they did get back in sync as a family, the energy level was out of this world. Family adrenaline was pumping as they competed in Bean Bag Toss and Family

Feud. Table Two, consisting of resident Dustin Aguire, his mother D. Ramirez, his father M. Ramirez, and resident Gary Snow and his son R. Snow, took home bragging rights for Bean Bag Toss. Other winners were on the Table Five team: resident Royneco Harris and his mother Q. Wright and his sister R. Mickens, along with resident Joel Velazquez and his father J. Velazquez. After the meal, volunteers D. Nicholas and S. Gach, along with the Fort Stockton Praise Team, entertained the families in song. No one wanted the day to end, but soon it was time for the closing event: family testimonies. In expressing what this day meant to them, all nine residents and their loved ones said their hearts were touched and their souls were moved.

HALBERT UNIT



Halbert Unit high school equivalency graduates

STEVENSON UNIT

Reporter perspective:

Changing our thinking

By Landon Brook

An inspirational podcast I listened to recently, including C.F. Hazelwood of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and DJ personality "MegaMind" from Polunsky Unit's "Tank Nation," helped me shift my thinking and embrace new values. The theme was changing thinking.

"Changing your thinking is about more than just increasing your productivity, it's about building your character," Hazelwood said. We all have a set of core values and beliefs that guide us through life. Our values often define who we are and determine how we behave. However, sometimes we get disconnected from our values and lose sight of our true selves. It can be difficult to stay connected to our values when life throws us a challenge.

One way we can embrace our values is by changing our thinking practices. By reflecting on our day-to-day behavior patterns, we can gain insight into our decision-making processes and identify areas for growth. This type of reflection can provide the necessary motivation to transform not only our thinking habits, but also ourselves. Changing our thinking can be a daunting task, but it can also be an opportunity for personal growth. Embracing your values is not only about making conscious decisions about your current situation, but also about developing

life skills and decision-making. It is about finding ways to learn, grow and become the best possible version of yourself. When we live in alignment with our values, we feel a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

One way to develop life skills is by investing in yourself through learning to change your thinking habits and taking up a new hobby. This investment in yourself can put you on the right path as you develop new skills and discover new parts of yourself. Additionally, it can provide an opportunity to meet like-minded individuals and expand your social network.

Lastly, changing your thinking habits can be a way to rehabilitate ourselves. We may have made poor decisions in the past, but that does not mean it has to define who we are or what we want to become. By making positive changes and aligning our thinking practices with our values, we can take steps toward a healthier future.

By aligning our thinking habits with our values, we won't get so wrapped up in our planning, prioritizing and scheduling that the preparation itself becomes a distraction. Your real focus must be on getting your priorities straight. Only then will you be able to embrace your true values and rehabilitate yourself. Proper management of time depends on proper management of yourself.

HILLTOP / MOUNTAIN VIEW UNITS



Hilltop / Mountain View Cognitive Life Skills program graduates

BRADSHAW STATE JAIL

Bradshaw State Jail hosts first Toastmaster ceremony

By Reginald Davis

Graduates of the Toastmaster program showcased talents they learned over a 12-week course at the Bradshaw State Jail. They presented a demonstration for other residents and a handful of special guests, including a local mayor, county sheriff, judge and district attorney. Club President and resident Jeremiah Pilkington served as Toastmaster and introduced all of the other speakers who presented their speeches in front of the crowd. Participants included Club Vice President Edmund McDonald, Jayson Falls, Dakota Cross, Brent Gathright, James Bland, Javarrio Morrow and Daniel Taylor. Participants agreed that public speaking is a skill that can be developed and can serve one well during their lifetime.

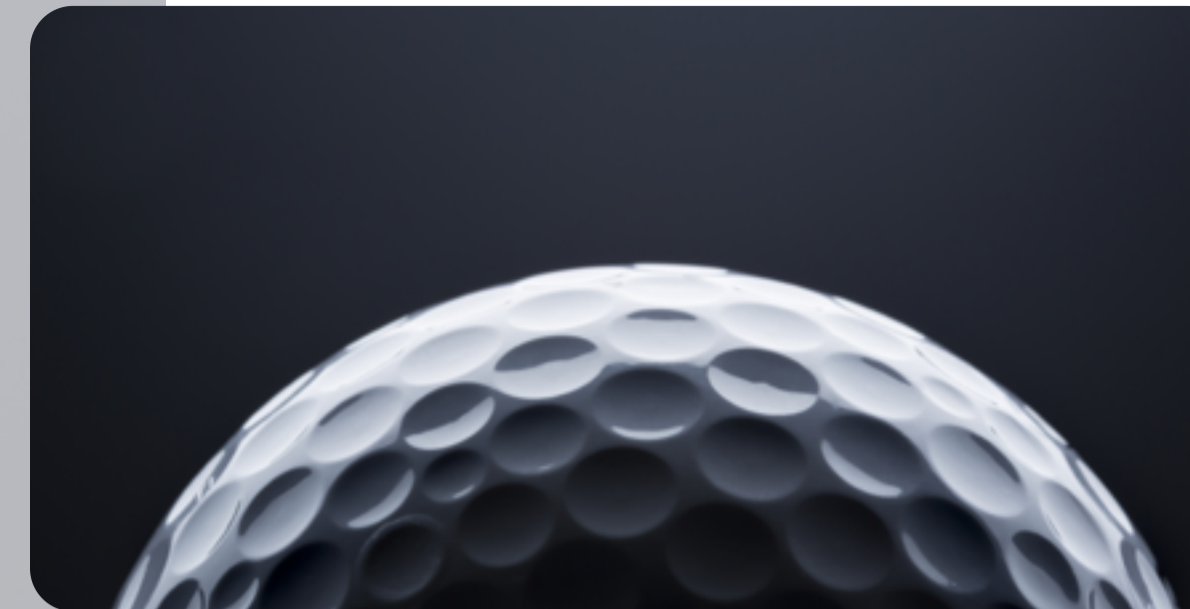
Cognitive Life Skills class hold reunion

By Reginald Davis

The Bradshaw State Jail recently celebrated its first Cognitive Life Skills class graduation. The 15 graduates included Cornelio Avila, Johnathan Clayton, Larry Crawford, Brian Durbey, Gustavo Figueroa, Jeremy Hilton, Anstacio Ovalle, James Perkins, Gerald Pettis, Kevin Price, Roy Ross, David Sanchez, Mario Zamora and Aaron Zigga. Students Price and Sanchez spoke for the graduates, and a keynote address was given by Don Smith, executive director of Behind the Bars and Beyond. Warden J. Rayford closed the ceremony by addressing the graduates. Special thanks are extended to the unit administration and the chaplain's department for their support.

SPORTS VIEW

By William E. Hill - Staff Writer



Money, money, money

Jay Monahan, the Professional Golfers' Association of America (PGA) Tour commissioner, sent shock waves through the sports world and beyond with the June 6 announcement of an agreement with LIV Golf to form a new, for-profit joint venture. The agreement to work with the rival tour is an abrupt about-face from Monahan's stance of the past two years when he told everyone who would listen about the evil of the Saudi-backed tour and the players who defected from the PGA to LIV. The rancor spilled over from the headlines to the courtrooms as both sides sued and countersued each other.

In January 2020, Monahan announced that any PGA Tour player who decided to play on the new tour would face a lifetime ban from the PGA Tour. His threats fell on deaf ears with established stars such as Phil Mickelson, Brooks Koepka and up-and-coming players such as Bryson DeChambeau and Patrick Reed ignoring his warning and signing lucrative \$100 million contracts.

New leagues spring up all the time in just about every sport with barely an acknowledgement by the sport's dominant power. This raises the question: Why did the PGA Tour institute such excessively harsh penalties on its members that chose to play on LIV Golf while they are allowed to compete on other tours such as the European and the Asian tours while still retaining their PGA card?

The answer to that question is as convoluted as the formu-

la used to compute a golfer's handicap, and as I have discussed those issues in past Sports View columns, I will only skim over them in this article. First, there is the competition component. Golf, like all sports, is entertainment and as such relies on the star power of its golfers to drive it. After all, the reason fans tune into broadcasts or attend in person is to see the best players in the world compete, and if the best

players are competing at a LIV Golf event, then that diminishes the PGA's own product. The first lesson in business is: protect your brand at all costs.

To most, the Saudi government's involvement in the new tour is seen as another example of the country's "sportswashing." The term refers to a nation's effort to distract the international community from a spotty human rights record. Although the term may be relatively new, the concept is not: the 1936 Munich Summer Olympics is considered the most infamous instance of the practice.

Professional golf is not Saudi Arabia's only attempt at sportswashing. They own the Newcastle soccer team in the Premier League and a Formula 1 race team, and there are whispers that they are in talks to stage a Women's Tennis Association (WTA) tournament--a Premier League soccer club.

The golfers are divided into two groups: the defectors and the loyalists. The defectors are led by Mickelson and Koepka, the two most accomplished golf-

“
Each golfer must make their own choice on what is best for them, their legacy and their family.”

ers to leave the PGA Tour to this point, while the loyalist faction is led by Rory McIlroy and Tiger Woods.

In an interview that appeared in the February 2022 issue of *Golf Digest*, Mickelson was outspoken that it was the PGA Tour's "obnoxious greed" that led him to look to continue his career elsewhere. His main contentions with the PGA Tour were the tournament's relatively small prize purses for the golfers in relation to what the tournaments generate--a season that is too long with tournaments being too long.

In contrast to Mickelson, McIlroy is not comfortable with the money coming from Saudi Arabia.

"I'm in a better financial position than I was a decade ago, and my life is no different. ...I just don't see the value in tarnishing a reputation for extra millions," McIlroy said.

Greg Norman, LIV Golf's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and two-time major champion on the PGA Tour in the 80s and 90s, knows the gripes that golfers, such as Mickelson, have because they are the same ones that he and his contemporaries held in their playing days.

Each golfer must make their own choice on what is best for them, their legacy and their family. I am certainly not going to begrudge Mickelson or any other player who decide to seek greener pastures than the PGA was willing to offer. I am also not going to criticize McIlroy or Woods for remaining loyal to the PGA Tour. They have made their decisions and they are standing behind it, and I respect that.

However, I am not prepared to let Monahan off the hook. In my humble opinion, he is both a hypocrite and a coward. To be clear, my issue with Monahan is not that he took such a hardline stance against LIV Golf, but that he never took a stance at all. When the rumors of the new tour came to fruition and there was public outcry, Monahan insisted that he and the PGA were taking the high moral



ground. Then after he saw the money pouring into the golfers' hands, and that the LIV program was economically viable, he jumped on the bandwagon. Meanwhile, Monahan, Jimmy Dunne and Ed Herlihy were secretly working on a deal with the very tour they were vilifying in public.

Monahan didn't even have the common decency to announce the agreement to the players directly. Instead, he allowed them to find out through social media news apps. That is cowardly. Think about that for a moment: I found out about the deal only a few hours after the players who drive the PGA Tour did.

Since the announcement, the PGA Tour and Monahan have been under intense scrutiny. United States Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn) sent letters to Monahan and the CEO of LIV Golf, Greg Norman, seeking information about the announced merger of the two tours. Monahan decided that was the perfect time to take some time off to recover from an unspecified "medical situation." In his absence, he left his two underlings: Chief Operating Officer Ron Price and President Tyler Dennis to appear before a Senate committee to answer questions

about negotiations they took no part of.

McIlroy said at the Canadian Open that he felt like the proverbial "sacrificial lamb" and when Monahan talked to the players at the tournament in a damage control effort, several players said Monahan needed to resign.

The latest shoe to drop to date is the resignation of Randall Stephenson, the former AT&T chairman who had served on the PGA Tour's policy board. His resignation came over "concerns" about the proposed partnership with LIV Golf.

These are only the latest results of Monahan's decision to flip-flop on his stance about LIV Golf, and I expect that there may be many more to come in the days and months to come. ★

Goodbye to a legend

By Lisa Jackson - Contributing Writer

Diehard football fans, please join me in mourning the passing of one of the National Football League's most gifted athletes—Jim Brown.

Brown was inducted into the Professional Football Hall of Fame in 1971. His career rushing total of 12,312 yards stood as the league record until Walter Payton broke it in 1987. He also set the single season rushing record of 1,863 yards during the 1963 season.

Brown also excelled in lacrosse, basketball, and track and field during his career at Syracuse University. When his collegiate career was over he had earned 10 varsity letters in five sports. The Cleveland Browns selected him with the sixth selection in the 1957 NFL draft, and led the team to the NFL Championship in 1964. In Brown walked away from the sport at the height of his career to pursue an acting career. He appeared in more than 50 movies including "The Dirty Dozen," "Ice Station Zebra," and "100 Rifles."

Brown was also an early voice for social change along with the National Basketball Association's Bill Russell, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and professional boxer Muhammad Ali.

Brown died May 18, 2023 at his Los Angeles, CA-area home at the age of 87. Brown was a Hall of Fame athlete, but more importantly he was a champion in life. ★



Jim Brown in 1959