

THE ECHO

TEXAS PRISON NEWS

NOVEMBER/ DECEMBER • 2023



TDCJ's BRIGHT HORIZON

Executive Director
Bryan Collier
Discusses New
Department
Initiatives



Winners of the
Murray Campus Fall
Writing Contest

Life Coaches
Give Women
A Hand Up

American Welding
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at TDCJ Facilities

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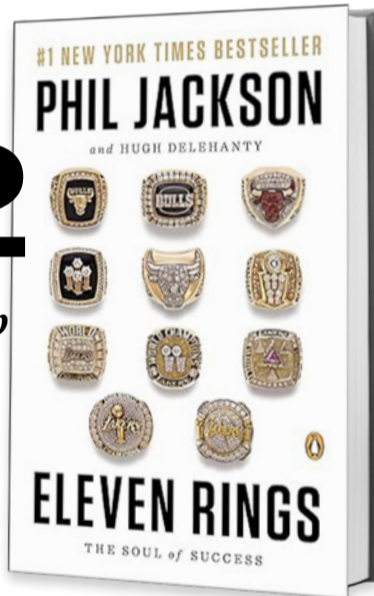
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SINCE 1928

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Letters to the Editor



The ECHO
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To the editor,

My entry in the latest writing contest was listed under the wrong category. “Frick and Frack” is non-fiction instead of fiction. Also, I am submitting a poem that I have written. A few ladies here suggested I send it to you. I really enjoyed the writing contest, and I will keep my eyes out for the next one. By the way, will any of the finalists be printed?

Cynthia Phillips
Murray Unit

To the reader,

We apologize for mislabeling your writing contest submission. We will continue to publish our writing contest’s finalists and honorable mentions in upcoming ECHO issues. Look for another chance to come out on top in our next writing contest in 2024! Dates to be announced. Thank you for your participation and letter.



To the editor,

It is such a pleasure to read about the accomplishments and personal growth of the men and women here in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Every time I read The ECHO, I gain a new drive and ambition to leave this place so much better than I was when I entered. After 20 years of incarceration, I now realize that nobody owes me more than I owe myself. The ECHO has helped me change my life in this place and for that I cannot thank you enough.

However, I cannot help but notice that the Elevation column is no longer in the paper. Is there a reason for this? I really enjoyed the Elevation articles. I was thinking that you could get the Hendrix guy to continue that column. I think he is a great writer. Just a suggestion. If you continue the paper as is, it’s okay. You are doing a great job and have a great day.

Adrian Eleby
Wynne Unit

To the reader,

The “Elevation” section of The ECHO provided additional space for inspirational opinion pieces we usually print in the “Op-Ed” section on page three. If we run out of room on page three and have additional room to fill on another page, we add the Elevation section to print an additional opinion article. Elevation is not dead, but it’s not used every time, either.

Thank you for your compliments on Staff Writer Hendrix. We have a good collection of gifted staff writers, along with the many valued contributors across the agency — their work is what makes The ECHO possible! Thank you for your inquiry.

To the editor,

In an earlier edition of *The ECHO*, you gave the address to Inside Books as: 12th Street Books, 827 W. 12th St., Austin, TX 78701. I sent a letter to that address, and it was returned as undeliverable/unable to forward. The updated address is:

Inside Books Project
c/o 12th Street Books
P.O. Box 301029
Austin, TX 78703

Also, I had an outgoing letter returned by the mailroom because I had put an “incorrect return address” on the envelope. I put the address for the Allred Unit on the letter like I have always done, but the denial slip had this address printed on it: Texas Department of Criminal Justice, P.O. Box 660400, Dallas, TX, 75266-0400 as per Board Policy 03.91. Did I miss something? Are we going to a centralized mailing system? Will my incoming mail come to me from this address? Should I give this address to my family and friends?

Brian G. Oatman,
Allred Unit

To the reader,

*We’re sorry about the address change for the Inside Books Project. Thank you for providing us, and our readers, with the corrected address. As far as the return address for your unit, yes, the digital mail address is the correct address to put on your mail. This is now used systemwide. And yes, that is the correct address that personal mail should be sent to — it will be scanned and sent as a digital copy to your tablet (or a black and white printed copy if you don’t have a tablet.). This issue of *The ECHO* features a chart with specific details about the mailing process on the front page. Please check it out, and thank you for writing.*

To the editor,

Hello, I am writing today to ask if you may send me *The ECHO* as well as the booklet of artwork. Thank you.

Christina Armendarez
Henley State Jail

To the reader,

*Unfortunately, we do not send out booklets of submitted artwork. You should have *The ECHO* available to you on your unit, both in print form and on the tablet in the FYI app. Thank you for writing and for having an interest in art featured in *The ECHO*.*

TDCJ Updates Digital Mail Exceptions

TDCJ recently clarified its new Digital Mail policy regarding what should and shouldn’t be sent to the Digital Mail Processing Center in Dallas. Both requirements and exceptions to the Digital Mail policy are outlined in the table below. This information is also available to residents on their tablets under the Digital Mail section in the FYI app and to those on the outside at **TDCJ.texas.gov**.

Type of Document	Where to Send
General/personal mail from family and friends	Digital Mail Processing Center
Greeting cards	Digital Mail Processing Center
Photos	Digital Mail Processing Center
Documents that require resident’s signature	Unit Law Library
Refund checks from outside vendors	Unit
Legal mail	Unit
Special mail	Unit
Media correspondence	Unit
Correspondence from organizations, businesses, and agencies	Unit

Mail that should be sent to the Digital Mail Processing Center is to use this address:

TDCJ
Resident Name and #
P.O. Box 660400
Dallas TX 75266-0400



Dear Darby,

I've been in TDCJ since they sold canned items and tobacco in commissary. I've seen 'em come and go over the years. These youngsters now days don't know how to do time and they are disrespectful. How has the system come to this?

In Distress
Polunsky Unit

Dear Distress,

The items in commissary may have changed, but this is still the same place. When yours truly first got here, I heard the grey hairs grumble and belly-ache about the younger guys coming in. It's a time-old tradition of generational disputes. When fellas like us first came in, we got "laced up" by the older guys — you know, the mentor conversations dispersing wisdom on how to live successfully and productively in TDCJ. Do you do the same for these youngsters you are complaining about? You can still give those whippersnappers a lesson or two — by being that mentor. And while losing the tobacco back in '95 didn't faze me much, I sure do miss them canned goods!

Dear Darby,

The ECHO is supposed to be a newspaper, correct? I don't mean to be sardonic, but doesn't the word "news" literally mean newly-received or noteworthy information, especially about recent or important events? We just recently had this statewide restricted movement. Why hasn't "The ECHO" given us any noteworthy information about it? Does it count as one of the two-yearly restricted movements, or should I keep my property packed for the next two months until the dust settles and the rumors fade? Just looking to receive some NOTEWORTHY NEWS — if y'all don't mind.

Iam Sarky
Coffield Unit

Dear Sarky,

I don't mean to be judgmental any more than you mean to be sardonic. Now that we understand each other, you're what some like to call "almost clever," but more snarky than Darby?! Never! Not only were you grimly mocking — i.e. the literal definition of sardonic — you gave yourself up like Peter Parker to Mary Jane. Your pseudonym? Come on! Iam Sarky? As in I am Sarky (Sarky: British informal for Sardonic). Nice try, but that's too Brit to Quit! As for the recent lockdown, I just so happened to be a fly on the wall during a recent interview with The ECHO and TDCJ Executive Director Bryan Collier. Your letter, unlike your attached sardonicism, was timely. The statewide restricted movement was one of the issues addressed. Here's your answer. You can unpack your property and stuff it back in your locker—along with the rest of your near-craftiness. The statewide restricted movement does count as one of the two, accordin' to TDCJ Executive Director Collier. To read more of what he has to say, read the Q&A with Bryan Collier in this issue. That's NOTEWORTHY, and you're welcome!

Dear Darby,

I have a question about the digital mail system that I hope you can help me with. I have been writing halfway houses and was told by the parole officer at the Huntsville “Walls” Unit that when/if I am approved for a halfway house, to bring them the approval letter so that it can be copied and placed in my file. Will I still receive a physical letter from the halfway houses to show parole that I was approved or should I rewrite them and give them the digital mail address? How will the unit parole officers be able to make a copy of my digital mail if it is on my tablet?

Jeffrey Jeter
Gist Unit

Dear JJ,

Here’s the gist of it — if someone sends you somethin’ that goes on your tablet that you need in printed form, you can write to your unit’s mailroom and request a copy. They will print out a black and white copy of what you’re needin’, as long as it’s somethin’ you really need. You should have a posting on your living location’s bulletin board that explains what they will and won’t print. Also, they have updated what goes to digital mail and what gets sent to the unit — see “TDCJ Updates Digital Mail Exceptions” in this issue. As far as what address to put for them to write to, if they need to send it to the digital mail processing center, the address is in Dallas. It’s available on the FYI app on your tablet. Okay, my coworker just said I should go easy on you and give you the address. In the interest of good office dynamics, here it is:

TDCJ
Resident Name and #
P.O. Box 660400
Dallas, TX 75266-0400

Dear Darby,

Hey ol’ thang, I am a long-time reader of your column, but a first-time writer. I have a question that I know only someone with your vast wisdom gleaned from your years of experience inside the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) can answer. Why do some TDCJ residents, not all but some, feel the need to immediately stop after going through a doorway no matter how many other people are behind them?

Dazed and Confused
Wynne Unit

Dear Dazed and Confused,

Thanks for the letter, and yes, my many years in TDCJ has given me a pretty good insight into the ways of my fellow residents. I have two thoughts about the situation you present: first, maybe they have a malevolent streak that makes them want to hold up everyone behind them from getting where they are trying to go. My second thought is that perhaps they were big fans of bumper cars prior to incarceration, and they just want to experience that thrill of collisions. Whatever their reason, I agree with you that it is annoying to be stuck behind someone who must stop after going through every doorway or crash gate. May all your hallways be clear and all your future travels free of these human speed bumps.

Are You Ready?

Vincent Smith

Contributing Writer

Wynne Unit

What would you do if they pulled you from your cell and told you that you were going home today? I know: pretty unlikely — but what if? Where would you go? How would you support yourself? Where would the things you will need to survive come from? Would you be ready? This fantasy could turn into a nightmare quickly, couldn't it? Fortunately, that's not usually how it works — and for good reason.

It doesn't matter if you're in here for three years or three decades, we are going to face similar challenges when we make the transition from one side of the fence to the other. Yes, some of us will have better support, but we will all need food, clothes, an address and a job. It would be very hard to thrive in the outside community without these basic needs.

As we all know when we walk out the gate, we will have very little change in our pockets. I applaud those of you that are willing to look ahead and save some of your money for the future. That's a pretty good indicator that you are willing to sacrifice a little now to increase your odds of success when you get out. For the rest of us, it's going to be much harder.

A roof over your head will

be required. You must have an approved address before your release on parole. It could be a friend or family member's address. Another alternative is privately-run housing.

For those of you that believe privately-run housing is your best option, don't wait until you have an F.I. vote to start looking for one. These places, often referred to as alternate housing, halfway houses or transitional living, usually have long wait lists, so you need to start contacting them a year or so before your parole eligibility date. Write them a letter and tell them about your situation. Let them know what you've done in here to better your chances out there. If you have taken Cognitive Intervention type classes or faith-based classes, let them know. A lot of these places are hosted by Christian organizations, so if you're a Christian, let them know. If you're not, be honest with them. That alone probably won't matter as long as you are willing to follow their program. Start building a relationship with these people, and keep in touch with them. If you get a setoff, let them know. You may need them the next time you come up for re-

view. Consistent, honest communication will mean a lot to them, so keep writing.


Food, clothing and jobs will be provided by some but not all places. Ask them what services will be available to you. Will you be required to pay rent at some point? Are there jobs nearby? Are they located on a bus route? What are their rules? How long can you stay? Ask questions ahead of time.

A guy I know in here was homeless in Dallas for several years. He became very good at knowing where to find a free meal and clean clothes. Depending on where you release to, these kinds of services may be available to you too. Even though you aren't technically homeless, you are in


need, and that is the mission of these churches that provide for the homeless, and needy. When you get back on your feet, go back to these places and volunteer your time, or give back a few dollars to keep it going for the next guy or girl. Show that you have become a true, contributing member of your community.

The time is now. Sign up for those classes that will help you change the way of thinking that got you here. Begin to build relationships with the people you will need to depend on when you're in the outside community. Develop a plan now, and work toward it. Set your sights on success and accept nothing less — so when they do tell you it's time to move on, you're ready. ●

“
Develop a plan now, and work toward it. Set your sights on success and accept nothing less.”



Unsolved Homicide




Danydia Thompson

On April 30, 1997, Danydia Thompson (age seven) and her two cousins left her residence to walk to Marlboro Heights Elementary School. However, Danydia did not attend school that morning. She was last seen near the school on the shoulders of an unknown black male. A search was coordinated, but Danydia was not found. On May 8, 1997, a group of searchers found Danydia's body alongside a rural highway south of Killeen in Bell County. The unknown suspect was a black male, 5 feet 10 inches to 5 feet 11 inches tall, with a short afro style hair and a thick mustache.

If you have any information on this crime or any other crime, 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. ★

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Change Agent Graduate
George Ramirez

Coffee Bean Banter

By Edgar Arturo Sazo

“For decades, God knows I helped break down many lives in here. Now, it is my duty to help mend some lives,” Ramirez said.

George Ramirez Jr. was the chosen speaker for his recent graduating class of the Change Agent. *The ECHO* caught up with him to speak about how he has been affecting his environment as a coffee bean since completing the program.

Ramirez has been a resident of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) for almost 30 years. Since coming in to the system as a teenager, he has seen, experienced and taken part in both negative and positive behaviors. Ramirez was able to, however, recognize a pattern in himself of negativity.

The first step to affect the positive change he wanted was to get the tools he needed. He went through Gang Renunciation And Disassociation (G.R.A.D.) to leave behind his gang affiliation. After completing that program, he was assigned to the Wynne Unit. Ramirez began signing up for all available classes in the chapel. A friend of his was also on the journey to change for the better. The friend told him about the Change Agent course. Ramirez had heard about the Change Agent program’s message, and he immediately realized he had been living as an egg. In Change Agent discussions and its analogy, an egg immersed in boiling water becomes hard. This spurred Ramirez to enroll in the class, and he said the curriculum deeply resonated with him.

“At that point in my life, I was looking for positive transformation. The Change Agent class introduced me to concepts that have been crucial to my growth,” Ramirez said. “One of them is an acronym for the characteristics of a coffee bean: OSHANE. It stands for Optimistic, Serves others, Hard worker, Accountable, Problem solver, Encourager. Now, every day I wake up and I apply this concept to my life — along with humility.”

Ramirez has no doubt about the effectiveness of the program to spur positive growth in people seeking to better themselves.

“This was one of the best decisions I have made,” he said.

After graduating the program, doors have opened for Ramirez to help others. He helps facilitate classes in the chapel and for men in G5 custody.

“As I work to place myself in positions where I can be a light, an encourager in the depths of darkness, I know I am a change agent. Simply walking down the hallway is an opportunity to promote hope and growth,” Ramirez said. “My life has truly taken on a whole new meaning.”

Changing the culture of the residents within the TDCJ is the goal of the program. In the Change Agent theme analogy, a coffee bean in boiling water becomes a pleasant, aromatic and enjoyable product. Making everyone a coffee bean, so to speak, and turning the whole system into a pot of coffee is a goal of the program. After all, who can sell us a negative dream, if we are wide awake on a double shot of black bag coffee? ●

Editor’s note: Coffee Bean Banter is a new feature designed to highlight the Change Agent program and its impact on the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) population. The message of the program is we can deal with our environment and circumstances in one of three ways. We can be like a carrot in boiling water by turning soft and weak, like an egg which becomes hard and unforgiving, or like a coffee bean, which instead of being changed by the boiling water, changes the water into coffee.

American Welding Society Testing Trainees at TDCJ Facilities

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Welding is an essential part of everyday life for residents working for Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Logistics (MAL) in the Powledge Unit's Metal Fabrication and Luther Unit's Stainless-Steel facilities. Safety, skill, and experience play a critical role in every weld in these Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) work sites. Whether residents are welding dump beds, trailers, water tanks, bleachers, stainless steel combo sink/toilets or kitchen equipment, they are undergoing skilled training.

"Getting my welding certification has helped me to see the future possibilities to provide for myself and my family," said Michael McPeters, a resident welder at the Powledge Unit. "I am thankful for MAL in helping me build character to become a better man and welder."

However, MAL does not only focus on the quality work the residents produce but also on additional skills essential to their overall success. Plant Managers Lisa McLane at Powledge Metal Fabrication and Ross Winland with Luther Stainless Steel ensure residents can maintain a good working relationship with other workers, supervisors, and customers. The supervisors strive to ensure the welders have a willingness to work as part of a team and perform their duties safely. McLane and Winland said it is essential that all residents demonstrate a dependable work ethic.

This criterion is used to determine which welders will be given the opportunity to test according to American Welding Society (AWS) specifications. Selected residents must be well-rounded in soft skills including work ethics, as well as equipped with exceptional trade skills.

"I am truly grateful that during my incarceration I was



Luther Unit Stainless Steel Plant

given the chance to improve my life after making some poor choices. This certification will continue to bring a renewed sense of direction into my life," said Timothy Haney, a welder at the Powledge Unit.

Between Fiscal Years (Sept. 1 — Aug. 31) 2019 – 2023, more than 160 individuals assigned to an MAL job successfully passed AWS testing standards. Welders usually practice for several months prior to taking the test. Testing extends over a couple of days due to the number of participants and the number of tests performed. The assessment is highly structured, and there is not a lot of room for error. Welding is a very precise occupation, and it is important to get the weld right the first time.

"I came to prison with fast food as my only work experience," Ruben Gonzalez at Luther Unit's Stainless-Steel facility said. "I never imagined that nine years later I could call myself a certified welder. Whether you are fresh to the system or have several years completed, I encourage anyone reading this to make good use of this time by taking any opportunity to learn and grow."

Passing an AWS welding test demonstrates a commitment to welding excellence and professional growth, mastering the skill sets required to uphold vigorous industry standards. Participating residents have made themselves competitive in the welding industry, and they will be able to earn a lucrative living in a growing career field.

"This certification is another step toward me helping my family when I go home. If you truly set your mind to accomplishing something you will achieve it," welder Michael Loeffler at the Luther Unit said. ●

Editor's Note: Special thanks to MAL for information contained in this article.



Powledge Unit Metal Fabrication

Fresh Start Program Aids Residents with Student Loan Defaults

ECHO Staff Report

B

Being incarcerated has many financial effects on residents of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), and one of these can be becoming default on federal student loans. The Fresh Start program is providing a pathway to getting out of this loan default. Below are questions and answers on the program and how residents can utilize its benefits.

What is Fresh Start?

Fresh Start is a one-time, temporary program from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) that offers special benefits for borrowers with defaulted federal student loans.

Fresh Start automatically gives you some benefits, such as restoring access to federal student aid grants and post-release loans. However, you need to act to claim the full benefits of Fresh Start and get out of default.

Sign up for Fresh Start for free using one of the methods below. Incarcerated borrowers with most types of loans are eligible for Fresh Start.

Residents in default should ask for Fresh Start as soon as possible, but no later than Aug. 31, 2024.

What is student loan default?

For most federal student loans, default means that you haven't made a payment for nine months. There are many consequences that come with defaulted loans, including:

- You can't receive more federal financial aid to pay for college.
- Your credit score may go down.
- The federal government can take money out of your paycheck and your tax returns to pay your loan bill.

How does one participate in Fresh Start?

TDCJ residents can sign up for Fresh Start by mail, or they can have family member sign up for them via phone or online. Mail: Send a letter to:

Default Resolution Group
P.O. Box 5609
Greenville, TX 75403



Phone: Family members can call ED's Default Resolution Group at any or the following numbers:

- 1-800-621-3115 (toll-free)
- 540-792-9171 (toll number; collect calls will not be accepted at this number)
- 1-877-825-9923 (TTY, if you have a hearing impairment)

Online: Family members can go to mveddebt.ed.gov and either log in, or create an account.

Using FAFSA® Form to Ask for Fresh Start

You can get Fresh Start by:

- submitting your Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) and
- signing a Fresh Start acknowledgement with your college.

What information is needed?

When you contact the ED, please state that you are incarcerated and want to use Fresh Start to get out of student loan default. Ask for an income-driven repayment plan, which could make your monthly payments as low as \$0 (more info below).

Be prepared to provide as much of the following information as possible:

- Full Name
- Social Security Number
- Birth Date
- Correctional Mailing Address
- Account Number (found on your student loan statement letters)

You will also need to provide the following information if you or your spouse filed a federal tax return within the last year:

- Residency Status (typically the state you live in)
- Filing Status (typically single, married filing jointly, married filing separately, or head of household)
- Family Size (yourself, your spouse, and number of dependents you or your spouse provide a minimum of 50% financial support to)
- Adjusted Gross Income (line 11 of IRS Form 1040)

What happens after the loans are out of default?

When Fresh Start is used to get out of default, defaulted student loans will be returned to “in repayment” status. This means individuals have to begin making monthly payments in order to keep from defaulting again.

Next, residents will need to choose a repayment plan — the choice can be either:

- a fixed repayment plan: you pay the same amount each month based on the number of years to repay your full loan balance or
- an income-driven repayment (IDR) plan: you pay an amount customized to your income and family size. (This is the recommended option for residents.)

About 80% of borrowers who enroll in Fresh Start choose an IDR plan because it may result in lower payments. Half of Fresh Start borrowers pay \$0 per month, and 60% of Fresh Start borrowers pay less than \$50 a month. After a certain number of years, the remaining loan balance is forgiven.

Can defaulted loans be written off?

Pursue Fresh Start if your loans are in default and you have less than 10 years left on your sentence.

However, Fresh Start may not be the best option for those whose next possible release date is more than 10 years from now. In that case, the ED may be able to write off the loan instead. A write-off means the loan will never have to be repaid, but those with a write-off can’t get more federal student aid (loans or Pell Grants) to pay for college. To get more federal student aid, individuals would need to ask to have their loan restored. Write-off is still a good option for those who have a long sentence, because it protects them from the negative consequences of default.

For more information about the options for a loan write-off, contact the Student Loan Ombudsman using the contact information below.



What if more help is needed?

If someone is unable to contact the ED’s Default Resolution Group using the contact information in this document or if they are dissatisfied with the response, a complaint may be filed with the Student Loan Ombudsman. The Ombudsman will review the complaint and follow up. Complaints can be submitted by mail, or have a family member contact them via email or online.

- **Mail:** Send a letter to:

U.S. Department of Education, ATTN:
Ombudsman Office, 830 First Street
NE, Washington, DC 20002

- **Email:** ombudsman@ed.gov
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Fall Favorites

Murray Campus Hosts
Fall-Favorite Themed
Writing Contest

Fall Favorites

Corn Maze

Savannah Taylor

FIRST PLACE



Savannah Taylor



M

My fall favorite is the corn maze. The corn stalks are tall and sway from side to side as the sky is a midnight black. The spooky mysteries that lie waiting at each turn are frightening as my anticipation grows to explore these tall corn stalks. Never mind the critters that scramble along the ground; they are harmless. I love the corn maze because you never know what you may stumble on as you wander through the stalks ahead.

The corn maze is my favorite because I love the feeling of being lost. I also love the corn maze because the stalks are so very tall that I can't see around me. I may just pick a piece of corn and eat it as I wander through this breezy corn maze, making correct and incorrect turns, trying to find my way to the exit.

When I was seven years old, I explored a corn maze. Halfway through the maze, I heard a fast rustling. Suddenly, a family of seven deer ran past me, slightly in the distance. My heart started pounding and adrenaline coursed through my body as I continued my journey and anticipated my next surprise.

As I was exploring this maze, I smelled different aromas, and one of them was of fresh corn and dirt. As my adrenaline kicked in, so

did my sense of sight. I noticed the greens and yellows of ripening corn stalks. Some stalks were healthier than others. Some were damaged from parasites while others went untouched. My adrenaline started rushing, and because of this, I became more aware of my surroundings.

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The corn maze is my favorite because I love the feeling of being lost... because the stalks are so very tall that I can't see around me.

So, the excitement of surprises and the feeling of the adrenaline rush that comes with the unknown is why I love the corn maze. In my opinion, you need to visit a large, thick maze with tall corn stalks—preferably at night time, while it's hard to see. ●

Fall Favorites

Candy Apples

Judyth Elizondo

SECOND PLACE



Judyth Elizondo



Y

You may ask me what my fall favorite is. Is it the small triangular candy corns or is it the big, glistening candy apples? Simple: my favorite is the delicious, juicy candy apples; the ones that make your taste buds tingle and your mouth water. If you've never had one before, then you are missing out. It's easily my favorite because of the exotic mixture of flavors provided: the sour, sweet, sticky syrup combined with a choice of delicate pieces of candy sprinkled on top.

My favorite is the candy apple because I can take my time to savor the flavor with each lick, nibble and swipe to my mouth. It allows me to settle the bite onto my tongue and give it room to melt. I could even eat some now and still have more for a later time. There's no rush or hurry. They're simply my favorite because once I bite down into the loving taste, I can be reminded of my childhood memories. This was a time when my grandmother would make them in our kitchen and it seemed as if my soul was completely in Heaven. I could enjoy the magnificent candy apple while thinking of my favorite person and love the sweet treat and my memories.

Candy apples steal my number one spot due to the variety differences — different types of candy to add on top or as a combination of multiple kinds. There's also a choice to make between three different kinds of apple: green, red or yellow. It's

completely your choice to make and enjoy.

These are the reasons candy apples continue to be my favorite: the variety of possibilities and glorious memories to go along with it. Why wouldn't they be my favorite? If you have never tried a candy apple, then hurry along and grab one — I can assure you that you won't regret it one bit. ●

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I can be reminded of my childhood memories. This was a time when my grandmother would make them in our kitchen and it seemed as if my soul was completely in Heaven.

Fall Favorites

The Pumpkin Patch

Letisha Morgan

THIRD PLACE



Letisha Morgan

M

My favorite fall activity is going to the pumpkin patch; there are numerous enjoyable things to do with pumpkins.

I love my fall favorite because the holiday season involves decorating pumpkins; carvings, candles, scary and happy tales are the pumpkins' body art. I also enjoy roasted pumpkin seeds, toasted and seasoned to perfection. Pumpkins are very important during the holiday season because they symbolize culture, significance, freedom and happiness.

The pumpkins also serve as a delicacy item for pumpkin pies. It can be baked as a tart or pie, served with Cool Whip, toppings, nutmeg, cinnamon and sugar. Pumpkins have been part of holiday culture since Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts for the first Thanksgiving.

Another great thing about pumpkins is they come in all sizes. They are orange-colored, sweet and beautiful for floral arrangements. Going out to a pumpkin patch is a great outdoor event for children and people of all ages to enjoy.●

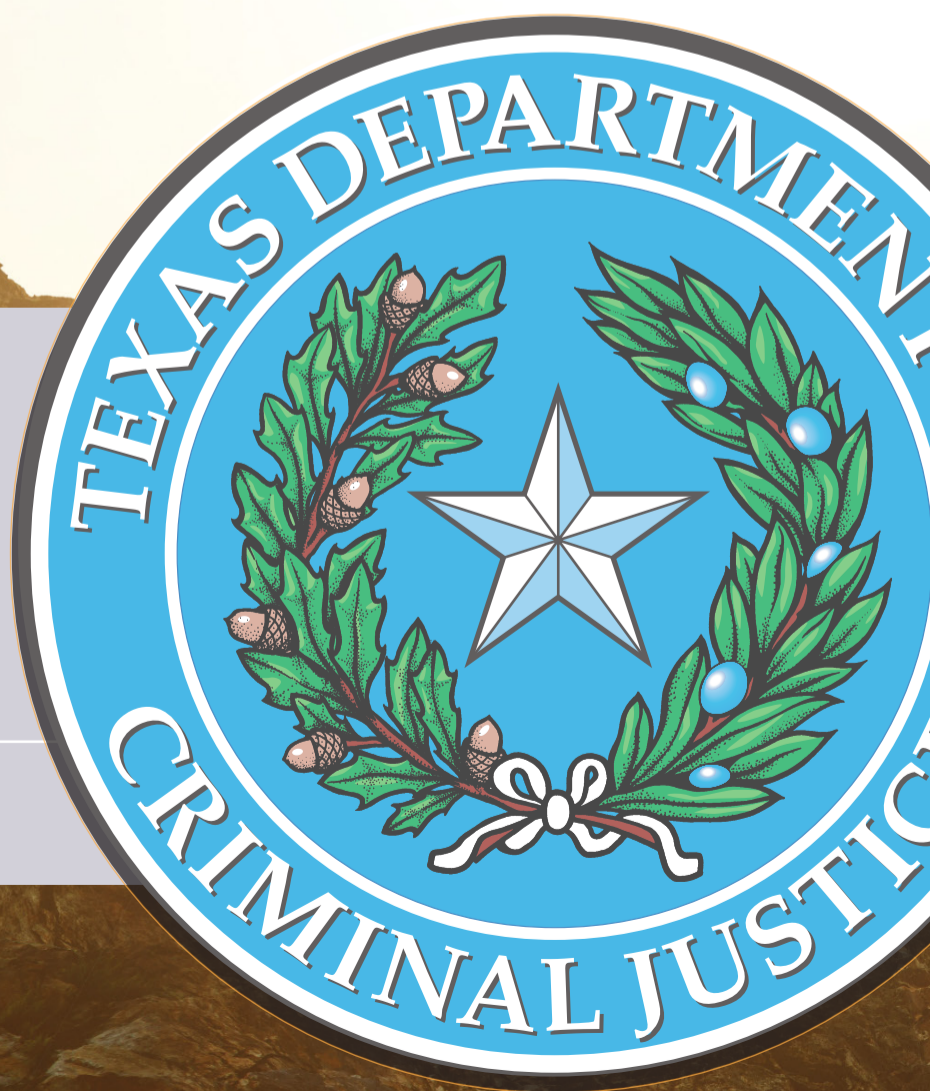
**“
Going out to a pumpkin patch is a great outdoor event for children and people of all ages to enjoy.**

REENTRY
SUCCESS

TDCJ's BRIGHT HORIZON

TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier Visits
The ECHO, Shares New
Department Initiatives, Part 1

ECHO Staff Report



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It's a privilege to be able to sit in this role... It wasn't a plan. I think that the opportunity came up and I was fortunate enough to be chosen.

TDCJ Executive Director Bryan Collier

Executive Director Bryan Collier talks with ECHO writers Todd Carman, Elkanah Hendrix and Edgar Sazo.

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“Our goal isn't really any different than anyone else's goal — we want people to be successful when they get out. We also want people to be safe when they're here,” said Bryan Collier, executive director of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ).

The ECHO recently had the opportunity to sit down with Bryan Collier and talk about TDCJ's 2030 plan, the recent system-wide lockdown, tablets in TDCJ, and future possibilities for the agency. ECHO staffers Todd Carman, Elkanah Hendrix and Edgar Sazo conducted the hour-long interview in the Wynne Unit law library, while staffers Will Hill and Fabian Flores recorded the audio and video. Below are excerpts of the questions and answers from that discussion.

This Q&A interview with Mr. Collier will be presented in a two-part series. See the next issue for the conclusion of this article.

Professional Preparation

ECHO: Welcome to The ECHO, Mr. Collier! Please tell us a little about your background in TDCJ.

Collier: Okay, so I started with TDCJ, actually TDC (Texas Department of Corrections). You hear a lot of people say they worked at TDC, but it hasn't

existed since the late 80s. I started in 1985 as a switchboard clerk at the old administration building. I was a college student and came to Sam Houston State University. My intent was to be a Department of Public Safety trooper — I went to junior college, graduated — and then the academy that was [held] that year got canceled. So I came on to Sam Houston and finished my degree. Dr. Beto [former executive director of TDC] helped me get the job at the switchboard, part time. That was actually a job where you could take a full load as a college student. After hours everything got pretty quiet and they didn't mind if you studied while you were working. So, I did it part time for about six months and then I was full time until I graduated.

ECHO: So, were you ever a Correctional Officer (CO) in TDC?

Collier: Yes. After I graduated college in '86, I went to the Eastham [now Wainwright] Unit and I was a correctional officer. I left there in '87 and went to the Darrington Unit, now Memorial Unit, as an Institutional Parole Officer (IPO). I worked at Ramsey, worked some of the Jester [units] and then toward the late 80s, as jails got overcrowded, I also worked out of the Harris County Jail as a Parole-In-Absentia officer. We were actually interviewing people in the county jail. If they were eligible for parole, we'd go interview them. If they made parole, we processed them right out of county jail. I then be-



came a supervisor in parole.

ECHO: How do you think this history helps you with your current role as director?

Collier: Well, it helps because I've been there, and I've seen lots of things along the way. And I've worked in lots of areas. I've worked in parole [and] prisons. I also worked in what was, back then, classification and treatment. In the midpoint of my career, I worked with substance [use], chaplaincy and institutional parole.

ECHO: You really do have a well-rounded experience in pretty much all the dimensions of TDCJ.

Collier: A lot of pieces of my career in TDCJ have been helpful over the years. Sometimes it's very handy because we can tell folks why we did what we did policy-wise back then. We're looking at what we've tried before, and it either worked or didn't work.

Why a Director?

ECHO: People like you make it better because you understand the "why." You don't just understand the "what"—you understand why they do what they do. So why do you serve as the director of TDCJ?

Collier: For me, it's a privilege to be able to sit in this role. I surely never would have ever dreamed of being in this role at all. It wasn't a plan. I think that the opportunity came up and I was fortunate enough to be chosen. And for me, it's a real privilege. Because I've been in the agency so long, there are some things I've seen over the years that I think we need to do differently—and I help push and drive that change. But I also serve and support the men and women of the agency and what the agency does. I deeply appreciate there are a lot of really good people in the agency, and I think supporting them is helpful.

ECHO: If you hadn't chosen the path of corrections, is there another field that you can see yourself in?

Collier: I took the Law School Ad-

mission Test (LSAT) when I was a correctional officer, thinking I'd be a lawyer. But I actually wanted to be a prosecutor. So, when I became an IPO, I went to save money for the spring and fall semesters of law school, but I fell in love with the job of an IPO—and I knew I wasn't going to make any money [as a prosecutor] because I didn't want to be a freeworld attorney. As for me, I love talking with inmates. I love the interaction on a unit, and I just felt like that's where I need to be. But I truly enjoyed it then, and I still enjoy it. If you like people, this is a good business to be in, because you talk to lots of different people with lots of different stories and interests. That was very interesting then, and it still is today. So, to me it just was a really good fit. And then I've done so many different things; it never felt like I worked at the same place. So, I haven't really gotten bored.

ECHO: Would you say that that's the most enjoyable part of your job? Or are there other things that you enjoy more?

Collier: I think now it is probably being able to move big pieces or move in a direction. I get more satisfaction out of steering the ship, although it's a very slow ship to turn. I mean, it's not easy to make change in this big of a system. I think as we make progress and I see things that I think are really promising, maybe I'm just getting out of somebody's way and letting them push their concepts and ideas. That's really rewarding to me, and to see the agency succeed is very rewarding.

Get Involved

ECHO: If you could share any message with our readership, what would it be?

Collier: Look at what you can do while you're here. Use us while you're here to help you. Don't expect to sit back and wait on the system to come to you. The system has a lot of tools in it, and I've seen



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*TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier*



Get involved.
 Doing time
 alone doesn't
 benefit
 anyone...
 Getting
 involved in the
 right activities
 with the right
 people (is of
 benefit). You
 know, pick
 your friends.
 Try to be smart.

*TDCJ Executive Director
 Bryan Collier*

lots of people come in through the system and out through the system. Obviously I'd love to say to everybody, "Be a good citizen. Please be a good citizen." That's easy to say for a lot of folks, but it's not always the way it plays out. So, I think obviously working within all that, we work with, "But how can you utilize what is available to better prepare you for what's coming and getting out?" It is really what I would tell everybody to focus on. You can't ever make up lost time. None of us can, so forget about it — you have to let your past go and focus on where you're headed. Put your focus on, "How do I do that to the best of my ability?" Make this time count where you are. Even though this isn't the place you want to be, it's where you are. Don't let this time be time that's just dead time. That's not, to me, life. Life is wherever you are trying to live at that moment. But it's easier said than done. Because I'm as guilty as anybody about thinking about what else is out there or what's next. But if you just focus today on "What can I be doing right now?", I think that's the best advice I would have. I think take it and, you know, learn and get better at whatever it is you want to get better at.

ECHO: So, what's your advice for residents on how to best use their time while they're here?

Collier: Get involved. Doing time alone doesn't benefit anyone. But I think getting involved in the right activities with the right people [is of benefit]. You know, pick your friends. Try to be smart. Peer pressure is tough. I get that. But at the same time, you know, even in this environment, there are some options you could do and try to look at what's available in education, the chaplaincy, a vocation or with your job. If you're doing what you really want to do as a career, you're building that subset. But even if you're

not building a subset and you take electrical trades, when you get out, you know how to fix a plug that goes out in your house. You haven't done anything negative. You've made yourself better at something else you're doing. Also, faith-based programming — take advantage of that. Look at all the things going on. I mean, you can fill your day with a lot of decent things to do versus things that are, you know, not worthwhile. Watching the TV in the dayroom — that's not a good way to spend your time.

Tablet Talk

ECHO: Let's talk about tablets for residents in TDCJ — what are some of the advantages?

Collier: Tablets? I mean, can you imagine what it would have been like if we'd had that during COVID? I mean... that's what really snapped. Well, two things happened. COVID made it really clear that that kind of tool would be awesome. I think coming out of COVID, that's when we started talking to folks about, "Okay, we think we need to do tablets." To me, we're just at the baby steps. We just have our toe in the water with tablets right now. I would like to see I-60s on the tablet at some point. But keep this in mind: we have an old mainframe computer system that runs TDCJ. This is an old school, older-than-me system. It's COBAL-based programming — what they used to program computers back in the 70s. That's what it's made of. We're replacing it now with a Microsoft product. When that's done, then I think a lot of other opportunities come available. With the tablets right now, [Securus] could probably plug in I-60s, but we don't have a way to show it on the administrative side. So, if I'm in law library or any other area where I'm going to get an I-60, I don't have a way to pull it up, because our old system won't talk

to the new system. That'll change. When that changes, to me, you open the gate on a lot of possibilities with a tablet. Down the road, I'd love for it to be able to do even medical, not just the medical slip, but also the medical visit. I don't know if that's feasible or not, because the video piece right now is either on or off. There is no way to be selective. And in our world, we would need to figure out a way to be selective, because some people might put something on video you don't want, and you just want to watch for that. Looking at those kinds of options as we grow, I think there's a ton of potential in the tablet. Re-entry wants to add lots of other content, like résumé building tools, and lots of those other kind of things on the tablet, so that folks can do that and have it ready [for when they return to their communities]. When they're ready, they could print it, use it, and have a way to send it to potential employers. Those things kind of tie into the 2030 Plan as well, but a lot of those pieces come with the tablet being involved.

ECHO: Now, thus far, from the outside looking in, are there any unexpected benefits of tablets that you see?

Collier: Communication, for sure — being able to have that [tablet] as a communication tool. If we needed to send a message out next week to the population, we can do it pretty quickly. It will get easier for even the units to be able to easily send information out. I think as we get better with video and online and those kind of tracks, many more possibilities come. I think being able to adapt with all the programming that's on there, as well [will be a benefit].

ECHO: Well, and you know, you're talking about communication — as a resident of TDCJ, I'd like to tell you, "Thank you" for letting us use the phone during the systemwide restricted movement. It was very meaningful to us.

Collier: That was huge, right? I knew what was going to happen when we did the lockdown. I know that's tough, and stopping visitation is even tougher. But I think having that tablet with the phone made that a whole lot easier to deal with, even though it was still a lot to deal with. To me, family connection is key, but being able to keep it going was really important.

ECHO: To your knowledge, what do you know about the tablet situation in Texas, compared to other states?

Collier: So, I'm part of a group of other directors called the Correctional Leaders Association. It's every director in the country, and some of the big jails in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago are also part of it. We meet regularly, and I'm the southern regional chair. So [it involves] all the southern states. As a matter of fact, I met with them today, and I meet with them by Zoom video regularly. We have in-person meetings, as well. So when tablets come up, I can send a survey out to all directors across the country and just say, "Hey, are you using tablets? What issues do you have with this vendor? What's good with that vendor?" So those kind of questions we do all the time. To me, that's really helpful. I'm finding out what's going on in other states—good and bad. Because if somebody is having a problem, you might be having the same problem and don't know it. Or if somebody is really doing something cool with a lot of creativity, then you're like, "Man, how can I also do that?" I've got folks today in Indiana looking at a program up there where they're teaching inmates how to do [computer program] coding, and those inmates are guaranteed employment before they get out—and good-paying jobs. We've already had a crew that went to Tennessee and looked at the same thing — looking at how we could move to having a coding pro-

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One of the most important successes you'll have when you get out is having a family support system there as well, so maintaining that while you're inside is key.

*TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier*



Some states have done incentive units, so that's where our ideas begin. I'd say our wardens are the ones coming up with (the ideas). For me, it's a matter of how can I get out of your way and give you what you need?

*TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier*

gram for men and women in TDCJ. I wouldn't know about that possibility if I wasn't talking to those other folks, so that's pretty helpful.

ECHO: Okay, moving on a little, is going paperless using tablets part of the 2030 Plan?

Collier: Hopefully, a lot of that can be done before 2030. It took us a year [to roll out the tablets], and then the next step was the online mail system, which we expedited. We were kind of slow rolling out that implementation, but because of things going on, we ended up expediting that and getting that moved in quicker. So, the next step is really trying to figure out how can we automate some of the forms, and then an officer tablet will also be developed so they can have a wing tablet as well.

ECHO: Oh, it would help them with count. You know, if you have all that tied together to something where they go through that makes count super quick and easy.

Collier: Yeah.

ECHO: Residents are allowed to correspond with family members in TDCJ, if they're approved to correspond with them through regular mail. Do you think there's a possibility in the future using the e-messaging, if they're approved to correspond with a family member in TDCJ, where they could just send them an e-message rather than having to write a letter? I have a friend whose brother is also in prison, and he's wondering if he can write a letter to the brother and send it to Dallas to get scanned in, why couldn't he just send him an e-message?

Collier: Probably. Here's what we would have to do. So now you can e-message, outgoing, but for basically the cost of a stamp. Right. What we would need to do is instead of providing the stamp and the envelope [for indigent residents], figure out if we can contract or do

some kind of a deal with Securus to say we'll pay for this out of TDCJ for those that don't have access to the other. So I would think that's definitely feasible. You know, that's a really good question. That one made me ask a few folks, "How hard would that be?"

Family Connections

ECHO: You touched on it a couple of times, but I think it's important for our readers to really hear from you as the director about the importance of residents maintaining a connection with their family.

Collier: Yes; it's one of the most important [factors], depending on the situation. One of the most important successes you'll have when you get out is having a family support system there as well, so maintaining that while you're inside is key. [Currently] you're not a breadwinner. You're not able to do things like that. But while you're inside, you may still be able to contribute. We have some areas like Windham School District offering programs where they're providing opportunities for parents to read books [to their child and support their child's education experience via Zoom or unit events]. Realizing that they're going to need that family tie when they get out, how do they keep connected while inside? We're not that great at that. We have a long way to go to get better at it, but I think [determining] how we can get better with that is really what we need to focus on.

ECHO: What else can you share with us?

Collier: [Did you know that] Windham students did a cooking class with a Czech Republic class?

ECHO: Yeah, we saw the video of that. That was amazing! We will have a feature next month about the event.

Collier: Yeah, that was really good.

ECHO: That was pretty cool. We need their recipes.

Collier: Yeah, they were cooking a traditional dish, and we were, too.

New Incentive Options

ECHO: You were talking about video visits. When I first came to prison, I would never have thought we'd have tablets or video visits. These are innovations that TDCJ is bringing in. Do you envision, or do you guys have anything in line for, more innovations?

Collier: I think there'll be much more with the tablets, and I will tell you this: this is really exciting to me, but these are pockets, not systems. So we are working on trying to create incentive programming at our units. We were looking at system innovation. What can we do as a system? But frankly, we've got lots of wardens out there already doing it. So, what we have backed up to do is say, "Okay, wardens, those of you that are proposing an incentive dorm or an incentive housing area, what do you need from us?" So we're putting in 65- or 85-inch TVs. They're putting in college-style mattresses in some areas. They're yanking up the tables in the day room and the chairs and they're putting in regular chairs and they're talking about foosball tables.

ECHO: Wow!

Collier: These are basically areas where residents could say, "I want to go to that type of housing." And if they go to that type of housing, then our goal is that everyone in that type of housing is going to be squared away and we're not going to have issues with it. But at the same time, by doing that in pockets, we begin to spread [the word] that that's a better way to live than what we see now. The hard part is, like if you're a G5, I mean, let's get real about that. So, the guy right now is a G5, and he wants to get right. How do you get right in G5 housing?

ECHO: It's tough.

Collier: Incentive housing has to be an avenue for that, too. It won't necessarily include the college dorm bed, and the other parts, but I mean, how could I, as a G5, say I want to be in a housing area with other guys who are wanting the same thing? And then, there will be about six or seven [incentive housing areas] that'll come online by the end of the year. But they are legitimate. When I was in Amarillo, they've already painted the housing area. I've never seen one like it. It was totally cool.

ECHO: Cool.

Collier: They've come in with murals. Lighting looks good. All the LED lights. It's bright. We're really trying to figure out how can we create an environment where you want to live—a housing area where everybody's agreeing that they want to be there.

ECHO: It's like a refuge.

Collier: How can you do that? And then, as you do that, other people hopefully will say, "Man, I want some of that." And then that can spread. Some states have done incentive units, so that's where our ideas begin. I'd say our wardens are the ones coming up with [the ideas]. For me, it's a matter of how can I get out of your way and give you what you need?

ECHO: I remember back in the 1990s on Ferguson, as an incentive for good behavior, if you didn't have a [disciplinary] case in 90 days, they would let you fill out a [trust fund] withdrawal slip and order a pizza. That was a long time ago.

Collier: Right. Those kinds of things can be very helpful. Because for some people, 90 days is a year, right? I mean, especially depending on what the housing arrangement is, that may seem like forever. Some may think, "Ninety days without a case? Oh, my goodness! Can't do that." But then if you do it, you've met a milestone. How can we do that? So I think trying to figure out

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I think coming out of COVID, that's when we started talking to folks about, 'Okay, we think we need to do tablets.'

*TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier*



We'll have body wave-millimeter machines for the maximum-security units, which, if you've been in an airport in the last 10 years, you go through the machine, you hold up your hands and it scans.

*TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier*

how we can be more focused there and then trying to hopefully support the [incentive]units to spread— that is what I hope we can do.

Why Systemwide Restriction?

ECHO: Okay, you touched on this a little bit as well, but can we discuss briefly the statewide lockdown?

Collier: Yeah, absolutely.

ECHO: Kind of like, you know, it was a big, big thing. Big news for us.

Collier: You bet. So this year in our system, we've had more homicides than we've had since we were the Texas Department of Corrections (TDC).

ECHO: Really?

Collier: Yes. We've had more homicides in TDCJ than we had as TDC. Back in the 1980s, we had a couple of years where we had 50-60 homicides because it was a gang war. And that's when the building tenders went away, and that's when the gangs were trying to essentially take over who's going to control what. That's when administrative segregation came in, because that all played in the late 80s. So, that's not what's driving it now. It now is mostly narcotics, and with narcotics, one of the big pipelines coming in has been the mail. And that happened, really, during COVID. Didn't happen just in Texas; I promise you, it's all over the country. People figured out how. So, finding a solution for the homicides that we had, was knowing that we need to do an old-school [system-wide] lockdown— where it's not a rolling [unit by unit] lockdown. But at the same time, just doing that and going back to normal business won't really help you if you don't make some changes. For us, switching the mail [to digital] — I mean that's an unpopular decision. But hopefully it makes it safer. Now we're finding solutions for the legal mail, the books, and the pamphlets to be reviewed as well. So getting all that where it's reviewed and hope-

fully no narcotics are coming in that way — I'm not that naive to think that means we'll never have drugs in prison again, but it means at least [there is]an easy pipeline that we hopefully can close, and then we change protocols, like no more liquid comes in from the street. Things like that. We'll have body wave-millimeter machines for the maximum-security units, which, if you've been in an airport in the last 10 years, you go through the machine, you hold up your hands and it scans. And we'll have similar x-ray technology for [residents] who may be going out on transport or coming into the unit. We'll also have body cameras. So body cameras are coming to all the maximum-security facilities, which to me, helps improve safety and security. We'll see everything that's going on and we can address [any problems.]

ECHO: Are body cameras for ranking officers or for everyone?

Collier: No, it's every uniformed officer. We will have 11,000 employees with body cameras.

ECHO: Something just came to mind. Certain things, such as strip searches, are done in an area where it's secluded away from a camera. Would there be a way to conduct strip searches away from the view of body cameras?

Collier: Yeah, there would. If you're doing a strip search, the body camera has to be off. So, you couldn't have that [camera] on. You can't record that [search] for Prison Rape Elimination Act reasons. Same thing with our regular camera systems.

ECHO: Okay. What about the benefits or the accomplishments of restricted movement? Can you share that with us?

Collier: Well, [we found] over 400 cell phones—a lot of cell phones. And to me, cell phones are the root of a lot of the issues. There's stuff that gets conversed on the regular phone system, but it's all recorded.

We have software that checks all that, and we have other folks that listen. Cell phones circumvent that. Then lots of drugs. A lot of K2, PCP, methamphetamine; some marijuana and fentanyl. I mean, the problems we've had; we've seen it over the last two years. Somebody thinks they're smoking K2 and it's laced with fentanyl, and they die. We've had deaths in prison. That's why we have NARCAN on our units now. So, you've got supervisors with NARCAN. They can administer NARCAN if they have to, and we've had to use that many, many times to help people. Sometimes we're not there in time to help somebody. Was it successful rooting out a lot of that? Yes. Did it get it all? Probably not. I'm not that naive. And a lot of weapons. A lot of weapons came out. A lot of weapons, obviously homemade weapons. A lot of liquid K2, alcohol, like 40 gallons of alcohol, and we found some things in places we've never seen before. It helped us learn, as well. I think it helps our staff to be more diligent about checking. Also, the people I look at are who's paying for it. Yeah, that's who I want, right? I want the people that are paying for it, and that's the people that most people don't think anybody's seeing. But, we're beginning to make cases on some of those folks as well, and that all, hopefully, will help.

ECHO: You know, you were talking about that. One of the things that we saw implemented with the lockdown and on the tablets is a tip line for, you know, things that are wrong. What about a tip line to make recommendations? Do you think there would be any possibility for people to give tips? Not necessarily in [the tip line,] but if they have an idea, you know, maybe there would be a way they could pass that idea on somewhere?

Collier: The tip line will stay open. It is aimed at really trying to provide information on what's going on. The idea of an idea line or something is

certainly something to think about, but I would also say pretty much anybody can write me. I get letters, I get I-60s — if you've got a really good idea, you can write me a letter and just tell me, and I'll read my letters, so I don't mind looking at that, I'm happy to do it.

ECHO: Yeah, at least this follow up was good. So, in order to help shut the doors on the rumor mill, did this lockdown count as the major shake-down?

Collier: It'll count toward it. In other words, you won't have to have three this year if that makes sense. Typically, every six months, right? You're going to go through it. So, this one should help us, but the wardens pick when they do the others. They're obviously going to pay attention and they're not going to want to all do theirs in March. So, that will adjust and they'll figure that out. However, we won't have to duplicate.

ECHO: Last spring, TDCJ made a conscious effort to do one in March as opposed to July. And as a resident, once again, thank you, because going through restricted movement, a lockdown, in July is tough.

Collier: Yeah. It's tough on us, too.

Editor's Note: Thank you for reading Part I of this ECHO interview.

In next month's continuation of Executive Director Collier's conversation with The ECHO, he discusses the challenges of staffing a major correctional agency, TDCJ's 2030 Plan, how the culture of TDCJ is changing, and statewide efforts to help residents prepare for careers and link up with community employers. ●

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Anybody can write me. I get letters, I get I-60s — if you've got a really good idea, you can write me a letter and just tell me... I don't mind looking at that, I'm happy to do it.

*TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier*

ANGELER ISSUES

Being
Incensed
Doesn't
Always
Smell Good

Elkanah E. Hendrix
Staff Writer

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Shon craned his head above those in line in front of him.

“Doesn’t look like we’ll be eating anytime soon,” he said.

Way up at the counter, an argument broke out between two residents of the prison facility—the guy serving the main dish and a man nicknamed Chow Hall Ninja Warrior, who was so incensed he was ready to use the blue tray in his hand for more than carrying food. An officer snatched out his radio to “Call it in!” Everyone was watching; some more eagerly than others. But Chow Hall Ninja Warrior’s friend pulled him away.

Now that’s a friend, Shon thought. Not too long ago, he, too, was a hothead. Over a dozen altercations and no less than half that number in trips to restrictive housing later, he finally got hold of his anger issues.

The line started moving again. Finally, Shon made it to the front.

“Hey, Ms. Stevens. You doin’ alright today?” He held out his I.D. card.

“I’m good, thanks,” the kitchen employee said. She scanned Shon’s card and placed two pieces of meat on his tray. All the pork chops now left in the pan were extra-small cuts.

Shon handed the tray to the server for his sliced bread — a luxury for those on the diet menu — and that’s when the situation went wrong.

“What you doin’, bro?” he asked the server, who had just removed one of the pork chops from his tray and placed it back in the pan.

Cardinal rule number one: Never take food off another man’s plate.

Shon’s heart began racing, and his palms started to sweat. His eyebrows furrowed and his nostrils flared. He swore he felt condensation coming from his ears. Before the server was provided an opportunity to give an excuse about how they might not have enough to serve everybody if people received two pieces, Shon hopped over the counter and transformed the kitchen into a mixed martial arts octagon.

“FlashFlashFlash,” an officer screamed into the radio.

Correctional officers rushed to the scene.

This entire scene quickly played out, but only in Shon’s head as he rolled an imaginary tape forward. He thought about handling the server, but he actually didn’t. Remember: Shon had finally learned to control his anger issues. Quickly, he went through the steps he had learned: the self-assessment, the identifying of triggers, the year and a half of relaxation techniques — all necessary for de-escalation.

He even put himself on a brief time-out as he contemplated the proper words to communicate in order to solve this minor problem.

Instead, here’s what really happened:

Shon gave the server a chance to explain. The server told him that if two pieces were given, half the population would be on a meat-free diet for lunch that day.

Whether he thought the guy was lying or not didn’t matter. What mattered was the fact that he wasn’t

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Begin by reflecting on your personal experiences with anger. Take note of situations, triggers and patterns that lead to your anger.

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**The
 psychological,
 social and
 physiological
 consequences
 of unmanaged
 anger are
 destructive...**

about to spend the next six to 12 months in restrictive housing for arguing over an extra pork chop. What mattered was him not having to try and explain to his three kids that he forfeited any chance at making his next parole because he got into a fight while defending a pork chop. What was of great consequence was that Shon had finally figured out how to keep his anger in check.

Yes. I said “in check.” There is no way we — nor anyone else for that matter — can rid ourselves of anger. It just isn’t possible. Anger is an ingrained characteristic of our experience as humans. From the earliest of times to present day, anger has played a significant role in molding our interactions. However, even with its commonality, anger definitely has its issues and challenges — as we saw in the film that played out in Shon’s head.

In its most primal sense, anger is a natural response to that which we perceive as a threat, injustice or frustration. If left “unchecked,” it can lead to a range of psychological problems. Anger can play a huge part in stress and anxiety. In many cases, it can be the cause of depression. If we refuse to manage our anger, or to keep it “in check,” it is inevitable that we will find ourselves stuck in a vicious cycle of negative emotions, leading to a decreased quality of life and a slew of messed up relationships.

As residents, who knows better than us how omnipresent the prison environment is with triggers that can induce anger. What we may not know is that these pressures, fused with our loss of personal freedom — freedom that yes, we willingly gave up — can contribute to the development of mental health issues.

Studies suggests individuals in

incarceration frequently experience heightened levels of anger, which is correlated with elevated rates of anxiety and depression. In this population’s code, showing vulnerability is often discouraged, which can lead to the suppression of emotions — worsening anger-related issues.

Add enough pressure to anything — including the mind — and surely it can strongly react.

Unless you’ve taken the time to install a proper release valve.

If not, the cognitive contortions that typically move alongside anger can hinder clear thinking and rational decision-making. When consumed by anger, we may be more prone to hasty actions, making choices we later regret. This impulsivity can lead to destructive behaviors, strained relationships and unfavorable consequences in numerous aspects of our life.

Another element we cannot overlook is the reality of the physical toll anger exacts on the body. When we experience anger, we activate our body’s stress response. Our heart rate increases, blood pressures rise and we release certain stress hormones like cortisol. In short bursts, this physiological reaction has little effect, but chronic anger can lead to long-term health issues. It increases the risk of heart disease, and the immune system can be weakened, making us more susceptible to illnesses.

Identifying the problems associated with anger, we — and society at large — can benefit from a game plan to manage and resolve this strong emotion. Cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness techniques and communication skills training can all be effective tools for us who are seeking to control our anger. Learning to identify triggers, practicing empathy and

taking on a solution-oriented approach can help transform anger into a more constructive force.

Effective anger management programs in prisons can have far-reaching benefits. They not only contribute to a safer and more efficient prison environment, but they also play a pivotal role in preparing residents for successful reentry into society. These programs can supply us with critical coping skills and emotional intelligence, which are key for navigating the challenges of life. Windham School District offers CHANGES and the Cognitive Intervention Program, while TDCJ's Rehabilitation Programs Division provides Overcomers, Voyager, the Change Agent and Life Skills Program.

Now that we know how powerful of an emotion anger is, and the certitude of "unchecked" anger negatively impacting our mental, relational and physical health, and our overall well-being, let us take a look at some ways we may engage in self-guided anger management. This is a proactive and effective way to develop emotional regulation and skills to improve our quality of life. Here's the detailed step-by-step approach that Shon took in his journey to self-guided anger management:

Step 1: Self-Assessment and Recognition

Begin by reflecting on your personal experiences with anger. Take note of situations, triggers and patterns that lead to your anger. When a negative thought arises, the practice of Meta Cognition can quickly change your reality. Meta Cognition is when you have a thought, you realize you're having a thought, and thus you possess the power to change that thought. This type of self-awareness will serve as a foundation for your anger management journey.

Step 2: Educate Yourself

Understanding the psychology of anger is crucial. Read books and articles, or listen to podcasts on anger management to learn about the physiological, emotional and cognitive aspects of anger. One podcast I really like on the tablet is called the Anger Management Institute. Absorbing this knowledge will help you identify and address your anger more effectively.

Step 3: Develop Emotional Awareness

Practice mindfulness techniques to become more attuned to your emotions. Regularly check in with yourself to identify how you're feeling throughout the day. Mindfulness exercises, such as deep breathing or body scans, can help you stay present and in touch with your emotions.

Step 4: Identify Triggers

Use a journal to track situations, people or events that trigger your anger. Write down your feelings, thoughts and physical sensations associated with each trigger. This record will help you recognize patterns and understand your anger triggers better.

Step 5: Cognitive Restructuring

Challenge and reframe negative thought patterns that contribute to your anger. When you notice irrational or exaggerated thoughts related to anger, replace them with more balanced and rational perspectives. This cognitive restructuring can help prevent anger from escalating.

Step 6: Relaxation Techniques

Learn and practice relaxation techniques to manage anger in the moment. Deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and visualization exercises can help calm your body's stress response and reduce the intensity of anger. The

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Effective anger management programs in prisons can have far-reaching benefits... They also play a pivotal role in preparing residents for successful reentry into society.

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In its most primal sense, anger is a natural response to that which we perceive as a threat, injustice or frustration. If left “unchecked,” it can lead to a range of psychological problems.

Deep Energy Podcast contains music to aide in sleep, meditation and relaxation.

Step 7: Time-Out Strategy

When you feel anger building up, take a “time-out.” Physically remove yourself from the situation and give yourself time to cool down. Engage in a calming activity, such as walking, listening to music or reading before returning to the situation with a clearer mind. Our tablets can be a major positive tool here also.

Step 8: Communication Skills

Develop effective communication skills to express your feelings without aggression. Practice assertive communication, which involves expressing your needs and concerns while respecting others’ perspective. This can help prevent misunderstandings and conflicts that fuel anger. There is a particular podcast that I happen to really enjoy. “Talk About Talk” is a communication skills training podcast hosted by Dr. Andrea Wojnicki, a Harvard-educated executive communication coach. Two episodes in particular are a must: #132, “The Power of Listening” and #136, “Communicating with Precision.”

Step 9: Practice Problem-Solving

Work on finding constructive solutions to the issues that trigger your anger. Instead of dwelling on the problem, focus on identifying actionable steps to address the underlying causes of your frustration.

Step 10: Seek Support

Consider seeking support from friends, family or a therapist. Sharing your journey with someone you trust can provide accountability and encouragement. If your anger issues are severe,

a therapist can provide guidance and personalized strategies.

Step 11: Monitor Progress

Regularly assess your progress by reviewing your journal entries and reflecting on situations where you managed your anger effectively. Celebrate your successes and identify areas where you can continue to improve.

Step 12: Continual Growth

Anger management, like other areas of personal growth, is an ongoing process. Keep practicing the techniques you’ve learned and don’t get discouraged by setbacks. Remember that change takes time and the goal is gradual improvement.

Starting self-guided anger management requires dedication, patience and a commitment to personal growth. By following these steps, you can develop effective emotional regulation skills, improve your relationships and enhance your overall emotional well-being.

Remember, while anger is an inherent and universal emotion, its “unchecked” expression can lead to a range of complex issues. The psychological, social and physiological consequences of unmanaged anger are destructive, which is why it is so imperative for us to foster emotional intelligence, promote effective communication and advocate for constructive outlets. By doing this, we can harness the transformative potential of anger while minimizing its detrimental effects.

Stay tuned for upcoming articles on emotional intelligence. ●

The Herstory of Life Skills

Leading Ladies

*Mountain View and Crain Unit
Life Coaches Give Women
A Hand Up*

Edgar Arturo Sazo – Staff Writer

The Herstory of Life Skills

Part One :

Life Skills Program Directly Reaching Women for Positive Change

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“I knew I needed to change,” said Primavera Baltazar, a Life Coach on the Mountain View Unit. “I realized I had errors in my thinking.”

Baltazar was one of the first participants in the women’s Cognitive Life Skills (CLS) program in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ).

“The [peer-led] program is geared toward changing negative thoughts and changing how you perceive yourself,” said CLS Coordinator Terri Burnett of TDCJ’s Rehabilitation Programs Division (RPD).



Growing Program

Under the guidance of Burnett, the CLS program has expanded to over 40 units and more than 4,000 participants throughout TDCJ. Six of those are women’s units with almost 500 participants. Residents, directors, wardens, administration and staff have taken notice and have many times told Burnett this program works.

“I have been in G5 housing six times, and I have been in medium custody over 10 times. When I took the class, it gave me the tools I needed to evolve,” Baltazar said.

The curriculum is evidence-based and stems from an already existing inner-city program called La Bodega that focuses on recidivism and how it impacts society. CLS is a six-week, peer-taught educational program. The topics for this program are cognitive thinking skills, substance use awareness and mental health first aid. It is taught by TDCJ’s life coaches, typically Monday through Friday for two hours each day.

Burnett said the program emphasizes personal change.

“One thing I tell participants about their crime is this is what you did, this is not who you are,” she said.

The program’s long-term objective is to reduce recidivism. The immediate goal is to teach participants to cope with everyday pressure by being proactive instead of reacting negatively to their environment. Residents in G1, G2 and G4 custody status may apply to participate in the course by writing an I-60 to unit administration or the chaplain.

Coaching Ability

Although the curriculum is the same in every class, coaches add their own flair. For example, a coach might read a book and use what she learned from it to enhance her lessons. As program coordinator, Burnett has seen positive change in behavior and attitudes taking place in the women as they move through the course. One woman

I had to admit a lot of things that I hadn’t previously been willing to admit about myself.

*Life Skills Program Participant
Michelle Tortora*

told Burnett that if she would have had this program during her first sentence in TDCJ, she would not have come back.

However, the program is not designed as an overnight solution to behavior and thought process defects. It is a standard operating procedure to be followed and practiced daily. The concepts and practical application skills learned in this class are referred to as “tools in the toolbox” and meant to be utilized in everyday situations.

“Do participants have a good day every day? No, they do not. ... but when things happen, participants know how to use the tools in their toolbox,” Burnett said.

She said this course is about giving opportunities, and life coaches are trained to facilitate the program, not direct the participants. This means they talk about ways one can grow, then ask the participants to engage in discussion and be involved in the process. Accountability is key.

Challenges and Changes

Women show up to class at 6 a.m. while still maintaining a work assignment. Some also attend other educational programs. This schedule may not be within the comfort zone of many residents, but these program participants persist in reaching for success. The changes are evident, and participants take notice.

Cassandra Timmons at the Mountain View Unit, credits CLS with helping her effectively recognize and deal with her emotions. She also said internal assessment tools have made her a better mentor in the faith-based dorm where she lives.

“Being a mentor in a faith-based dorm, I have to be open-minded when people come to me with different situations and circumstances, both personally and spiritually,” Timmons said. “It was hard for me to relate to each one because I was looking at it from my point of view. I wasn’t taking into consideration that their feelings were valid. Now I give them my undivided attention. CLS really helped me in

communicating with the people with whom I live.”

Michelle Tortora, graduate of CLS on the Crain Unit, felt changes taking place in her own life.

“During the class I realized a lot about me. I had to admit a lot of things that I hadn’t previously been willing to admit about myself,” Tortora said. “The main challenge was figuring those things out so I could work on them.”

Family members and other loved ones have approached Burnett at graduations and told her they see a difference in the participants. She tells them she believes in this program 100%.

“I tell people I will bet my career that you will come out better than you were before,” said Burnett, who has worked in the TDCJ for more than 20 years. “I can truly say that I have been witness to the shifting of the mindset in those ladies who have been hungry for change. My main take away from this program—the rehabilitation!” ●

I have to be open-minded when people come to me with different situations and circumstances, both personally and spiritually.

*Life Skills Program Participant
Cassandra Timmons*



The Herstory of Life Skills

Part Two:

*Life Coaches Give Women
A Hand Up*

When residents walk in and see a resident teaching the class, some assume it will all be fluff. They have to see that what we are teaching is worth it, see that we know the material, and see that if we can change, they can change, too.

*Crain Unit Life Coach
Kimberly Alexander*



“Who am I to be ungrateful or a complainer when the women I speak to on death row are sitting there with the knowledge that their time could be up?” Life Coach Charlotte Leal asked. “I get to leave this place one day, and that opened my eyes.”

Typical Day

Life coaches on the Mountain View Unit in Gatesville facilitate Cognitive Life Skills (CLS) classes, and they tier-walk to counsel peers during the day. They are on-call to residents 24/7, but they also work a job assignment and some even pursue a college degree. Leal, on the Mountain View Unit, counsels death row and protective-custody residents.

“We reach out to every group, including G4s, G5s and Protective Custody,” Leal said. “The program is branching out quickly. I am able to see people grow out of the same dysfunctional cycle I was in, utilizing the tools learned in the course.”

Transitional Dorm

Mountain View Unit has a transitional dorm in which the life coaches reside, along with women borderline going to, or coming out of, G4 housing. The coaches teach CLS in the dorm and work closely with these women to help them change their mindset. The focus is on creating and maintaining boundaries, effective communication, anger management, offering words of wisdom, healthy social interaction and knowing how to have a good time without being under the influence of substances. To let off steam, they have a celebration once a month in which they might play musical chairs, bin-

*Life Coach
Kimberly Alexander*

go or charades, or enjoy art expression with music. Many women are able to avoid a more restrictive custody level because of this dorm's intervention, and the women moving into general population are better prepared to face daily challenges.

"During words of wisdom sessions, there is a sense of community and being able to hold one another accountable. It is like a family that we have going on in the transitional dorm," said Erin Fannin, a life coach on Mountain View Unit.

Serving Others

A core tenet of the Life Coach Program is the concept of servant-leadership. It is more than leading by example, it is providing for others the tools they need and serving their best interests to facilitate positive change. Marcie Moon, a life coach on the Mountain View Unit, expresses an attitude consistent with these values.

"I love helping people, making people smile and knowing they are starting to trust us," Moon said. "They know that we will come to them. I like having the opportunity to encourage and lift them up and give them advice. When I leave another dorm, I get a sense that I helped somebody, and they trust us enough to be as transparent with us as we are with them."

Although their main goal is to help others, many life coaches credit the program with helping them also become better individuals.

"This program is literally an answer to prayers. My whole time down I have needed this. I know plenty of women like me who have also prayed for something similar to happen. It is a blessing to have this here," said Enevelia Canales, a life coach on Mountain View Unit. She has been a resident of TDCJ for 15 years. The life coaches are trained on the Mountain View Unit, then, sent back to their assigned units.

Katherine Nadal, a life coach now on the Crain Unit, noticed that after 16 years of being a resident, she was just sort of moving aimlessly through life.

"There is a stigma to self-help in here that says if you take classes like this, it's lame, or if you were strong enough, you wouldn't have to do that. That is a false narrative be-

There is a stigma to self-help in here that says if you take classes like this, it's lame, or if you were strong enough, you wouldn't have to do that. That is a false narrative because we all need help.

*Crain Unit Life Coach
Katherine Nadal*

*Life Coach
Katherine Nadal*

cause we all need help. Just because we are all people does not mean we know how to be healthy people,” she said.

Many residents expect the coaches to be proponents of the program, but others outside of the Life Coach program are looking in and seeing noteworthy results. Chaplain T. Bolwaire on the Crain Unit praises the work these women are doing and recognizes the benefits of having CLS on site.

“It has really sparked an interest in the residents seeing ‘something for us, by us,’” Bolwaire said. “Individuals that I know have taken the class. I see where they have changed in their actions and in their behaviors. I can recall someone who was in G4 housing that took the class and is now in general population. This is something that helps them every day for the rest of their life.”

Program Challenges

Though positive results are taking place, the program is not without challenges.

“When residents walk in and see a resident teaching the

I am not a victim. I am a victor because I am standing here today. When we experience trauma, it is not our fault. Instead, it is our responsibility to fix what has been broken.

Mountain View Life Coach Primavera Baltazar

class, some assume it will all be fluff. They have to see that what we are teaching is worth it, see that we know the material, and see that if we can change, they can change, too. Life Coach Kimberly Alexander of the Crain Unit said a common worry is ‘Will she tell my secrets?’ They often realize in a resident-led class they feel more comfortable because they don’t have to worry about us judging them or telling them what they can or cannot do.”

Primavera Baltazar, an East Los Angeles native, said she has prevailed over that which once controlled her. She is now a life coach on the Mountain View Unit. For a long time, she understood she had to do better, but she did not know how. Now, she does not let her past define her, and she is encouraging her peers to do the same.

“I was in denial for a long time, but when I was able to see it for what it was, I could start chipping away at those issues. It is a struggle every day because some of those issues still linger. It is a choice I make every day that I wake up. I have a life sentence, but I am not defined by that. I have been here almost 24 years, but just because I am in prison, does not mean I cannot change or that I cannot make a difference in my community,” she said.

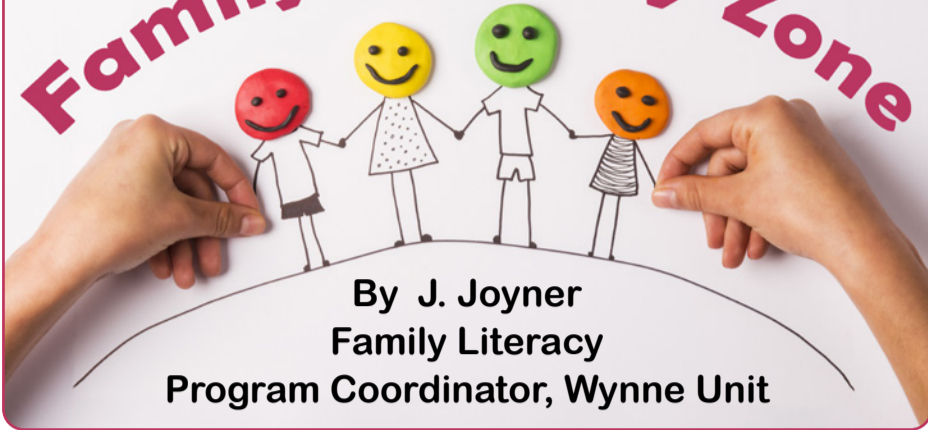
Baltazar has been in G4 and G5 housing multiple times and feels she is very relatable to the women in those areas. Many of them, like her, come from rough areas and have experienced a great deal of trauma in their lives. Even so, she works to help them surmount these obstacles on their path to victory.

“I am not a victim. I am a victor because I am standing here today. When we experience trauma, it is not our fault. Instead, it is our responsibility to fix what has been broken,” Baltazar said. ●



Left to right: Erin Fannin; Marcie Moon; Andrea Davidson; Ene delia Canales; Primavera Baltazar; and Charlotte Leal

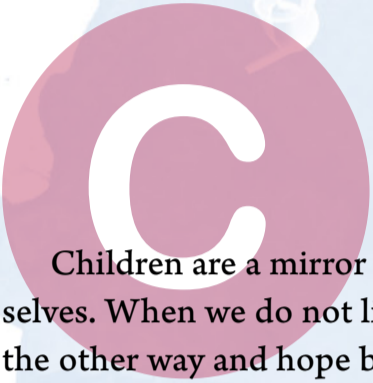
Family Literacy Zone



By J. Joyner

Family Literacy

Program Coordinator, Wynne Unit



Children are a mirror in which we see a reflection of ourselves. When we do not like what we see, it is tempting to run the other way and hope by ignoring the issue it will resolve itself in time. You, resident parents in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, have wisdom and knowledge that can be shared with your children. Children want to know they matter to their parents. Even when they are angry with you or ignore your correspondence, what they really want to know is, will you still love them? Will you pursue them, take a risk, and show them that they matter?

“Our words have such potential. They can be either life-giving, or hard-to-remove roadblocks to our children’s future,” said Jimmy and Laura Seubert in a book titled “Parenting Without Regret.”

Parents have the power to influence children, and it can intentionally be for the better, even during this time of separation.

Remember, what we think about ourselves as parents leads to what we say and then do. One must first believe they have influence over their children in order to feel impactful, leading to purposeful speech, letter writing and family meetings. Human beings are made for relationships. Families are designed to be a place of belonging.

What goals do you have for your child? How are you turning “life moments” into “teaching moments?” Ted Tripp observed in his book, “Shepherding a Child’s Heart,” that parents don’t always take the time to figure out what heart issues are

Editor’s note: Family Literacy Zone will be an ongoing feature created to dispatch short teachings and encouragement from Family Literacy program coordinators. These tips can benefit program participants and residents who are not a part of the program. Currently, the Family Literacy program is on the Crain, Coffield, Hilltop, Jordan, Sanchez, Stringfellow, Torres and Wynne campuses. Send an I-60 to your Windham student advisor for information on how to enroll.

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You, resident parents in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, have wisdom and knowledge that can be shared with your children. Children want to know they matter to their parents.

J. Joyner, Family Literacy Program Coordinator



causing the behavior needing correcting. Most of the time, we as parents just try to fix the unwanted behavior. However, addressing the reason for the misbehavior will meet the child’s needs overtime.

Windham’s Family Literacy program is designed to help resident parents become effective, supportive and active partners in the education of their children. This works toward the goal of eliminating the potential for generational incarceration and increasing student growth of both the parent and child.

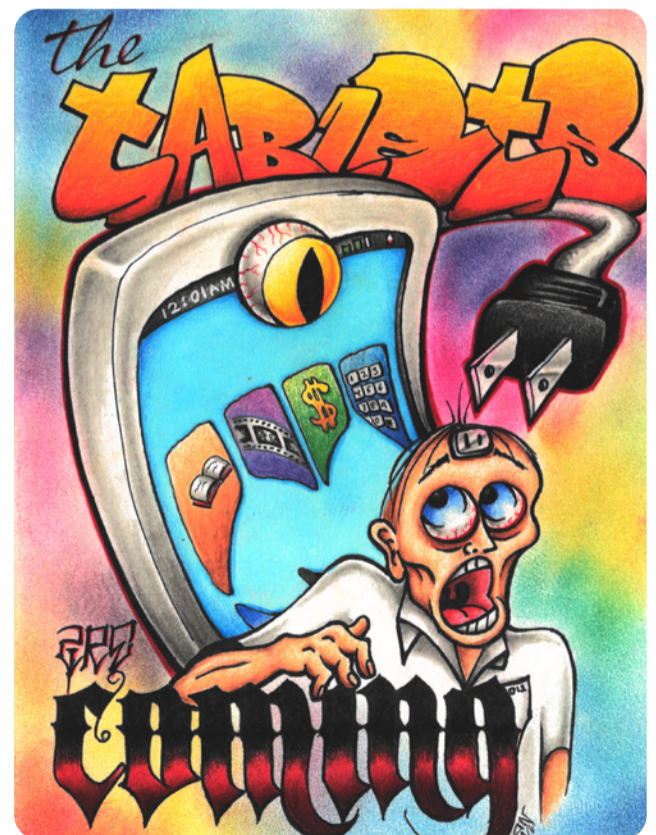
Conversation Starter with Your Child: What is one thing that happened today that made you laugh? ●



ART EX PO



Mighty Fine Bovine | Charles Silva
Airbrush on Illustration Board | 15" x 20"



Tablets | Daniel Johnston
Color Pencil on Illustration Board | 7.5" x 10" (Each)

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.



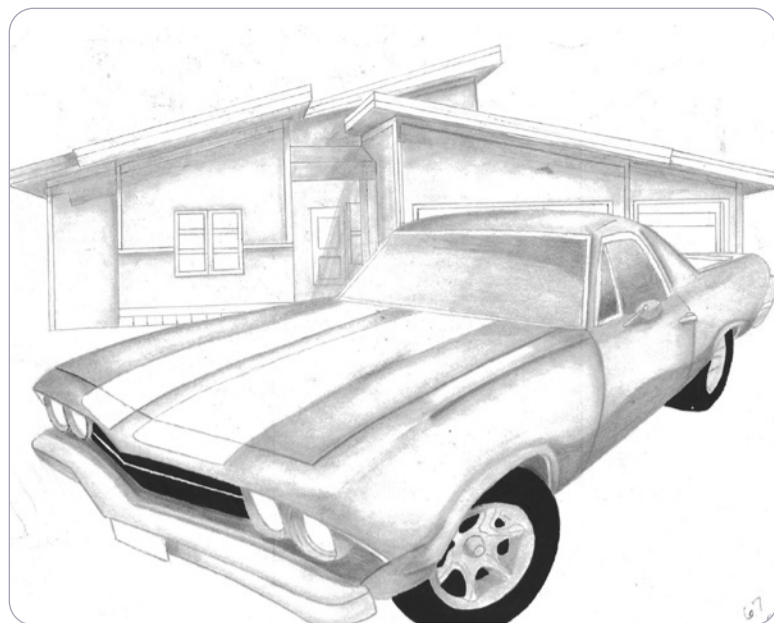
Daddy's Lil Monster | Fabian Flores
Airbrush on Illustration Board |
15" x 20"



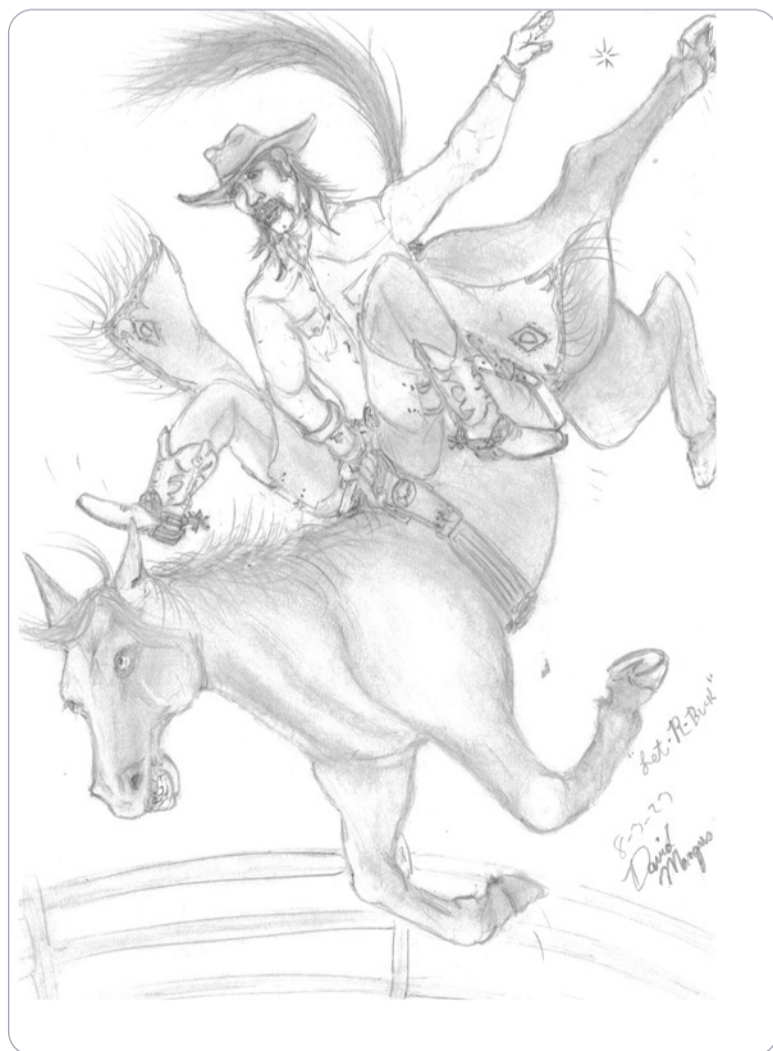
Misc. Art and Mural: Telford Campus Library (x3) | Marcus Gaines



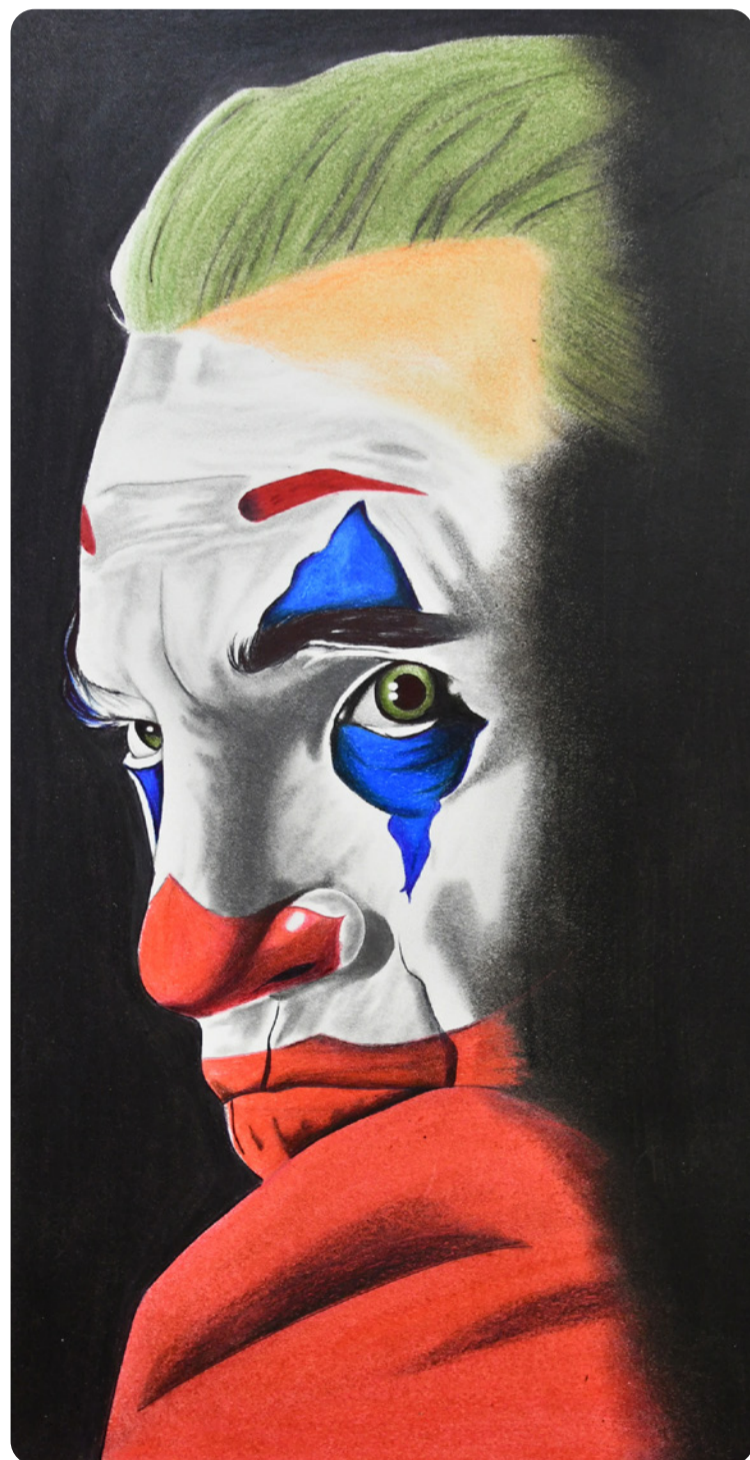
Woman and Butterflies | Martin Garcia III
Graphite on Illustration Board | 15" x 20"



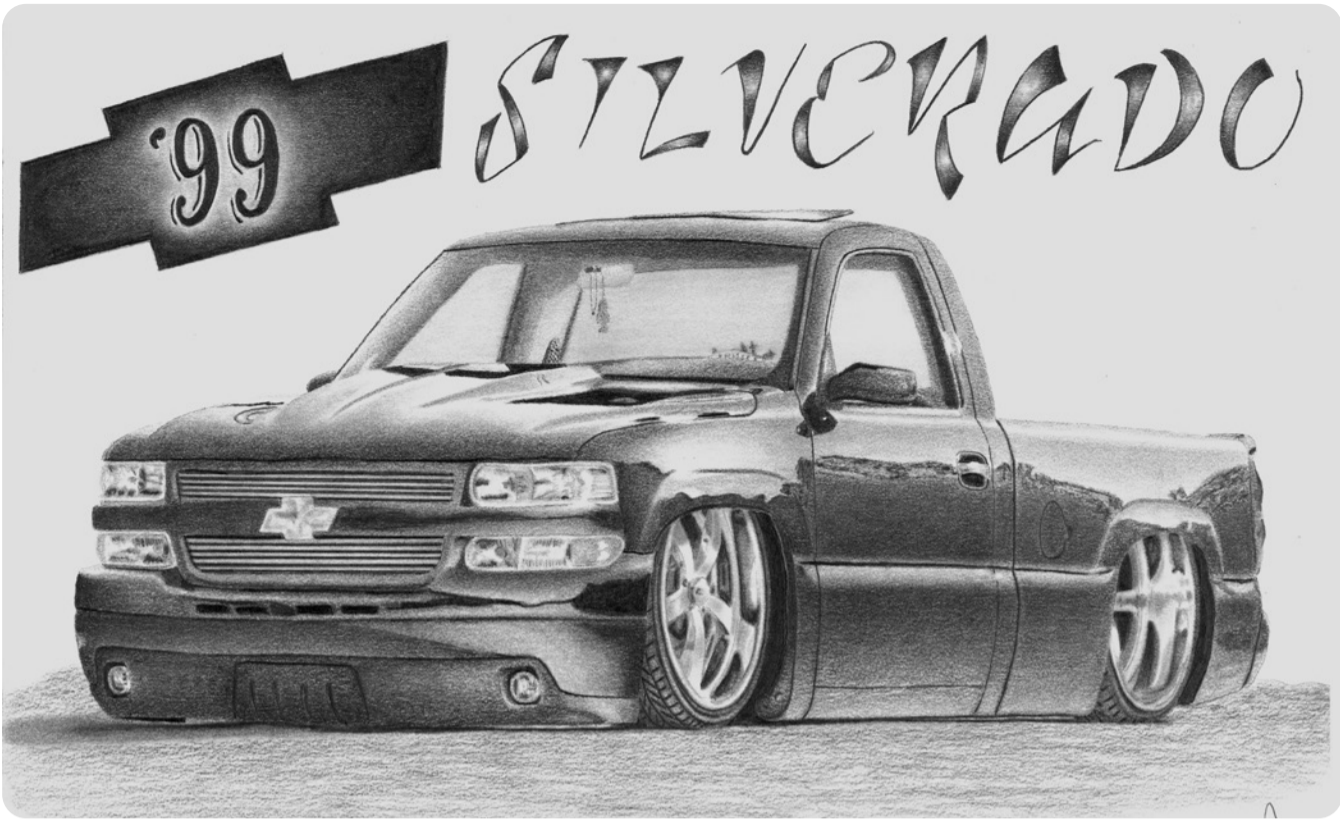
'67 El Camino | Shaun Conley
Pencil on Drawing Paper |
9" x 12"



Let R Buck | Gary Mangus
Pencil on Drawing Paper |
9" x 12"



The Joker | Gerardo Loreda
Color Pencil on Illustration Board |
15" x 20"



'99 Silverado | Lance Gentry
Graphite on Illustration Board |
7.5" x 12"



The Grinch | Mauro Barrazo
Airbrush on Drawing Paper |
28" x 36"

Poetry Corner



Undercover Angel

Submitted by Raymond Shelton
Jordan Unit

I once met a girl to whom I gave my heart.
Once I knew, I knew from the start.
She's the glory of God with a heart so pure.
With her is where I'm to be, of this I'm sure.
She's always gentle and calm as a dove,
so forever and ever, I'll give her my love.
For all she's done, I'm forever in debt.

I'll wait for her, forsaking all others.
I know — it's what I prefer.
She came from Heaven down to me.
Whether she realizes it or not, she set me free.
She reaches in and saves me with a kiss
that's fatal. Little does she know — she is
my undercover angel.

We the People

Submitted by Hannah Roberts
Coleman Unit

I was built on the foundation of
crushed dreams and broken hearts,
a lineage of mad hope filling in the cracks
with silly putty as if it could support a
home.

Walls are built to cave like
rivers dry or canyons.

There is no other way.

We the people do not wallow
through the thirsty, bedrock
or stand amongst the rubble.

We get on our hands and knees and
crawl,

bleeding until the tide rises and
the cracks fill with the iron in your veins.

Who you were when the
whitewater rapids began
does not have to be who stands
up to a broken home.



Thundering Moment

Submitted by Landon Brook
Stevenson Unit

Daylight broke as work began.
America was under attack again.
Way up in the sky not far away,
Evil was about to strike this day.
Right before our unbelieving eyes,
A tragedy happened way up in the skies.
Tower One was hit first.
People ran as flames burst.
A roaring sound came as we looked again.
Teardrops fell as we hugged our friends.
In disbelief we looked up high:
Tower Two was struck before our eyes.
New York's twin towers came thundering down.
So many lives would never be found.
America stood strong through all of this,
New York's twin towers will always be missed.

*Dedicated to:
All the victims and first responders.*

Pure Hands

Submitted by Sebastian Chaney
Clements Unit

Hands together; hands apart.
Hand me downs; hands that pass.
Hands that are small; hands that are large.
Family hands that pray together stay together.
Pure as I am; pure that is in you.
Hands in the tidal wave.
Pure water; pure blood.
Hands from a brother to a sister.
Pure thanks to the hands that have on this
long journey been with these pure hands that
wrote this poem and the melody.





Silver Boxes

Submitted by Janelle Peterkin
Hobby Unit

It took me four years to walk 20 steps forward,
but a few minutes to take 20,000 back.

I bottle it all in under my shell,
then the smallest things make me crack.

My whole life I've had these wounds,
that have never quite had time to heal.

I use people around me as Band-Aids;
over time I have created a shield.

Deep down I feel unwanted, alone and
inadequate, amongst many other things.

Yet I try to hold my head up high,
carrying myself like a queen.

Rejection is a tough pill to swallow,
"What's wrong with me?" I ask.

Abandonment is no stranger;
we were even closer in the past.

I dislike being vulnerable,
so, I prefer to be by myself.

Unfortunately, my worst enemy
becomes my mind, when I'm sitting
alone in my cell.

Silver boxes could have changed my life,
if I had got them as a little girl.

Instead, a naïve swan got sent out
to the vultures of the world.

Power of the Pen

Submitted by Andres “Sergio” Ayala
Allred Unit

I was 20 years old when I picked up the pen,
when it leaks I see people cry and people laugh.
The pen is the most powerful weapon;
it can keep you locked down or
lead to enlightenment.
Within the pen dreams are envisioned.
The pen can build relationships or destroy
family and friends.
At times it’s unfair and ruthless
in the wrong hands.
When you see it you learn to
obey its commands.
The man behind the pen can turn
a kid into a monster or teach a parent
how to be a man or a father.
The ammo in my pen is about done.
It runs dry until there is none.
As I look all around me, it's amazing
how much power you can find in the pen--
for the time being.



Vacant

Submitted by Andrew Reynolds
Wynne Unit

I see you, gnawing the bones of your exile,
heart filled with vacant shallow dross —
around your soul wanton heathen things
seethe with hollow loss.
But as evening slows with the field of dawn,
and your sadness’s screams come to naught,
the sunlight rays through raven-black
with the new day never sought.
See,
the future comes.
Forget me not.

Because of the Brave

Submitted by Aaron Carter
Hodge Unit

America the beautiful, home of the
brave and free,
a land that God, our father, has given
you and me.
He knows that in our world, freedom
always has its price,
and can easily be lost, without fight and
sacrifice.
So with a love of country our bravest
give their all,
many even life itself...we're grateful to
them all.
Our Army, Navy, National Guard, Air
Force and Marines,
present and past...all have made our bell
of freedom ring.
We thank them for their sacrifice and
pray to God above,
that they may know the greatness of our
gratitude and love.
Because of them, our nation's flag will
ever proudly wave,
and we are still the home of the free be-
cause of them...the brave.



True Love

Submitted by Crystal Thomas
Woodman State Jail

These eyes, they cry when things aren't right,
so full of tears and so full of fright.
This heart of mine so tender and broken,
these words of mine that are left unspoken.

The things I've done that I'll regret,
the people I've hurt and I'll never forget.
If I could change one thing about my past,
I would change time because it goes so fast.

My eyes get weary, my heart feels pain,
it breaks to pieces and tears flow like rain.

Tears of hurt; tears of pain,
the love I had down the drain.

I prayed to my savior for a word from above,
He showed that there was only one true love.
Look in the mirror; tell me what do you see?

I see this beautiful angel created by me.

So, close your eyes and open your heart,
Jesus forgives; He will never depart.

The real forgiveness comes from above,
Jesus Christ our Lord; He is our only true love.



Color With Me

Submitted by Daniel Huffman
Montford Unit

Emotions are like crayons and I'm
colored blue, in a set of crayons there are
so many colors to choose from — this is true.

Life is the picture and we try to color
within the lines, happiness, love
and caring are but signs.

Our story is but a play on the stage
of time in space, and the script did
change when I came into this place.

But let it be said so many ways,
I'll love you beyond nights and days.
So with my crayons in hand I'll make a
sign for a performance, for one day
I'll be out from behind this fence.

Yes, one day I'll be free,
and then you can color with me.

Temporary Life

Submitted by Rhiannon Petty
Hilltop Unit

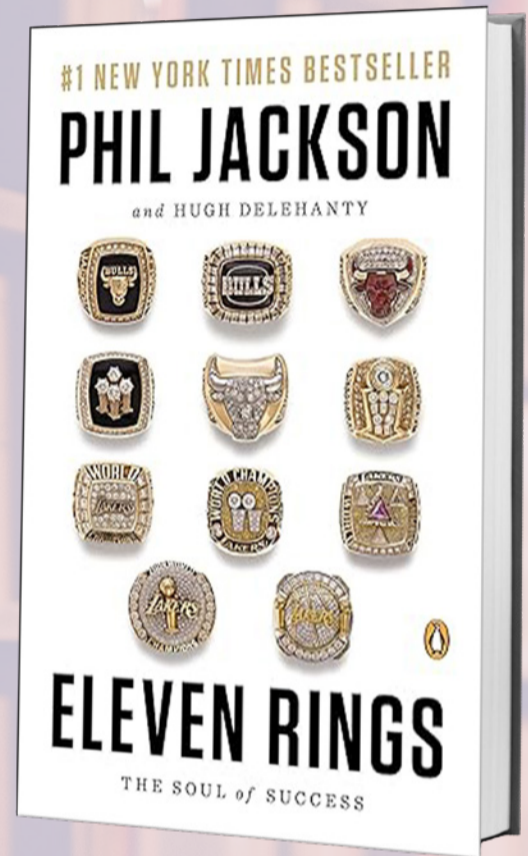
May arrived and so had my day,
the time for me to go away.
Time to begin my temporary life.
Tired, scared and still in shock,
you sit there wondering if you will
be strong like a rock.
You sigh, you know deep down inside
there will be times you sit and cry.
Days will come and days will go; but the
unanswered question will still remain, "Why?"
The pain of this temporary life feels much,
like that of a cut by a sharp knife.
You miss your loved ones so very much,
and you try so hard to remember
their soft touch.
Letter after letter you pray the pain
will somehow get better.
The routine is the same day after day:
you wake up early to the sound of yelling.
As you open your tired, sleepy eyes,
you hear a voice say, "Chow, laundry and pills."
Hurry, lady, and be on your way.
As you get ready for bed at night,
wishing you could see the stars in the sky,

You look around at the other women,
as they sit and ponder the question why.
When all is quiet and most are asleep,
it's unfortunate, but some will weep.
These beautiful women in white
reach out to God, you can see as their
heads give a simple nod.
There are times the pain and embarrassment
do not stop--kind of like the rain,
dripping drop after drop.
You wake up in the morning and before
starting your day, you bow your head
and you begin to pray.
You hope God hears these words that you say,
"Dear God, heal my broken heart and
please show me the way,
As I work on me and become closer to you;
please God bless this temporary stay."
Bless these beautiful women here with me,
please shine your light for all to see.
Dry our tears and calm our fears,
as we often feel the pain of that sharp knife,
God please bless this temporary life.

THE BOOK DROP

FABIAN W. FLORES
STAFF WRITER

If you have suggestions for books — old or recent — that can motivate, inspire and educate your broader community, drop a letter to The Book Drop, c/o *The ECHO*. Enjoy — and remember: READ BETTER — BE BETTER.



"Eleven Rings:
The Soul of
Success"
by *Phil Jackson
and Hugh Delehanty*

Review by
Alberto S. Cesarez
Clements Unit

Many consider Phil Jackson to be the best coach in the history of the National Basketball Association (NBA). He won six championships with the Chicago Bulls and five more with the Los Angeles Lakers — for a total of 11 — more than any other coach in the annals of professional sports.

I decided to read this book because I'm a huge Lakers fan, but also because I was curious to find out just what made Jackson tick. I used to see him coaching on TV and wondered how he maintained such a calm exterior even when his players were clearly befuddled and floundering on the court. I used to see other coaches in similar situations, bristling with rage, ranting and raving at their players or the refs, but not Phil. No, he always seemed to be unflappable, radiating an aura of total composure and tranquility. He'd sometimes refuse to call time-outs whenever his teams were struggling and may have benefited from one. I would want to pull my hair out (when I had hair) when he did that with my beloved Lakers.

Despite Jackson's success and fame, I discovered that he's just an ordinary guy with everyday problems from the sticks of North Dakota. I discovered the reasons for his atypical style of coaching and the essence for his wisdom. Dubbed the "Zen Master" by the media, Jackson actually did have an appreciation for Zen meditation and other facets of Buddhism. He also had an adept understanding of basic human psychology, which was certainly helpful in negotiating the fantastic egos of NBA players. Additionally, he also studied Native American tribal ideology, and integrated some of their way into his approach.

Jackson was fortunate to lead teams with some of the greatest players ever to play the game, such as Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen, Shaquille O'Neal and the late, great Kobe Bryant. However, he explains what it took to propel them to become the selfless players he wanted them to be so that they could capitalize on a unique system known as the triangle offense. Phil encouraged this style of play, but inevitably ran into some resistance, since the triangle requires the entire team to buy into the scheme for it to work. Gradually, his players embraced the offense and ultimately flourished in it.

Jackson details the highs, lows surrounding each season— including the losing ones, —and presents his opin-

ions on why they either ended in triumph or defeat. In one anecdote, Jackson recounts a close game in which Jordan was struggling.

"Michael, who is open?" asked Jackson. When he received only a stare back from his superstar for an answer he asked again, "Michael, who is open?"

"Paxson," was Jordan's terse one-word reply.

"Then get him the ball!"

This exchange blew me away because I recognized it for what it really was: in the heat of battle, here were two grown men eschewing their pride and coming to an understanding for a common cause.

Have you ever wondered what it was like to coach unruly and recalcitrant players such as the pompous, traveling circus that was Dennis Rodman? Widely known as undisciplined and outlandish, Rodman's bizarre and rowdy behavior resulted in a myriad of fines, ejections and suspensions. He once appeared in a wedding dress at a stop on his book tour and declared that he was marrying himself. That is strange behavior even for Rodman. Yet, somehow despite his insolent, arrogance and ridiculous buffoonery, Jackson was able to corral him in enough so that he thrived under his tutelage and helped the Bulls win the second of their three-peats.

I delighted in Jackson's many vivid and graphic descriptions of his coaching career. In one passage, he describes some of the players for the Sacramento Kings, which his Lakers were facing in a playoff series. He writes of one player in particular, "I was impressed with the Kings bench, led by Predrag Stojakovic, a chilling outside shooter." That line was spot on because I personally remember Stojakovic as being utterly lethal from beyond the three-point line.

There is a lot of basketball action going in this book so it might not be a book for everyone; however, there are also an abundance of lessons to be learned from this book concerning determination, self-discipline and discretion. The book speaks of the need to live one's life with empathy, compassion and compromise, even love. It certainly opened my eyes and prompted me to take a good look at my own life and to correct a few areas. Maybe this world would be a better place if we all sought more knowledge and wisdom, just like Phil Jackson. ●

SPORTS VIEW

By William E. Hill - Staff Writer



Championships, Comebacks, Farewells

T*This sports column represents the viewpoints of sports fan and sportswriter Will Hill, reflecting his opinions and observations. These opinions do not represent official opinions of TDCJ or of The ECHO. Enjoy them; respond to them. The ECHO welcomes your letters and input!*

Gymnastics **She's Back!!!**

Simone Biles is back in the international gymnastics game after taking a couple of years off to work on her mental health after the 2022 Tokyo Olympics. When Biles won her sixth all-around title at the world championships, she became the competition's most decorated gymnast with 28 medals. In addition to the gold medal in the all-around, she also collected a silver in the vault exercise after she over rotated on her signature Yurchenko double pike, a vault that no other woman gymnast will even attempt. The move is named after Yurchenko after she was the first woman gymnast to attempt and land the vault in international competition. In all, Biles has five skills named after her, and she will probably have

more. Biles is pointing to the 2024 Paris Olympics where she is expected to add to her total of 37 medals earned in international competition at the world championships and Olympics. By the way, that total is also a record.

"It's like as long as I go out there, do these routines again, like it's a win in my book," Biles said after the competition.

Basketball

Las Vegas Aces Prove to be Winning Hand — Again

The Aces join the Houston Comets and the Los Angeles Sparks as the only three teams to repeat as Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) champions after defeating the New York Liberty to win their second consecutive title. Playing without injured starters, Chelsea Gray, the 2022 Finals Most Valuable Player (MVP), and Kiah Stokes both suffered foot injuries during game three.

"We've been facing adversity all season, playing without different players," Alysha Clark who filled in for Gray, said. "To

be in this moment right now and do it together it speaks volumes about us, our chemistry.”

The Aces may have been missing two players but they still had A’ja Wilson, the Finals MVP who finished third in voting for the regular season MVP award. All Wilson did in the deciding game was score 24 points, grab 16 rebounds and make the key defensive stop in the closing seconds.

“To be short-handed and win is amazing,” Wilson said. “It is hard to get back to the Finals, much less to win again.”

Football

Two NFL Stalwarts Report to the Big Game in the Sky

The National Football League (NFL) lost two players from the 60s and 70s that contributed to making the league into the juggernaut it is today: Chicago Bears’ Dick Butkus and the Dallas Cowboys’ Walt Garrison. Butkus was a hard-hitting middle linebacker that instilled fear in opposing players, and Garrison was a hardnosed running back.

Butkus, a Chicago native, played his high school, college and entire nine-year NFL career for teams in his home state of Illinois. The 1970 NFL Preview issue featured an image of a snarling Dick Butkus with the tagline: “The Most Feared Man in the Game.” The opponents who wound up on the business end of his bone-rattling hits would almost certainly concur with that statement.

In one game, the Detroit Lions featured the I-formation against the Bears, and this apparently upset Butkus so much that he proceeded to knock out of the game the center, the quarterback, the fullback and the tailback.

One interview I heard after his passing indicated that he not only tackled opposing players out of bounds, but he would chase them onto the track surrounding many of the fields of that era and tackle them. In a league where defensive players are penalized for looking sideways at an offensive player, Butkus would have accumulated so many fines that he would be paying the league to play.

During his nine-year career, Butkus was named to the All-Pro team five times and made the Pro Bowl eight times.

The Butkus Foundation, which promotes education opportunities for underserved individuals, presents the Butkus Award to the nation’s best collegiate middle linebacker.

Walt Garrison was a true cowboy. After playing high school football in his hometown of Denton, Texas, he received an athletic scholarship to play for the Oklahoma State University Cowboys of the then Big Eight Conference. In his junior year, he was the conference’s leading rusher, which is an impressive feat since the University of Kansas Jayhawks had a running back by the name of Gale Sayers.

The Dallas Cowboys drafted Garrison in 1967, and as a rookie, he didn’t play much except for playing on special teams. After team meetings, he would go out and compete in local rodeos and get back before curfew. When Tom Landry, the legendary coach

of the Cowboys, found out about Garrison’s side hustle, he forbid it, saying it was too dangerous. Garrison complied with the rule during the season but started rodeoing again in the offseason.

Garrison was part of the Cowboys’ first two Super Bowl teams (V and VI). In the team’s last-second 16-13 loss to the then Baltimore Colts, Garrison was the game’s leading rusher with 65 yards on the ground and added another 19 through the air. The following season, he contributed 74 rushing yards and 11 receiving yards in the Cowboys 24-3 blowout of the Miami Dolphins. Garrison retired at the age of 30 due to a knee injury after nine seasons in the NFL.

Baseball

Texas Rangers Two-Step to World Series Title

The championship dance began with a sweep of the 98-win Tampa Bay Rays in the American League wild card series. The team then do-si-doed on to Baltimore where they pulled out the brooms and eliminated the American League’s number one seed, the Baltimore Orioles. The team then moseyed on down I-45 to take on the Houston Astros, where they celebrated winning their third pennant on their in-state rival’s home field. The Rangers completed their dance through the postseason with a dominating four-games-to-one series win over the National League representative, the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Rangers’ Manager Bruce Bochy won his fourth World Series title, cementing his legacy as one of the game’s best managers. Great players make great managers and Corey Seager, the Rangers’ All-Star shortstop, is definitely a great player. Seager won his second World Series’ Most Valuable Player award, joining Reggie Jackson as the only two position players to win the award multiple times.

The 63-year wait for a World Series title is finally over in the Metroplex. The Rangers victory leaves the following five Major League Baseball franchises without a title: Milwaukee Brewers, San Diego Padres, Seattle Mariners, Tampa Bay Rays and Colorado Rockies. Come on, what are you guys waiting for?

Dusty Baker Calls it Quits

After nearly 50 years in baseball, Dusty Baker, the Houston Astros’ manager, has earned some time away from the game to spend with his children and grandchildren. Baker is one of only seven men who have won a World Series title as both a player and a manager, and he is one of 12 managers to win more than 2,000 games. The Houston Astros hired Baker after A. J. Hinch was fired in the aftermath of the sign stealing scandal that tarnished the organization’s first title. Baker, who has led four different teams to the postseason, was hired as much for the respect he has garnered around the league during his career as he was for his baseball acumen. During his three-year tenure in Houston, Baker has compiled a 320-226 won/loss record.

“I haven’t made up my mind yet on what I’m going to do, but I’m going to go home to talk to my daughter, who thinks she’s my mother,” Baker said.●

HOOP DREAMS

G4 Residents
Compete in
Two-Day
Basketball Tournament
on the Wynne Unit

By William Hill - Staff Writer

Buoyed by the rhythmic beats emanating from speakers placed around the gymnasium, 12 four-man teams showed off their basketball skills in a two-day tournament. The first day was a round-robin format in which every team played every other team to determine the top eight squads. The second day was an all-day March Madness-like bracket format.

The tournament winning team played up to its name: Relentless. Jordan Jones expertly captained Gregory Williams, Ketrick Morris and Curtis Gambill to an undefeated record.

In the final, Relentless met its toughest challenge in the form of Golden State. Just like their National Basketball Association namesake, the runners-up featured their own version of the Splash Brothers: Team Captain Mileek Davis and Jaden



Former Resident Richard Smith
and Field Minister Michael Green



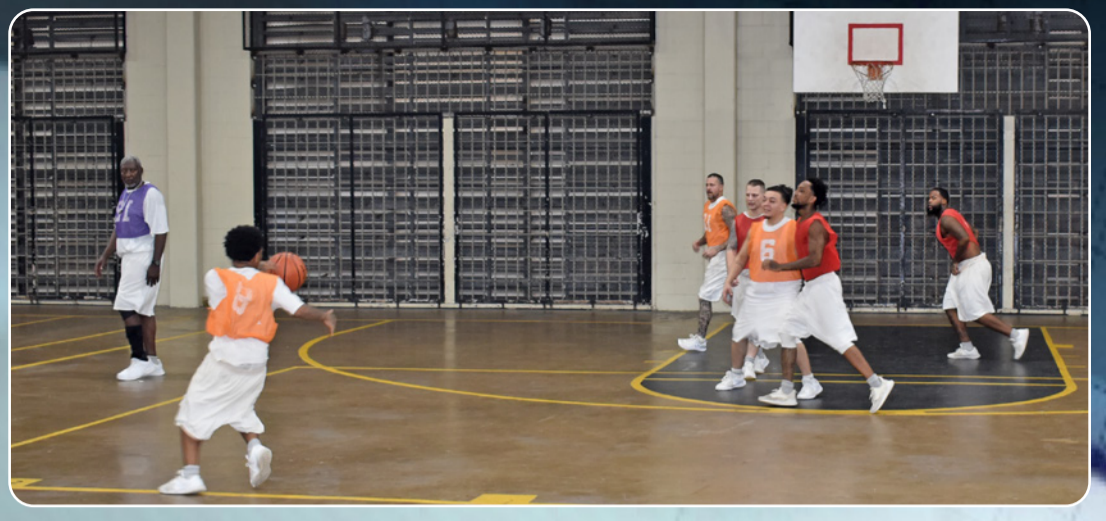
Referee
Adrian Eleby



“

God put it in my heart to
come here for these guys.

-Marcos Cabrera,
former TDCJ resident



Newton lit up the scoreboard with torrid outside shooting while William McKnight and Jordan Jennings provided an inside presence. Although the team finished in second place, their ball skills were second to none.

The third-place team, Locked Up, came within one victory of reaching the championship game. Team Captain Trevon Lee, Cody Wilson-Lambert, Sedrick Darnell and Deaundric Dorsey played hard and were a tough out.

The event was a joint venture between the Chaplaincy and Recreation departments and approved by the Wynne Unit administration, including Senior Warden R. Bowers; Assistant Warden C. Garcia and Assistant Warden T. Mitchell. Former Wynne Unit residents Reginald Hicks, Richard Smith, Kenneth Godfrey



Chaplain Amobi (center) and former Wynne resident volunteers



Wynne Unit G4 Tournament Facilitators



and Marcos Cabrera returned as volunteers bearing messages of hope.

“God put in it my heart to come here for these guys,” Cabrera said. “Most of my time [during incarceration] was in G4 and G5, and I wanted to give someone hope and encouragement [because] that’s where I made a decision to say, ‘Yes!’ to Jesus.”

The real winners were all who participated in the event, including the members of the G4 outreach team, which includes Richard Trevino, Alan Boling, Lorenzo Villarreal and Mario Bellard. In addition to their assigned job duties, these men voluntarily go to G4 and G5 cellblocks to teach classes and preach messages of hope or be willing listeners.



“

**God put it in my heart to
come here for these guys.**

*-Marcos Cabrera,
former TDCJ resident*

In addition to the opportunity to exercise and enjoy friendly competition, the event also boasted a live performance from the Wynne Unit's own rap duo, HOLY GANG Tredric Culclagher and Richard Donaldson, who energized the participants with up-tempo beats and tongue-twisting lyrics.

Author's note: As a personal observation, I was amazed by the level of sportsmanship and camaraderie exhibited by the participants. It was refreshing to see men competing hard but with respect for the opponent. It was also inspiring to see Field Ministers, Life Coaches and the G4 outreach team all working together to make the event an enjoyable experience for all. ●





DALLAS COWBOYS

Table of Dallas Cowboys 2023 season schedule including dates, opponents, times, and networks.

HOUSTON TEXANS

Table of Houston Texans 2023 season schedule including dates, opponents, times, and networks.

ARIZONA CARDINALS

Table of Arizona Cardinals 2023 season schedule including dates, opponents, times, and networks.

ATLANTA FALCONS

Table of Atlanta Falcons 2023 season schedule including dates, opponents, times, and networks.

BALTIMORE RAVENS

Table of Baltimore Ravens 2023 season schedule including dates, opponents, times, and networks.

BUFFALO BILLS

Table of Buffalo Bills 2023 season schedule including dates, opponents, times, and networks.

CAROLINA PANTHERS

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CHICAGO BEARS

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CINCINNATI BENGALS

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CLEVELAND BROWNS

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DENVER BRONCOS

Table of Denver Broncos 2023 season schedule including dates, opponents, times, and networks.

DETROIT LIONS

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GREEN BAY PACKERS

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INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

Table of Indianapolis Colts 2023 season schedule including dates, opponents, times, and networks.

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

Table of Jacksonville Jaguars 2023 season schedule including dates, opponents, times, and networks.

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

Table of Kansas City Chiefs 2023 season schedule including dates, opponents, times, and networks.

LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

Table of Las Vegas Raiders 2023 season schedule including dates, opponents, times, and networks.



Happy Holidays!
from
The Echo