

THE ECHO

TEXAS PRISON NEWS

JANUARY • 2024

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Up a Collaboration with
the Czech Republic



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Director Bryan Collier,
Exclusive Interview Part 2

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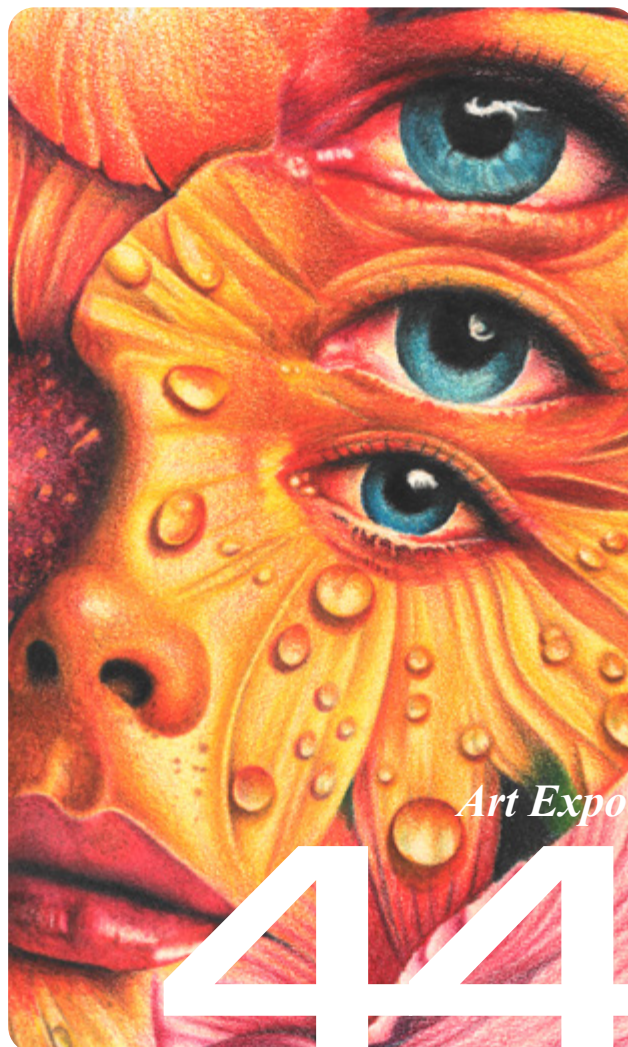
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THE ECHO

MANAGEMENT

Kristina J. Hartman, Ed.S.
Superintendent

Bambi Kiser
Managing Editor

STAFF

Todd R. Carman
William E. Hill

Fabian W. Flores

Elkanah E. Hendrix
Edgar A. Sazo

CONTRIBUTORS

Sergio D. Alvarez—Ramsey Unit
 Jesse Castillo—Huntsville Unit
 Laura Anne Cloy—Henley State Jail
 Ruben Constante Jr.—Released
 Ashley Dack—O'Daniel Unit
 Greg Freeman—Allred Unit
 Robert Fridell—Roach Unit
 Joseph L. Fritz—Memorial Unit
 Brandon Hayes—Wynne Unit
 Lisa Jackson—O' Daniel Unit

Tara Layer—Hobby Unit
 Daniel P. Meehan—Connally Unit
 James D. Noer—Hightower Unit
 Michelle Orduna—Hilltop Unit
 Roger R. Reister—Coffield Unit
 Andrew R. Reynolds—Wynne Unit
 Bruce Ruckman—Duncan Unit
 Tim G. Scoggin—Stiles Unit
 Vincent Smith—Wynne Unit
 Misty Weaver—O'Daniel Unit
 Michael Wiese—Luther Unit

UNIT REPORTERS

Allred Unit—Kenneth Gardner
 Beto Unit—Leon Hendricks
 Boyd Unit—Michael Deen
 Clemens Unit—Lawrence Burks Jr.
 Clements Unit—Paul Gillette
 Coffield Unit—Mark Brock
 Coffield Unit—Robert Morgan
 Coleman Unit—Cheryl Jackson
 Cole State Jail/Moore Unit—Kelsie Whitten Jr.
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Letters to the Editor

The ECHO
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To the editor,

I'm writing in response to the Inmate Support Program I saw advertised in *The ECHO*. Could you please print the names and addresses of TIFA and the program in question?

Roddric Howard
Terrell Unit

To the reader,

We haven't published anything about an Inmate Support Program, but you may be referring to the Peer Support Coach training offered through the Rehabilitation Programs Division (RPD). See the ad on page 9 for more information.



To the editor,

I want to first report the tablets are on the Coffield Unit. The unit has been impacted by this device, in more good ways than bad, and I am thankful for that. By this being one of the biggest units in Texas, the problems with overcrowding for the phone and TV or even tables in the dayroom and benches had been problematic. I've only been back in the system for a year this time, and immediately, I was overwhelmed by the dayroom crowds. Now that we have tablets (as I write), there are only 11 others in the dayroom with me. I want to thank Securus for the hard work and those in TDCJ. In my opinion, the law library app and podcast app or Pando app are the most resourceful features.

R.L.
Coffield Unit

To the reader,

*Tablets are now implemented on all units within the system. These devices will have a positive impact on the TDCJ population as Securus continues to add more content and connectivity. Thank you for writing and providing an update on the effect of tablets on the Coffield Unit. Look for *The ECHO*, too, in the FYI app! We are honored to serve our readers on the tablet.*



Dear Darby,

I've been gone [from the community] for a couple of decades, and I think I have almost got it. Incarceration is still a little bit of a cultural shock and surreal, but there are some things that I just don't get such as, where's the beef? I'm talking about beef soups in the commissary. I am a tad older now and spicy soups are hard to digest. Thankfully, there are no pork soups — there is a God! What happened to our beef soups, Darby?

**Kimberly Brown,
Murray Unit**

Dear Kim,

The times, they are a changin'! They just got a new line of soups in commissary, so give 'em a shot. Unfortunately, they still don't have the beef soups, but you can write to commissary and request that they carry them — who knows, they might go ahead and carry them! Ol' Darb misses them beef soups, too!

Dear Darby,

I am writing to complain about the issue of *The ECHO* that included the 2023 NFL Team Schedule. If you don't know, let me tell you: It is NOT CORRECT. Every week I see more errors. Small example, you have the Dallas Cowboys playing the San Francisco 49ers on Oct. 1, when they actually played the New England Patriots. The next week you have the Cowboys playing the Los Angeles Chargers on Oct. 8 when they actually played the 49ers. Oh, yeah, the networks are also wrong. I would tell you about all the mistakes I have found, but I do not want to take up the entire Darby column with this one letter. Don't you have someone who proofreads what yall plan to print? You could at least correct the schedule you have in the tablet version of *The ECHO*. Just saying.

**Baby Bird
Gib Lewis**

Dear Bird,

Proofreads? What's that? Oh, you mean reading over an article and correcting any typos such as misspelling the word writing, placing an extra space between the number nine and the letter "e" in 49ers and making two words out of the word "proofreads"—all of which you did in your letter. I could continue by pointing out grammatical errors in your letter, but I don't want to take up this entire response simply pointing out all of your blunders. I would think that when you are sending a letter to someone complaining about their mistakes you would want to make sure your own correspondence doesn't have any. Judging by your note, you don't agree. To answer your question, yes, we do have a proofreader, several in fact, and they are all good at it, but they are human, and therefore fallible. Hard to believe: we actually make mistakes! We admitted that there were errors after the first printing, and we ran a corrected copy the very next month. I'm not exactly sure what else you wanted us to do, but I'm open to suggestions. Thank you for writin' in and pointin' out our blunders. You do have eagle eyes! By the way, the apostrophe goes between the letters "y" and "a" in y'all. Just sayin'.



Dear Darby,

I am a long-time reader of *The ECHO*, and I have always enjoyed the articles that appear in it. However, an article in the September/October issue was the first one to motivate me to write to you. Kevin Long's article "The Human Compass" was right on the mark. I have not always been one of those model residents. I spent time in Restrictive Housing and went through the Gang Renouncement and Disassociation Process. Those of us who have seen the error of our former ways do bear a responsibility to pay it forward to the next generation. There are several ways that a person can be the "human compass" that Long spoke about, and I would like to give kudos to a group of men on the Wynne Unit who have been an example to me and others: the Lee College Huntsville Center (LCHC) tutors. As an older LCHC student who has been out of school longer than I attended it, I have been aided immensely by the efforts of several of this unit's peer tutors. These guys show up to every class, and they are always ready to assist any student that may need a little extra help.

**Thankful to Tutors,
Wynne Unit**

Dear Thankful,

*Although I am a curmudgeon through and through, it always warms the cockles of my heart when someone writes in for the first time. First, I commend you for going back to school. As an alumnus of LCHC myself, I too benefited from having peer tutors in class to assist me. I also know many of the tutors on the Wynne Unit, and I am not surprised to hear that they are able and willin' to help any student who asks for it. Now, when you graduate that will be your opportunity to pay it forward. Your story deserves to be heard. I read somewhere that your survival story can become someone else's road map to victory. Thanks for writing and sharing your story with *The ECHO* and our readers.*

Dear Darby,

I am writing in regards to the section on parole in the September/October 2023 issue. Currently, I am under review for a full pardon, and I believe that it is like the parole process. Will having many petitions and letters of support make a difference? I am asking because this is my first time in prison, and my friends and family are always asking me what can they do to help during every phone call and visit. I really enjoy reading *The ECHO*. Keep up the good work.

**P-Dog
Stringfellow Unit**

Dear P,

A full pardon? Pardon my skepticism, but those are few and far between. The process of getting a full pardon is very different than the parole process. It would take more space to explain than I've got to use for this column, so if you really want the 411 on pardons, go to your unit's law library. You can even look it up on your tablet! Good luck on your quest. Thanks for your letter!

Indigent Fan Program

The Indigent Fan Program will supply indigent TDCJ residents with a Registered Property fan for FREE from the commissary. The program runs from Jan. 1 to June 30 each year.

To qualify for a FREE fan from this program, you must meet ALL eligibility requirements listed below:

1. Have less than a \$5 balance in your Trust Fund account.
2. Be classified with an indigent status for more than 180 days.
3. Have never purchased or received a fan through a TDCJ Program.

You must submit an I-60 to:

**Commissary & Trust Fund /
Indigent Fan Program
P.O. Box 60
Huntsville, TX 77342**

Information provided within your I-60 must include the information below:

I would like to request a fan from the Indigent Fan Program.

Name: _____

TDCJ# _____

Unit: _____



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](https://www.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**



Become a TDCJ Peer Support Coach!



What is peer support?

Peer support includes a range of activities and interactions between people who share similar-lived experiences of substance use disorder. Peer support services promote recovery, the process of change where people improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.

What is a TDCJ Peer Support Coach?

A Peer Support Coach is a Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) resident who has completed formal peer support training and has received credentials as a peer support specialist. A Peer Support Coach provides recovery support services to other residents, acting as role model for peers, and inspiring success by utilizing first-hand knowledge to demonstrate resilience and self-empowerment.

What does a Peer Support Coach do?

A Peer Support Coach helps other residents

achieve recovery through mentorship and acts as a "resource broker" to encourage and assist other residents in:

- Identifying long-term and short-term goals.
- Evaluating choices and decisions.
- Recognizing the value of self-determination.
- Shifting focus from management of symptoms to acknowledgement of achievements and capabilities.
- Relinquishing destructive attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors learned in the criminal justice setting.

How can I become a Peer Support Coach?

Peer support specialist training is available to applicants who qualify and are selected to become a Peer Support Coach Trainee. Those approved will be transferred to a designated facility where they will undergo a series of classroom sessions, followed by practical experience work hours, in order to prepare for a final examination. Training takes approximately 6 months to finish. Trainees who successfully complete the program will receive credentials from the

Texas Certification Board and be relocated to another TDCJ facility to be assigned as a full-time Peer Support Coach.

How do I apply?

Those interested in applying to become a Peer Support Coach may request an application from the Chaplain or Warden.

- Eligibility criteria to receive training:
- Must have a high school diploma or GED.
- Must have eligible disciplinary history.
- Must not be STG affiliated.
- Must not be currently enrolled or pending enrollment to another program.
- Must not be currently in or nearing parole review.
- Must agree to be housed at an approved PSC Program facility following completion of training.
- Must be willing to share your story with others.

Mail your completed application to:

TDCJ RPD
P.O. Box 99
Huntsville, TX 77342-0099



Unsolved Homicides

Hugh McDaniel, Alton Bragg



Hugh McDaniel



Alton Bragg

On Feb. 2, 1998, Wichita Falls Police responded to a call concerning 304 Galveston Street, the location of a gun shop owned by Alton Bragg. Hugh McDaniel and Alton Bragg were both found deceased at the location. Evidence at the scene was consistent with a capital murder. The scene was processed and evidence was collected, but the case remains open.

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. ●

Mountain View Unit Becomes O'Daniel Unit in December 2023

From a Texas Department of Criminal Justice news release:

In recognition of former Texas Board of Criminal Justice (TBCJ) Chairman Patrick L. O'Daniel's history of outstanding service to Texas and the criminal justice system, the TBCJ recently renamed the Mountain View Unit in Gatesville to the Patrick L. O' Daniel Unit.

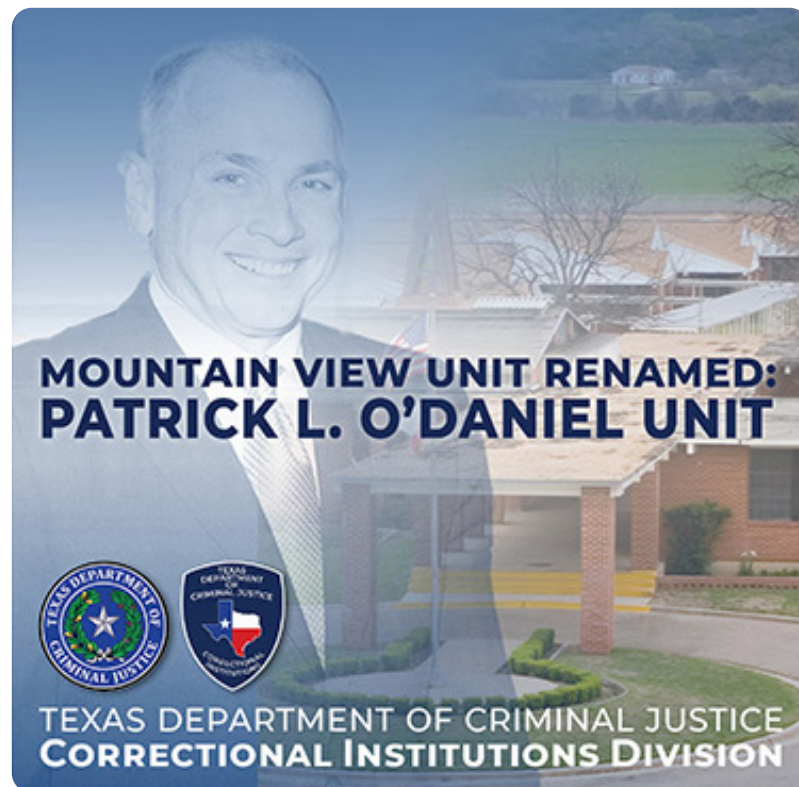
In a December address to the board, current Chairman Eric Nichols commented on the former chairman's tenure with the agency:

"One of the responsibilities of this board is to approve the naming of facilities that fall under the purview of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). It is a distinct honor because words have meaning, and names have power. This is particularly true for buildings. The name can represent its mission; it may reference a historical figure or an individual who accomplished great things, so choosing it is important. I have the distinct privilege of recognizing a great man who once led this board and who cares deeply about public service," Nichols said. "Patrick O'Daniel's legacy will long outlast his time on this board. Today, I recommend that we rename the facility where he spent so much time. The facility has numerous programs that provide individuals with the tools they need to turn their lives around successfully. Those programs, such as STRIVE, are a direct result of Mr. O'Daniel's pursuit to positively impact the men and women inside our prisons."

The Mountain View Unit, which opened its doors in 1962 as a school for boys and was acquired by the TDCJ in 1975, currently houses general custody, security detention, and death row female residents. With a maximum capacity of 644, the facility is also home to various educational and faith-based programs, including the Strength Through Restoration, Independence, Vision and Empowerment (STRIVE) program; the Braille facility; agricultural operations and a Windham School District campus.

O'Daniel, a distinguished graduate of The University of Texas at Austin and The University of Texas School of Law, served on the Texas Board of Criminal Justice from March 2017 to 2023. He was appointed chairman in January 2020. During his tenure, O'Daniel played a pivotal role in the agency's response to the global pandemic, leading to significant achievements such as historic salary increases for correctional officers, the establishment of the Office of the Independent Ombudsman and enhanced rehabilitation and faith-based programming.

O'Daniel's dedication and leadership also had a profound impact on Windham campuses, resulting in im-



proved access to prison libraries, salary adjustments for teachers, and the implementation of a technology plan to support classroom instruction and digital literacy.

"The TBCJ and TDCJ express their deep appreciation for Mr. O'Daniel's loyal service, integrity, and tenacity," Nichols said. "The renaming of the Mountain View Unit to the Patrick L. O'Daniel Unit serves as a fitting tribute to his remarkable contributions."●

Rebuilding Lives. Reducing Crime.

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Do you have a criminal record? Have you been incarcerated? Are you on parole or probation? Does the thought of looking for employment, housing and other needed services overwhelm you?

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214.296.9258

info@unlockingdoors.org • 12225 Greenville Ave, Ste. 850 | Dallas, TX 75243 • unlockingdoors.org

A Woman's Perspective

Instead of Stepping on Others, Try Lifting Them Up

Frances R. Ford - Carole Young Complex

W

Why is it that we still condemn one another? Whether in prison, in life or in society, we find ourselves constantly trying to feel better by stepping on others. For example, you have known your friend for years. You know her character, but that isn't enough for you to say, "No, that isn't her" or "I don't believe it" when you hear something negative about her. The worst part is that you then share it with someone else and they do the same thing.

Are we so codependent that we stop building our own opinions of one another, or are we afraid of standing out — afraid of thinking independently. Everyone is not out to get us, or are they? See how easy that was? I built trust and destroyed it all in one sentence. Don't be so easily influenced by gossip.

So, the next time someone comes to you with, "Hey, did you hear about...?", ask yourself: do I know this person being discussed? Does this sound like something they would do? Have I personally seen them exhibit this type of character? Give someone the benefit of the doubt. After all, none of us wants to be here. We should lift one another up and nurture each other instead of tearing each other down. ●



“

We should lift one another up and nurture each other instead of tearing each other down.

Change ... Are You Ready?

Robert Fridell

Contributing Writer, Roach Unit

“

**It's easy to
get stuck
in a rut and
call it 'doing
time,' but
change is
coming. Are
you ready?**

Change! Are you ready? Almost sounds like, “Tag you’re it,” but the question demands a thought. With all our new tech on the tablets and the positive messages and shows available, I sit here with my typewriter and feel somewhat archaic in attempting to type this article. So here is an attempt at this thought.

For years in prison, things seemed to be the same, day in and day out. And then one day, the new blue phones arrived. The event seems small now, but we were all very happy for the change. Now, we are holding personal tablets in our hands. Some residents who have not been here very long complain and talk about the tech being old, but for those like me, it is an awesome experience as the tablets have invaded my 20-plus years of doing time.

Yet there is still the original question: “Am I ready for change?” And since this decision about doing time has affected me and you differently, how much more effect will it have on us once we are back in society?

Integrity has been one of my biggest goals while being incarcerated. I desire to be a person that all can depend on and take at my word. Another goal is to have self-respect and know that I am truthful to all in all that I do — even in the small

things that only God sees. For I believe this is of utmost necessity when I leave this place.

Would you consider this a requirement? Integrity, that is, or have you even entertained this idea? Hopefully this article will provoke this thinking pattern in you and set you on a positive path in your rehabilitation process.

I am privileged to be able to speak and minister to the men who are custody level G-4 in Protestant services. I ask them if they are ready to come out of the pit and if they are tired of the merry-go-round. These are not uncommon questions for us all. We all have the capability to sink deeper in the pit as we stay on the same cycle, or we can do those things that build integrity in our lives and climb up the custody levels, education levels, spiritual levels, and physical fitness levels. All of this is preparing us for the day when this place becomes something of our past. It's easy to get stuck in a rut and call it “doing time,” but change is coming. Are you ready?

And just so you know: the compose section in the tablet's e-message app makes a great spell checker—since my typewriter does not have one. A great change. ●

The Options

Brandon Hayes

Contributing Writer, Wynne Unit

“

The biggest option that we have at our disposal is to be in a constant state of personal reconstruction, a constant mode of personal transformation.

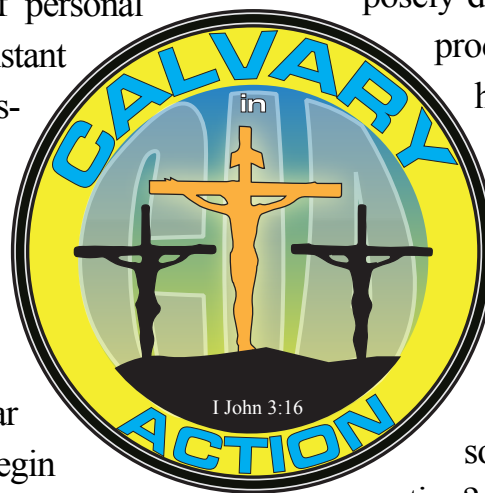
Living in incarceration is all about options. We have the option to squander many years essentially doing nothing, and all the time we hear someone will say, “I’m doing me.” But are they really? Capitalizing on the options that we do have at our disposal will set in motion a priority-driven mindset that will totally redefine us. We can sure enough be redefined by ‘opting’ to realign our priorities.

Priority 1.) Take ownership of what is hindering you. Own what is holding you back.

Priority 2.) Surround yourself with focused, determined people/influences.

Priority 3.) Use Priorities 1 and 2 to tackle and exploit your weaknesses.

This is a blueprint to rebuild ourselves anew for a smooth transition back into society. The biggest option that we have at our disposal is to be in a constant state of personal reconstruction, a constant mode of personal transformation. Properly defining what areas of our lives need work, i.e., health, bad habits or poor decision making give us a clear vantage point to begin working on the details. Having someone to hold you to a standard and objectively call you on your mess reminds you that you, in fact, are not alone in this process of personal reconstruction.



Ask yourself, “Am I worse off now than when I first arrived here? Do I have any priorities at all? What has five to 10 years of aimless, goalless living given me?” It’s the same old mess repackaged and rebranded, but the same old song and dance, nonetheless.

The amazing thing about personal reconstruction is that many of these concepts and ideas are new to us and discovering this new found set of tools has produced incredible results. A person goes from a state of not trying to hear it to trying to hear it. Going from “You can’t tell me nothing” to “Please tell me something” is the sweet spot in terms of pivotal personal reconstruction. It truly is a wonderful thing when someone’s light comes on. I have personally witnessed a friend of mine go from not trying to hear it, to climbing his way all the way up from G-5 and G-4 to the dorms. Today he is one of the unit artists, purposely driven to become a productive member of his community.

Can you humble yourself enough to allow a paradigm shift to occur in your journey of personal reconstruction? Can you allow yourself time to get clean, heal and begin the process of rebuilding your life? This is what is going to temper and fortify you, making you a better person in the process. ●

Never Again

Ruben Constante Jr.

ECHO Contributor, Released

“
For some of us, we are so dead set on getting things done that we interpret delays and rejections as people not understanding us.”

In September of 2023, I completed one year of working at Management & Training Corporation (MTC) at the Kyle Correctional Center. I began as a clerk, then quickly moved up to a treatment specialist — and even quicker thereafter became a certified criminal justice specialist, also known as a substance abuse counselor or SAC-I. What’s interesting is that when I was doing time at Torres (2001 to 2016), I never envisioned working at a private prison. It had not been my dream to be a drug counselor at a prison. I just wanted to teach the Blueprints curriculum I had written in 2013 — nothing more, nothing less.

My reason for sharing this with you is because of something I recently taught my clients here at my unit. As a SAC-I here at the Kyle Unit, I have the immense privilege of not only teaching the drug treatment curriculum and counseling for clients, but I also get to impart to them personal stories of setbacks and success.

What I had shared with my dorm a few days ago was that sometimes we don’t have a real game plan for our reentry. Sometimes we don’t know exactly what we want to do or where to even begin. If this is you, then you know what I’m talking

about. Anxiety may set in, and fear may cripple you. You may even think that because you aren’t making a plan, you are planning to fail.

But I don’t agree with that.

Experience has taught me that sometimes I don’t have to craft a well-defined plan for me to enjoy the successes of life. In fact, it was because I had such a rock-solid plan that I had failed so many times out here. If that sounds like heresy and outright counterproductive thinking, then I have succeeded in capturing your attention — so saddle up!

For some of us, we are so dead set on getting things done that we interpret delays and rejections as people not understanding us — or as people even “hating” on us. We are so determined to get it done that we easily transform our tenacity into trickery and may resort to crafty ways of getting our way. Yet, the more we fight for our vision to be fulfilled, the more we ruin it. Our character suffers loss, and then people begin to see more how crafty I am than how noble my cause may be.

Falling prey to this, I had to rethink a few things, and fighting for my vision subsided because I realized it was being eclipsed by my ego. Consequently, when I relinquished the need to execute my plans so impulsively, success slow-

ly entered my life. I admitted that the desperate need to prove how much I had changed was consuming my every thought. My drive was misguided and my self-worth was overly inflated.

And so, my “plans” were always failing.

The problems with this are many, but the most dangerous consequence is a relapse into criminal thinking and a return to substance use. This is why I now believe that you don’t have to have an airtight plan for success. You must allow some wiggle room. You must bend with life and roll with the punches. As I shared with a client of mine, work more on adhering to principles than to executing a

plan. When plans fail, your principles will uphold you.

“If you don’t have a well-written plan for your release, then at the very least, define what you don’t want,” I had told my clients. “Everyone in here doesn’t want to come back to prison, right?” All heads nodded in agreement. “Ok, then, your plan should begin with what you won’t do when you get out. The more you define what you won’t do, the more you discover what you must do. And that’s when success begins.”

Dear reader, please take heed. You don’t have to have it all figured out. You just have to purpose within yourself and decide what actions you will never take again. ●

“
The more you
define what
you won’t do,
the more you
discover what
you must do.
And that’s
when success
begins.”

What is Hope?

Daniel Paul Meehan
Contributing Writer

As the world continues to grapple with remedies to urgent problems, it’s easy to feel despair. What can be done to tackle humanity’s seemingly endless crises? And even if we know what to do, finding the common ground across our divides — that which is essential for cooperation — can seem daunting.

Though being hopeful seems an increasingly impossible stance, today we see powerful scientific and spiritual reasons to reach for hope. Hope is as essential to humans as oxygen. It is a crucial survival trait that has sustained our species in the face of danger since the Stone Age.

But what is hope? Can it be measured? Can we develop it? Hope is not a passive feeling. It’s a positive force that motivates action. You won’t be active unless you hope your action will make a difference. You need hope to get you going, but then by acting, it helps you generate more hope. It’s a continuous loop. In a time when the future is shadowed by illness, conflict, world changes and even long prison sentences, hope gives us the strength to move forward. ●

Spotlight on Peer Services:

Thomas Miller-El

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“The people on Death Row do all they can to live,” commented Thomas Miller-El, a Wynne Unit Life Coach. Miller-El, a former resident of Texas’ Death Row before his sentence was commuted to life, has also seen first-hand the destruction that gang affiliation and drug use poses to individuals in prison. When TDCJ’s Rehabilitation Programs Division (RPD) started the Life Coach program at the Wynne Unit, Miller-El was one of the first residents to express a desire to participate. As a Wynne Unit Life Coach, Miller-El emphasizes to residents the importance of making positive choices to become the best version of themselves. Miller-El has taught various classes both in general population as well as on the G4 and G5 blocks, inspiring and motivating the men of the Wynne Unit through his actions and words.

“When Miller-El and I were chosen to be part of the Life Coach Program, I didn’t know him at all,” said Gilbert Davila, a Wynne Unit life coach. “However, over the past two and a half years of living and working with him, I can tell you that he has a genuine heart to help make prison a better place.”

In addition to his work with the men on Wynne Unit, Miller-El was part of a group of life coaches and field ministers from various units selected to travel to the Hughes and Beto units to participate in Spiritual Awareness meetings. Miller-El addressed the resident population on those units about the necessity to make better decisions regarding drug use and suicidal thoughts.

Continuing to put his own desires and comfort to the side for the betterment of the entire resident population, Miller-El transferred to the Polunsky Unit to lead a new program for G4 residents.

To recognize Miller-El’s work on behalf of the incarcerated population, TDCJ’s RPD named Miller-El as the Life Coach of the Month last November.

“I went from Death Row to a Life Coach to show men how to live,” Miller-El said. RPD administrators say he continues to be a beacon of positivity in a potentially negative environment. ●

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**I went from
Death Row
to a Life
Coach to
show men
how to live.**

*Thomas Miller-El,
Wynne Unit Life Coach*



Evanescence

Kenneth Baker - Clements Unit

Isolation. Desolation. Abandonment. Ostracism. Left to die on the vine. These are just some of the feelings prison evokes. It's a dark and depressing place, with plenty of reasons to retreat to the solitude of our cells and to walk around like zombies with heads hung low in silent resignation. But it doesn't have to be like this, and sometimes beauty pierces the shadowy veil. You just need to know where to look for it.

I spent two years at a unit located in the Permian Basin, an area of Texas that millions of years ago sat at the bottom of a shallow ocean. The water that once was is now a sea of sand — a desert punctuated by tumble weeds, the occasional cactus and a handful of grand mesas. Our recreation yard was located at the end of the unit and provided us with a 180-degree view of this barren spectacle. One day, I was standing by the volleyball court, assembling my team and awaiting our turn to play the winner of the current game. Behind me, the sun was just starting to breach the horizon on its inevitable plunge into darkness. To my front, the unrelenting West Texas wind was filling my nose with the smell of sage brush and rain, as it pushed a thunderstorm across the near distant mesas on a beeline straight for us. My vision was saturated with dark ferocious clouds and lightning dancing like Russian ballerinas across their desert stage.

As the storm approached and the luminous dance intensified, rain began to fall — lightly, like angel kisses upon our cheeks — while desert lions roared with thunderous applause. And just when I thought my senses had reached saturation, a rainbow

appeared to the Northeast. Full and vibrant and brilliant, its ends framed the pathway straight back to my home — to family, friends and all things good and right in the world. As if to say, “Here we are, waiting patiently for your return.”

In the movie “The Shawshank Redemption,” a prisoner named Andy is called to the Warden’s office to receive a shipment of donated books for the prison library he started. He discovers a record of an Italian opera. In a moment of mischief, he locks himself in the office and plays it over the PA system for all to enjoy. Everything came to a stop. Work, rec, chow — it all fell silent as the residents enjoyed a brief moment of freedom. That moment of rain was our Shawshank moment. The volleyball and basketball games, the guys working out and the yard-walkers, all of them froze in their tracks, and stood in silent worship of the glory and grandeur of God’s work. And for a brief moment, we, too, were free.

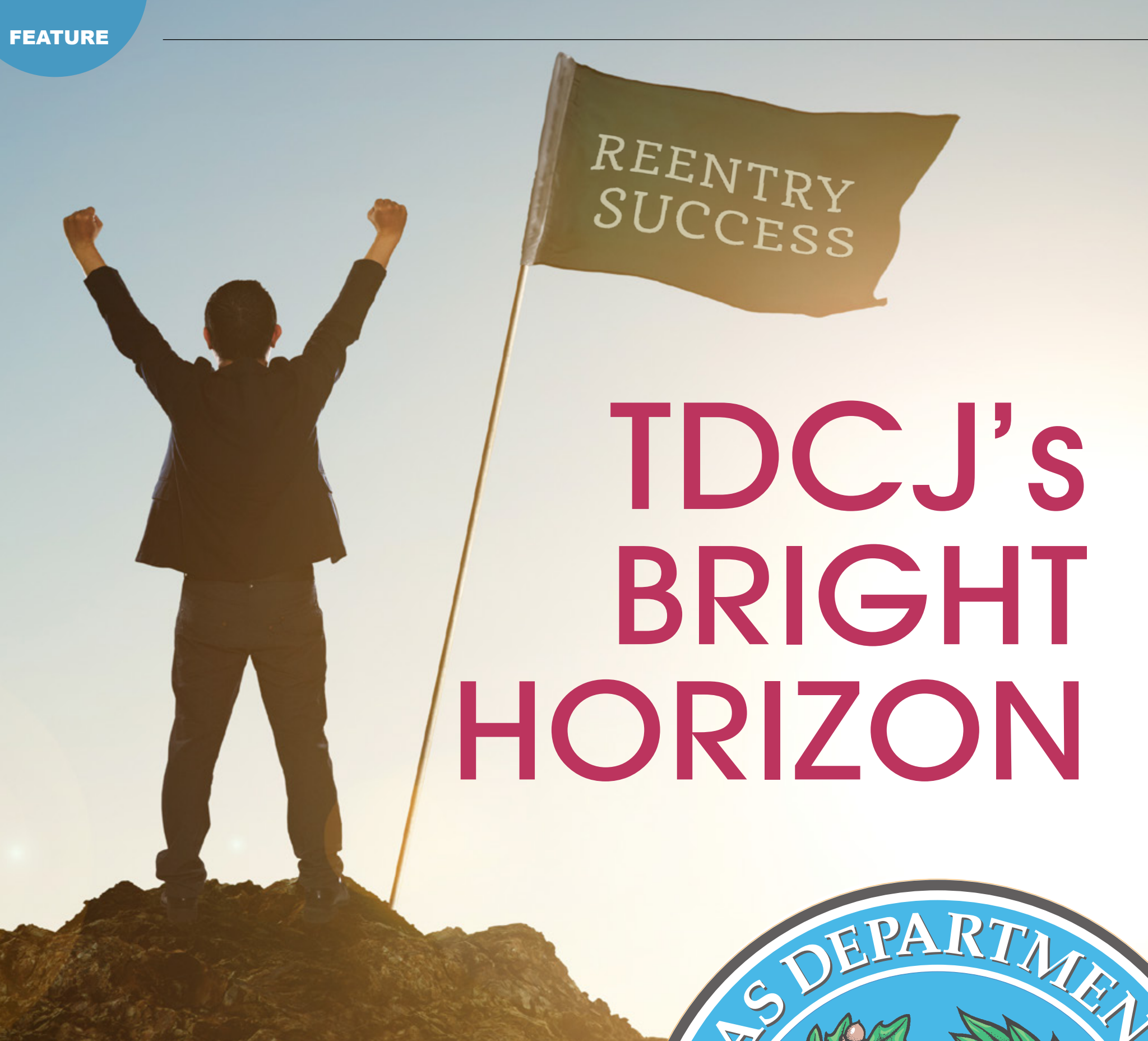
“Hey, man, serve the ball! We only have 20 minutes left.”

And just like that, our succinct yet splendid moment passed. The games and the walkers resumed, our heavenly vision vanished as quickly as it appeared, and life returned to its wonted pace.

I’ve had dreams about the rainbow. It is forever etched upon my soul. Along with these words:

“Tarry not upon the dirt and mud of your past. For in it lay the seeds of regret, planted by a life of bad choices, and watered with the tears of self-deprecation. Lift your gaze to the heavens, as there is where your hope and future dwells.” ●

I spent
two years
at a unit
located in
the Permian
Basin, an
area of
Texas that
millions of
years ago
sat at the
bottom of
a shallow
ocean.



TDCJ's BRIGHT HORIZON

TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier Visits
The ECHO, Shares New
Department Initiatives, Part 2

ECHO Staff Report



Bryan Collier, Part 2

“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.”

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.

*TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier*

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

“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 systemwide 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.

The first part of this Q & A interview with Mr. Collier began in the November issue. This is the conclusion of the interview.

Challenges, Goals, Staffing

ECHO: What's the most challenging part of your position?

Collier: The size of the system is significant. So staffing, of course; y'all know that. We struggle with staffing challenges. That's a huge challenge. We struggle with operational challenges. We just went through the statewide lockdown because we have significant contraband challenges. [We're trying to] move ahead while dealing

with the day-to-day. Everything has to be working at the same time, and that's tough because lots of things come up and get in the way, and they sidetrack you. I think 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.

ECHO: Speaking of goals — and the doors in the rumor mill are pretty wide open on this one — can you share with us TDCJ's 2030 Plan?

Collier: Sure. So, as we began to come out of COVID, our workforce numbers began to really go down in TDCJ. We've been short staffed the whole time I've worked here, which is 38 years, but the level it is at is very new. We've never been at the levels we're at now. So, for me, coming out of COVID and really studying what's going on—that's what's really happening. [Looking at the] big picture, not just the agency, you begin to look at the workforce and you realize that the national workforce has changed dramatically because of COVID. More people retired who were eligible that probably would have waited a few more years to retire, and there are fewer young people coming into the workforce. How are we going to shift as an agency to be where we need to be? I think that's part of

the birth of 2030. I want TDCJ to be rated a number one employer — a place where people want to come to work and want to invest their time. I also want something for the other side [residents of TDCJ]—95% of everybody who gets out, I want



them to have a job before they get out — not after they get out, not six months later—before they get out. I think it’s possible, especially if you look at the economy and the changes of what’s going on. Looking at how those two tie together [both TDCJ staffing and jobs for released residents] — they both meet our mission. So, if people are [going] to be successful upon release, they’re going to be more successful if they already have a job when they walk out the door. I worked in parole for a number of years. That time when you don’t have that job, especially if you’re having to figure out “Where are my documents?”, all those types of things could be a pinpoint of failure for a lot of folks. Having that job [when returning to the community] — it may not be the perfect job, but working, getting going, and moving in the right direction is really important. So I think it [helps] public safety [for residents to be successful upon release]. Think about it. It’s public. Everybody wants that for everyone here. I gave the 16 TDCJ division directors several things I want to see. I’d like to see our recidivism rate drop more. It’s 20% now. So, 20% is good, but what if we could have a 15% recidivism rate? That means we’ve got to have more effective programming. We’ve got to have a more effective system and model in place for TDCJ to function. So, when we hand off the keys in 2030, whoever’s here then gets a system that they can sustain. If we don’t do anything, I think by 2030, we won’t be able to staff our prisons. We’ll have to look for outside help to come staff our prisons, and we won’t be able to do much of anything. If all you do is function as “All I can do is the day to day; I can feed, turn out and that’s it,” then nobody wins that game. That’s a system that’s not going anywhere. So how do we get from here to there? I asked our division directors to come up with their vision of 2030

— it didn’t have to match mine. I said, “Put your glasses on and show me what you see for 2030.” And that’s where it really blooms. I see lots of different ideas and concepts. For instance, when you [a resident] get a job, when you go up for a job in prison, every job ought to have an interview. Doesn’t matter if it’s a janitor or whatever job it is. It ought to be a regular interview where you’ve got a resume and you’re sitting down and talking to someone. The reason for that is you’re practicing that skill while you’re here, and whenever you [release], it’s not new. It’s not something you’ve never done. It’s not, you know, I’m looking at my shoes. Instead, I’m looking at you in the eye, and I’m talking to you. That skillset we can help develop as we go. I think that’s really important to do everywhere in order to build that skillset.

ECHO: You answered perfectly the question of how it will affect us and staff. How do you see this 2030 Plan affecting the lives of our loved ones?

Collier: Well, they’ve got the same vision I do, and that you do. They want you to get out and be successful, right? So, I think if we can help make people more successful, give you more opportunities, they’re going to be happy as well. You’re productive as you get out, as you grow in the system. They’re proud. They see you accomplishing more and more. Everyone knows that’s the right direction and where you should be headed. I think for them, you get value out of why you’re here. That’s what we hope we can provide. Not everybody’s going to take advantage of that. But for those that want to do something different and say, “I want that opportunity,” I guarantee your family is going to support that.

ECHO: Absolutely. So why this initiative? And why now? Why is it so important?



I also want something for the other side (residents of TDCJ) — 95% of everybody who gets out, I want them to have a job before they get out — not after they get out, not six months later — before they get out.

*TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier*



People today want to know ‘Why I’m doing what I’m doing’ — not just what. Today, you need to explain the why, and people need to understand the why, and there’s nothing wrong with that, but we have to shift who we are to... change the environment inside.

*TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier*

Collier: I think maybe even if COVID hadn’t hit [in 2020], we might have been working on some of the same things. I don’t know if it would have been [a plan for] 2030, but I think coming into this job I came into in 2016, there were lots of things ramping up. Then COVID hit, and it kind of knocked us into a stall pattern for a couple of years. So, coming out of COVID, what made it even more real to me, was understanding the workforce data. And truly, if an officer doesn’t want to work here, there’s no reason to work here. You can make good money doing almost anything these days. So, how do you make this a place where people want to work? That means you’re probably going to have to change the role of an officer and have them more engaged in the product of trying to help folks make those positive pathways, and how do you do that? Because people today want to know “Why I’m doing what I’m doing” — not just *what*. Today, you need to explain the *why*, and people need to understand the why, and there’s nothing wrong with that, but we have to shift who we are to move in that direction and change the environment inside.

ITP: Focus on You

ECHO: Yes, sir. Okay, me personally, I’ve been gone a little over a decade, probably about 15 years. And going from unit to unit in TDCJ sometimes, I see that the units have their own culture. So, I’ve been seeing a lot of what you guys have been doing now, like with the Individualized Treatment Plan (ITP). It creates a lot of the same [programming] around the whole system. Is this something that you and your leadership core are trying to bring about — cohesion across the state? If there’s a message that you have about that to residents or their loved ones or even staff, could you speak about that?

Collier: Sure. So, I think with the ITP, Mr. [Chris] Carter and his team [in TDCJ’s Rehabilitation Programs Division] are really trying to make sure everyone sees and knows what an ITP is — an Individualized Treatment Plan. It was developed in the early 90s. That’s part of the history of the agency, before many, many things changed, and many of those ITP programs potentially were available over the time. [It was] then the Parole Board began to do a lot of those placements, and that kind of shifted it. It’s really, to some degree, shifting back. We don’t have enough program space, but hopefully we will at some point. I would love to see you take the initiative with your ITP. You, not me, take the initiative. You say, “I want to do this, this and this,” because the ITP is your assessment plan. It’s your needs that are realized when you come in. These are things you could do. It doesn’t mean that’s all, but it means you can do these specific things to improve. And if you take those actions, I promise you, you’re a better candidate for someone who’s going to be successful when you get out, versus the candidate that I says, “You have to go get your GED. You have to go sit in that class.” I think you are more satisfied as the individual. And frankly, I think it has more ability to help you make those positive changes. So, I think the ITP is your core. It’s the plan where you come in and go through the assessment process. I wouldn’t focus on parole [as a reason to take programs]. I say, “Focus on you. The rest will take care of itself, if you take care of those things you know you need to do.” You don’t need a parole plan. You don’t need some fancy anything else out there. You will take care of that for you. It may not always happen when we want it to happen, but nonetheless, doing it for the wrong

reason isn't necessarily going to help the individual. I've seen lots of people check the list and say, "I have done all these things," but they couldn't tell you anything about any of it. But they did it, thinking, I'm building a good-looking resume, right? It's like people who go out and get as much education as they can, but they can't spell, you know, or do [things], but they're thinking, "That's going to make me get hired!" No, not necessarily. That may help, but that alone is not going to drive that. That's too long of an answer, sorry.

Read *The ECHO*?

ECHO: No, that was perfect. You answered everything. So, we're curious. Do you read *The ECHO*?

Collier: I do.

ECHO: So, what are your favorite parts?

Collier: So I read Dear Darby, although he's gotten soft over the years.

All: (Laughter).

Collier: Because I used to read it in the old days.

ECHO: Oh yeah, when it was really salty.

Collier: And I read some of, lots of, the other articles as well, but I read the recipes, too. I'm always still impressed with the recipes, and what people can make out of some of the items they can pick up!

ECHO: People get really creative.

Collier: They definitely do.

ECHO: You ever try any of some of the simple ones?

Collier: Well, I don't have — though I guess I could easily get — a commissary account, but I don't have an account to go get all the stuff that you get. And how you can put squeeze cheese, this and this and this—and get gumbo out of it! I haven't figured it out.

ECHO Managing Editor: I'll

make you a care package.

Collier: There you go. But that's pretty cool. Yeah, I'm always impressed with what people can do.

ECHO: So we have a far-flung fantasy of us taking those recipes and presenting a cooking segment on the tablet.

Collier: That'd be cool. Yeah, video a cooking show.

ECHO: Yeah, that'd be really cool. Show them how to do it.

Collier: Yeah, that'd be kind of cool. I don't know why you couldn't do that. Yeah—because you'll have the capability to do that. Can you add video on your tablet?

ECHO: Yeah, yeah, that might be a possibility. So since you are an *ECHO* reader, what do you see as the role of the *ECHO* for its resident readership?

Collier: I think, to some degree, some of the light reading is probably very helpful for folks. The Darby, some of the other [articles], I think they're helpful, because prison shouldn't be, you know, the end of the line. It's where you are right now, but you can have a life inside. I think the job postings sometimes are helpful, but I think the recipes and the stories of people doing well, I mean, those are, those are awesome. I used to read Dent's column [Jim Dent was a sports writer, now released, who wrote a column for *The ECHO*]. He always had something good to say about the Cowboys. I think more of [that kind of content] you can put in there, gets people to want to read it, and maybe the tablet's the way to get you there. You know, guys like me still want to fold out the [newsprint] paper and look at it, but we still do the online, too.

ECHO: And you know, one of the things we had talked about as far as that is, you know, now that we have tablets, we could reach people we can't reach with just a print-



I wouldn't focus on parole (as a reason to take programs). I say, 'Focus on you. The rest will take care of itself, if you take care of those things you know you need to do.'

*TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier*



We will have a new webpage on our website that actually shows all the current and the future projects... It shows you what units are (air conditioned or slated to be air conditioned).

*TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier*

ed page, like people dealing with visual impairments. We could conceivably be reading aloud the articles and the Darbys and all that, and have an audio version for someone who can't see.

Collier: Yeah, that's a good idea.

ECHO: So, as an *ECHO* reader, do you have any suggestions on how to improve upon *The ECHO*, or things we can offer our readers?

Collier: I think, in a way, you're throwing out some thoughts, and maybe that is how you take *The ECHO* to the next level. You have pieces of video where you intertwine interviews, or you intertwine a recipe every so often. Or you intertwine a little bit of recorded video footage in it. If you record, you know, a picture of a school graduation, but maybe the words of the graduate. I was at STRIVE [graduation ceremony] last week, you know, and hearing the person that graduated—she did a great speech! Talking a little bit about maybe some of that would be a cool way to take it to another level — where it's still media, but it's more like a news show. You've got radio ["The Tank" program] at Polunsky Unit, but there'll be radios in every region. There'll be a little bit more information coming out, and they'll put that on the tablet. So, the tablet really gives us a lot of cool options to kind of play with.

Air Conditioning

ECHO: So, wrapping things up, is there anything we didn't talk about today, that you would like to share with the resident population?

Collier: I think one thing people probably will ask about or want to know about is air conditioning - a lot of talk in the legislative session about air conditioning. They did give us \$85 million for new air conditioning projects. We will have a new webpage on our website that actually shows all the current and the future projects.

It may even be up; I'm not sure, but I've seen the draft already. It shows you what units are [air conditioned or slated to be air conditioned], because right now, if you go back to 2017, we've added about 10,000 beds in air conditioning. So, we just got money to do another 11,000. So, there will be more beds. The system[as a whole is] not getting air conditioned anytime in the immediate future that I know of. That's a very expensive item if they do it, but they certainly may do it. There's a lot of interest in that. There will be more beds coming.

ECHO: Yeah. And, you know, air conditioning is good for us — I'm not going to lie about that. But also for some of the employees, it's a big deal for staff because it's hot.

Collier: Bottom line is this summer was brutal. It's the worst summer I remember. Worst one I've had in Texas that I can ever remember. So I think it's tough on everybody.

Efforts to Reach Employers

ECHO: If I may, before we close out, I'd like to redirect to the 2030 Plan that you were talking about. You said you want 95% of residents to already be employed before they're released, so that's the end goal, right? Today, in 2023, does the agency already have employers lined up for residents getting jobs before they get out?

Collier: Yes. I would say the number's small because we don't track; we haven't tracked it. And for us, we have to figure out how to move the interview process in. About 10% of residents right now go out with a job. That number could be 30% with some shifts as we continue to figure out how to pull those employees in. I've never seen the employment market we're in right now.

ECHO: Do you know how our readers could find out how to try to get involved with that?

Collier: TDCJ Reentry and Integration Division (RID), because that's

the division that typically helps with that. Like the STRIVE program for women — every one of those ladies has a job by the time they get out. Some of them have multiple offers. So they go through it — it’s a reentry program. At Travis State Jail, there’ll be a new reentry dorm if I’m not mistaken, but there’s several new reentry dorms being proposed around the system. Those will help pull employers in. If you’re in a vocational program, you’ve heard about the vocational job fairs. So you’ve got employers coming in right then, and they want to hire those guys tomorrow. So, there are more employers out there wanting to hire former residents than I’ve ever seen. I took Scott McClellan [to visit a unit]. You know, the guy from HEB you see on TV?

ECHO: Oh, yeah!

Collier: He went with us to the “Walls” [Huntsville Unit]. After we left the unit, he’s like, “I’m going to get HEB to change their policy.” What helps is when we can bring employers on site, and residents can talk to them and see they’re not somebody they’re scared of. They are not somebody who can’t communicate or somebody who won’t look them in the eye and have a conversation. They see that there are a lot of people. They would, you know, absolutely would like to hire some of these people. So right now, if you’re a truck driver in TDCJ, I guarantee you can get a job when you get out — and not a throw-down job. A good job. Big money.

ECHO: Well, anytime you find an employer that like HEB, let us know, because we will reach out to them and try to interview them and let the population know, “Hey, these are people that will help.”

Collier: That might be something to think about, because there are employers. Ms. [April] Zamora, RID director, could probably connect you to some [potential employers] that wouldn’t mind talking to *The*

ECHO. These employers are open to hiring more and more people that are coming out of the system. [Employers such as] trucking companies and a car dealership down in the Valley that’s got 40 or 50 people that have been in the system they’ve employed. There are lots of vendors and companies last year in Texas. There’s a state conference just for employers who hire people coming out [of incarceration]. So, second chance hiring is where that is. I think there is lots of opportunity. I’ve never seen as much opportunity. As I told a group of people not too long ago, our challenge of hiring TDCJ staff is the worst it’s ever been. So, I said I could be really depressed about that. I think, man, it’s just the toughest time I’ve ever seen as an employer! Or I could be really optimistic and say this is the best time we’ve ever had for getting people working when they’re getting out, which to me is our mission: public safety. And that really helps build back in the system because you all know we don’t get commission on return sales — on people coming back. We don’t need anybody [coming back to prison].

ECHO: So is that what you’re talking about when you said I’ve never seen a job market like it?

Collier: Yes. Never, ever. And I think it’ll only get better. There are more employers open to the concept, and when they try it, we work with them hand-in-hand to try to make sure we do it right, because that part is a two-way street. If the wrong guy goes, wrong thing happens, they’re burned—and they won’t come back. You get the right person working for the right [employer], and they see that these people are trying to work hard — they really can be the best employees. And I’ve got employers that tell me, “Those are my best guys.”

ECHO: For example, if I’m a resi-



If you’re in a vocational program, you’ve heard about the vocational job fairs... You’ve got employers coming in... and they want to hire those guys tomorrow. So, there are more employers out there wanting to hire former residents.

*TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier*



There are lots of ... companies that want to hire people and make that a career. From that end, there's never a better time, never, ever a better opportunity to get a job when getting out.

*TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier*

dent getting out, let's say I'm coming up for parole in the next year. I've got a trade. I've taken some Windham [classes], or maybe some Lee College [classes] or you know, some things offered in TDCJ. I just write Reentry and tell them these are the [accomplishments] that I have, these are the skills that I have?

Collier: Yes — they have a Website for Work. If I'm [a resident] and have a welding vocational, then my name's already on there, depending on where I'm going. So let's say I'm going back to Bexar County — I'm going to be on [the website]. If a welding company is looking for welders out of Bexar County, they can pull up and go, "Hey I want to talk to [this resident]. Where is he? He's at the Wynne Unit." Let's try to connect the dots. But you can try to find out, and I would write to [RID director] Ms. Zamora specifically and ask her for help. [Ask her if there] are some employers [you can] write to and say, "I'm in prison, this is where I am, but I'm coming out next year and I've got [these credentials] and I understand you're a second-chance hire. Would you consider giving me any information about your company or is there any way I could talk to someone? I'd be open for an interview, even though I'm in prison." We certainly would facilitate that.

ECHO: Wow, that's amazing.

Collier: I tell Parole people: if you got somebody out on parole and they don't have a job in 30 days, something's wrong. I'll tell y'all how I look at it: I'm like, you ratchet up on that guy. Cause I'm thinking something isn't right. You know, I guarantee you, you'd have job offers in less than 30 days. Probably less than a week. You're going to have job offers. Again, it's not always the perfect job. That's not exactly what I'm able to do. It's a job and it brings in income. It is. Since we are talking about it, the Boomers

[Baby Boomer Generation] are retiring and they're not coming back in the workforce. I mean, Buc-ees is paying \$20 an hour.

ECHO: Amazing.

Collier: So there are lots of places like that where you can start — companies that want to hire people and make that a career. So from that end, there's never a better time, never, ever a better opportunity to get a job when getting out. Like I said, if you don't have a job in 30 days when you get out, something's wrong!

Culture Changers

ECHO: This is really encouraging. Thank you very much for coming, sir. So, as I'm sitting back and listening, what you were saying to me is, "The theme is culture change."

Collier: Mm-hmm, right.

ECHO: Yes, trying to change the culture inside the prison. I came into the system in '96, and I was one of those knuckleheads: an I'm-going-to-do-my-time-my-way kind of guy. Didn't matter what y'all said! And that doesn't work, right? I spent 14 years in Seg, got out, came out into general population and earned two college degrees. The thing about college is you have to be within 10 years [of parole eligibility] to get in. I understand that you want the people [in college] about to be released to get that education. At the same time, the biggest culture influencers on a unit are the people serving the big time.

Collier: Very true.

ECHO: I think that when I came in, if I had the chance to go to college, maybe I wouldn't have done all that other stuff, you know? And that's one of the things I learned in college was critical thinking, better behavior and all that. So is there a way to maybe allow people to come into the college [who are not within 10 years of parole eligibility]?

Collier: Well, Pell Grants are coming. Pell Grants open a big door, because before that, [residents] went through college and used personal money, used the reimbursement program where they repay when released. TDCJ has only so much money, so we try to [focus on] those guys that are getting out within 10 years. The Pell Grant changes all that. Colleges are knocking on our door saying, “I want to sign up.” So one, I think over the next year, you’ll see a substantial improvement in college offerings as well as potentially unblocking those rules [such as having to be within 10 years of parole eligibility] because you will need them. You needed these rules before because you had a finite amount of money and you’re trying to spread it as best you can among a big population. But we don’t have to worry about that now. Because of the new money, I have people looking at [computer program] coding and some of those other things. If I was in your shoes, I’d rather take the Pell Grant money because I won’t have to pay it back. So I think Pell Grant will open that door. I think college will be more available.

Collier: The other piece I was going to tell you is that the Wynne Unit does the Life Coach class. Part of the goal there is to really figure out how could we have more people learning cognitive? Cognitive is all about just trying to help you remember how to make good decisions and teaching people how to make good decisions. We all should have taken Cognitive when we were in junior high, but we didn’t. So, their goal is this: how can we get Cognitive to everybody when you get to the system? It doesn’t mean everybody will take it and use it and apply it, but the science behind Cognitive proves that it consistently lowers recidivism by just helping people understand, “Maybe the way I’ve always been thinking is getting

me in the same old place and maybe looking at things a little differently is a better way to go.” It’s like they continue to think the way they thought when they were 15 years old. Sometimes we have people that don’t ever think past that stage, and they’re 30 years old, 50 years old, but they’re still making decisions based on, “Hey, man, you disrespected me. So that means this or this,” versus saying, “This is probably a better way to handle it.” So if we can do more cognitive, I think maybe getting somebody who’s new in the system to think things through and not maybe go the negative path [while they’re here].

ECHO: Yes.

Collier: I think the other is really getting people to think, “I’m here. What am I going to do with this time? And do I want to do what you did?” Because your story is impressive. That’s the one you want to tell — because everybody should be watching you. You did 14 years in Seg. Now you’re out. You’ve gone to college. You’ve done the other. So you’re leading in a different capacity versus somebody who may be leading in Seg in the wrong capacity. That’s the story you want to know — because if you can do it, why can’t they?

ECHO: Right.

Collier: Yeah, anybody can do it! Just like me — if some guy like me can be the director of TDCJ, anybody could. You don’t have to be a rocket scientist.

ECHO: Thank you very much, Mr. Collier.

Collier: Appreciate y’all. Good visit.

Editor’s Note: A sincere thank you to TDCJ Executive Director Bryan Collier for sharing his time and expertise in a personal interview. We appreciate the insights and comments he provided to The ECHO and its readers. ●



Cognitive is all about just trying to help you remember how to make good decisions and teaching people how to make good decisions. We all should have taken Cognitive when we were in junior high, but we didn’t.

*TDCJ Executive Director
Bryan Collier*



Czech Please!

Windham Students Cook
Up a Collaboration with
the Czech Republic

By Elkanah E. Hendrix
Staff Writer

“

The Czech Republic cultural exchange allowed the students to demonstrate their knowledge of food and traditional Texas cuisine to a large audience.

- Travis Campus Windham Culinary Arts Instructor T. Stephenson



“It

felt like I was on ‘Hell’s Kitchen.’ It was really nerve-wracking at first,” said Sean Stone, a Windham School District culinary arts student ambassador.

Recently, two culinary classes, separated by thousands of miles of open sea, met via Zoom for a cook-off. In one corner, the Czech Republic Příbram Prison; in the other, Windham’s Travis campus in Austin. During the Zoom meeting, students from both regions “threw down” in the kitchen — whipping up signature dishes representing their cultures.

The event marked advancement in development surrounding global educational partnerships. It was the first step in crossing geographical boundaries and connecting students that might not have ever otherwise come together — made practicable through the support of Windham, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), Sam Houston State University Correctional Management Institute of Texas and the Czech Republic Corrections Delegation.

“This collaboration between Windham and the Czech Republic Příbram Prison culinary programs is a testament to the power of partnership in education. It enriches our students’ educational experience, preparing them not just for a career in culinary arts, but also for a future where connection and understanding between



Windham Superintendent K. Hartman (left) and instructor T. Stephenson (right) support the culinary class at the Travis Campus.

communities is essential,” Windham Superintendent Kristina J. Hartman said.

The Czech Republic’s representatives were able to interact with Windham students, and survey the similarities and differences between learning environments.

“The main purpose of the non-traditional foreign cooperation was the possibility of comparing the level of pupils of both schools, the equipment of these establishments and a look into the ... prisons,” said Vladimír Rampas, a Příbram Prison spokesman in a news release.

In an attempt to better understand and welcome the visiting delegates, Stone took it upon himself to learn something new.

“I reached out to Ms. K. Jones [Windham principal of the Travis and Halbert campuses] to get some books on the Czech language. I learned enough to try to welcome them and introduce our culinary class and give them an overview of what we’ve learned and, you know, make them feel welcomed and invited,” Stone said.



Resident chefs share face time.

ON THE MENU

TEXAS



Texas Red Chili



Homemade Flour Tortillas

CZECH REPUBLIC



Oven Roasted Pork Belly Bites



Potato Dumplings

What Stone didn't anticipate was the feeling that he and his classmates had bitten off more than they could chew.

"I honestly thought it was going to be the 20 guys in my class, Ms. Stephenson and then maybe five to 10 people from the Czech Republic. Before you know it, there's like 30 other people in the room, and everybody's in their best attire. All the wardens, all of our ranking officers — all in suits and ties, and we were like: 'This is real! People are actually going to eat the food that we're cooking. 'But at the end of it all, we got to share that food and watch other people enjoy the fruits of our labor. You know, that made it all worth it,'" he said.

Under the guidance of the Travis Campus Windham Culinary Arts Instructor T. Stephenson, Stone and his classmates gave their visitors a taste of Texas.

"Here in Texas, we like things spicy and we like beef, so I think Texas red chili just says it all. It's got flavor, and it really represents what we like here in Texas," Stone said.

Throughout the virtual demonstration, the students actively engaged with each other, providing insights on the best culinary practices for both cooking and enjoying their respective dishes.

"I would say it was more like sharing knowledge of our cultures. We made a Texas red chili and homemade tortillas, and they cooked potato dumplings and oven roasted pork belly," student Darryl Moffett said.

"The Czech Republic cultural exchange allowed the students to

“

I would say it was more like sharing knowledge of our cultures.

We made a Texas red chili and homemade tortillas, and they cooked potato dumplings and oven roasted pork belly.

- Student Darryl Moffett





Student preps ingredients using techniques learned in the Culinary class.



Culinary student serves chili to the Director General of the Czech Republic Prison Services.



Teacher T. Stephenson supervises meal prep.



Texas chefs observe their Czech Republic collaborators.

demonstrate their knowledge of food and traditional Texas cuisine to a large audience. They not only got to demonstrate their skills to the people in the room who came to see this event, but they also got to share a new food with people thousands of miles away. They got to introduce a group of people to a food they aren't familiar with, but will hopefully enjoy. The students also got to experience a new dish they have never tried before when we made the recipes from the Czech Republic in class and try new flavor combinations we are unfamiliar with," Stephenson said.

These types of cooperative encounters are created to equip students with the knowledge and versatility needed to thrive in a progressive global landscape.

"Windham works to prepare students for life outside of TDCJ, and this event was no exception. The interactions our students experienced with the Czech class, Czech dignitaries and TDCJ officials served as reassurance that they have the people skills necessary to interact with individuals from varied cultural backgrounds," Principal Jones said.

Optics have been broadened and an appreciation for others' culinary heritage is now in view. However, it isn't merely the knowledge, recipes and techniques learned that they will carry with them as they return to society. The students will be returning home with their ServSafe Food Handler's certificate, their ServSafe Food Manager's

certificate and the Windham School District Culinary Arts certificate.

"The knowledge is always good," student Kristoffer Rhyne said. "But having something to fall back on whenever I get out of here, something that I could take home, like the certificates I've received — that's going to open doors for jobs."

They may have entered the kitchen with one thing in mind, but once inside, they feasted on more than just vittles.

"You know, a lot of us weren't planning on taking this course. We signed up for it on a whim or we signed up just so we could eat good food. And we ended up gaining a whole lot more than that," Stone said.

Soft skills were also scooped up in preparation for reentry into society.

"I really learned teamwork. This program taught me how to work with people," student Che Gonzalez said.

Student ambassador Stone had a few parting words he wanted to share, and they aren't only for those considering an education in culinary arts.

"Challenges are always going to be thrown our way, whether it's in the kitchen or another area in life. That's definitely not going to stop whenever we get out of here. Just having the confidence that we can overcome the challenges is what we should strive for," he said.

Editor's note: Residents interested in the Windham or college-level Culinary Arts programs can send an I-60 to their campus student advisor. ●

“

But having something to fall back on whenever I get out of here, something that I could take home, like the certificates I've received — that's going to open doors for jobs.

- Student Kristoffer Rhyne



BE A COFFEE SEAN

CHAMPIONS *of* CHANGE



KHALIA ALI AND KIM STROUD
VISIT WYNNE UNIT,
INSPIRE CHANGE AGENT GRADUATES

ELKANAH E. HENDRIX – STAFF WRITER



66

“Legacy has nothing at all to do with fame,” said Khalia Ali, daughter of world-famous fighter Muhammed Ali. “All of you, right now, today, have earned yourself one extraordinary legacy.”

Ali and Kim Stroud, mother of Houston Texans’ quarterback C.J. Stroud, recently spent time together at the Wynne Unit in Huntsville. They delivered encouraging speeches to the graduating class of TDCJ’s Change Agent program, inspiring and congratulating 31 men in cap and gown for completing the 16-week course curriculum. While Ali was the keynote speaker, Stroud, a surprise guest, spoke first.

“I want to say congratulations to you as you sit in your cap and gown today,” Stroud said. “What a great accomplishment to stick to a plan and meet every single goal, because there were goals you had to meet, every week, personally and within the program.”

Stroud then explained to the Change Agent participants that they weren’t the only ones who have disappointed people, or fallen, in the past.

“It’s not about how you fall — it’s how you get up,” Stroud said. “Everyone has fallen, and anyone who says they haven’t fallen is lying, because we’ve all fallen in one way or another. We’ve all disappointed people in one way or another.” In an exclusive interview with *The ECHO*, Stroud also shared some of the things that are important to her son.

“I think that’s what makes my son so special: the needs that are important to him. I’m president of the C.J. Stroud Foundation, and our target audience is low-income families, children of parents in incarceration and single mothers. “Those were all just really important to C.J. He has a huge passion to give back and to show that no matter what background you come from, you can make something of your life if you just stay positive and self-determined,” Stroud said.

Stroud told us that C.J. is so passionate about children of parents in incarceration and single mothers because he, too, was justice-impacted at a young age. He was only 13 years old when his father was convicted on several charges.

“His dad is sitting with a life sentence at Folsom State Prison, and it’s very difficult. That was something that my son had to come out on his own and speak about,” Stroud said.

Stroud described some of the subsequent difficulties C.J. faced growing up.

“I remember one time C.J. walked into the kitchen and he had blisters on his toes. I’m like, ‘Why do you have blisters on your toes?’ He says, ‘Oh mom, I don’t

Kim Stroud speaks with
ECHO Staff Writer
Elkanah Hendrix.



Khalia Ali addresses graduates.



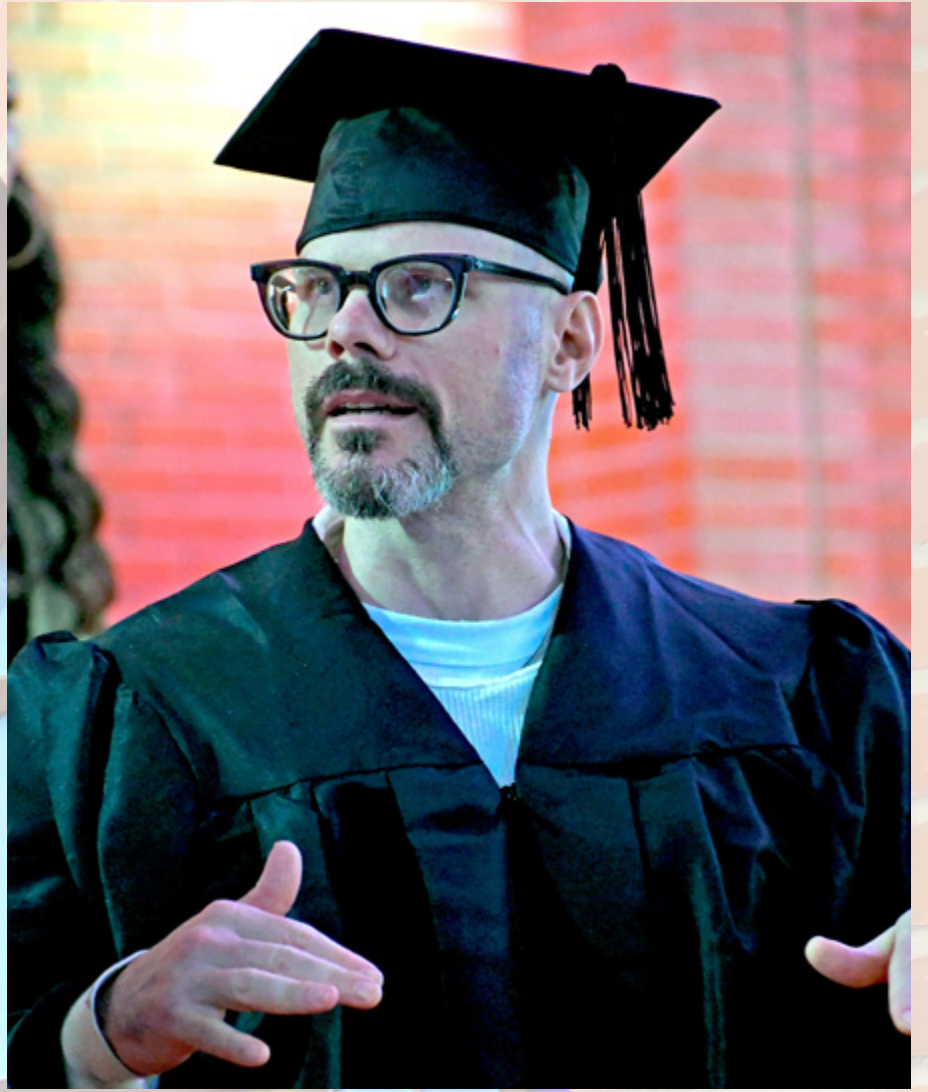
TDCJ's RPD Director Chris Carter presents a certificate to graduate Gary Welch.



“What a great accomplishment to stick to a plan and meet every single goal, because there were goals you had to meet, every week, personally and within the program.”

Kim Stroud





A new Change Agent class



The Change Agent participation workbook

want to bother you. I know you have so many things on your plate. But yeah, my cleats are just a little too small.’ So, he’s out there playing with cleats that are too small, you know. These are the kind of struggles that we went through,” she said.

Stroud then shared with the Change Agent participants how C.J. ultimately forgave his father.

“It wasn’t something that I forced. I let God lead my son onto that path of forgiveness,” Stroud said.

This forgiveness was evident when C.J. spoke about his father in a postgame press conference on Nov. 5, 2023.

“I got to talk to my dad a little bit this week, and I’m praying to God that something can happen that he can get out and come to one of these games,” he said.

Stroud closed her speech by leaving the Change Agent graduates with words on positivity and determination.

“I just want you to know that your outlook determines your outcome,” she said. “So, if your outlook is positive, your outcome will be positive. If your outlook is negative, your outcome will be negative. I don’t measure my life compared to other people, because everyone has their own background. It’s all what you do with what you’ve been given. It’s kind of like the old saying, ‘If you’re given lemons, you make lemonade.’”

After Stroud addressed the graduates, Ali stepped up to offer more words of wisdom and encouragement. “I have the great disadvantage of coming after such incredible speeches! In the spirit of Daddy [Muhammed Ali], there were TKOs all over this place today. I look to Mr. Damon West when I say that there are absolutely no mistakes. I’m here in your presence having the absolute profound opportunity to communicate to you, not only my love and gratitude for the hard work you’ve put in, accomplished and what you’re going to do next, but also be here in the spirit of my father.”

Ali looked upon the graduates and further shared her viewpoint.



Kim Stroud addresses graduates.



“We’re talking about lenses and what you look at [with them]. How do you want to introduce yourself?”

Khalia Ali



Damon West praises graduates.



TDCJ's RPD Director Chris Carter presents a certificate to graduate Johnny Davila.



“We’re talking about lenses and what you look at [with them]. How do you want to introduce yourself? Me, I’m an activist and I’m a mama. When I look at you, I see somebody’s son — somebody’s baby. If anybody doesn’t understand, it’s about proximity. It’s about closeness, and that we are all better than the worst decision we’ve ever made.”

While Ali said she lived a privileged life, she expressed empathetic sentiments for the Change Agent graduates.

“I ain’t fooled; I know I was disproportionately blessed,” Ali said. “And that’s why I’m here today: because my daddy taught me, ‘You build a longer table, not a higher wall.’ We’re all one and the same.”

Ali then concluded her speech by congratulating the graduates and their families.

“Congratulations to you. Congratulations to your beautiful families that have come out to join you today. I respect and honor the work that you’ve done. And I love you all. I truly do. Congratulations and thank you.”

Fifth Cohort Change Agent class spokesman Charles Jamison also recently encouraged the TDCJ population to choose the Coffee Bean path.

“Do whatever you have to do to get in this program. When you enter, make sure you remain optimistic. Don’t worry about anybody. Just utilize the program and apply it, because there is going to be something within it that is going to be able to help you process why you think the way you do,” Jamison said.

Editor’s Note: For more information about participating in the Change Agent program, contact the unit chaplain. ●



Graduating Change Agent Class with speakers and supporters



Please send us descriptions and photos of your events and achievements. Make sure photos are in color and in the highest resolution possible, and provide full names of all participants, if desired. Write to: *The ECHO*, c/o "Lace Up," WSD Admin. Bldg., P.O. Box 40, Huntsville, TX 77342-0040.

DALHART UNIT



Carolers Spread Holiday Cheer

By Patrick Bentley, Contributor

In conjunction with the Dalhart Unit Administration and Chaplaincy Department, the Breakthrough Church Praise Team committed to a month-long campaign of providing holiday cheer in December. Led by resident Praise Team Leader Timothy Bailey, carolers sang to other residents and staff. The caroling was a hit with G-4 residents, who enjoyed it as a concert. Some residents were also dancing and singing. The set list included such songs as "Carol of the Bells," "Joy to the World," "Mary Did you Know," "Feliz Navidad," "Emmanuel" and "This Christmas."

"We all know how difficult it can be during the holidays," said Chaplain V. Garza. "We wanted residents to know that people do care, and they are not forgotten. A lot of work goes on [to help people] behind the scenes—work that often gets taken for granted."

Throughout the month, more than 15 community volunteers coordinated with residents and staff to bless Dalhart residents. The Breakthrough Church carolers sang as volunteers handed out donated holiday packages. Meanwhile, in the faith-based dormitory, the entire group of men came together to host a community meal, sharing food and a bit of cheer while watching holiday movies.

As the month-long event ended, Dalhart residents performed a Nativity play during Breakthrough Church services on Christmas Eve—a reminder that there is a reason for the season.

On Christmas Day, the Breakthrough Church praise team performed in the chow hall, spreading holiday cheer as residents came to collect their meals. Even some of the kitchen staff joined in the singing of "This Christmas."

These events take a lot of coordination, and unit residents thank all those involved in the campaign, from administration to volunteers. These include Chaplain Garza and the following members of Breakthrough Church Praise Team for their contribution to the unit: Praise Team Leader Timothy Bailey; vocalists Jessie Diaz, Guadalupe Torres, Bobby Frasier, Kosta McFarland and Shannon Clegg; guitarists John Alvarez and Joseph Wainright, and pianists Timothy Bailey and Brandon Bales.

Dalhart Hosts Handball Tournament

Dalhart Unit recently held a handball tournament for unit residents. The participants exhibited athletic ability and sportsmanship, with Mark Salas emerging as the triumphant first place winner.

HAMILTON UNIT

High School Equivalency (HSE) Certificate Recipients Celebrate



Windham graduates at the Hamilton Campus celebrate earning their HSE certificates.

HOLLIDAY UNIT

Unit Artist Helps Honor Veterans Through Artwork



Unit Artist Matthew Yargee recently utilized his skill to honor military veterans. Pictured with the artist is Aaron May, who served in the United States Army from 2004-2007, and Jerrold Moreland, who served in the United States Navy from 2003-2009.

TRAVIS COUNTY STATE JAIL



Artist's Logo Work Boosts Windham School Spirit

Schuyler Ferris, unit artist for Windham's Travis County campus, recently updated the Windham campus logo in the school hallway. This work will continue to help inspire students and educators to succeed.

COFFIELD CAMPUS

Windham Students with Big Hearts Construct Tiny House

By Mark Brock, Unit Reporter

The students enrolled in the Windham School District Coffield Campus' Construction Carpentry class completed a housing project sponsored by Calvary Christian Center. During this project, students were taught the importance of safety along with carpentry skills that will help them find employment upon their reentry.

"It motivates me to be able to teach these men skills that will enable them to return to society and become a part of the working class while helping to close the gap on recidivism," said Windham instructor J. Smith, displaying

the passion he has for teaching.

The 560-square foot home contains one bedroom, one bath, a kitchen and a living area with central air conditioning and heat. It will be donated to a widow. Upon completion of this project, Coffield Unit *ECHO* reporter Mark Brook led students in a prayer of protection over the home.

The project may have been a tiny home; however, these students proved they all have big hearts as they worked together to build a solid structure. Congratulations to all participants: J. Trull, S. Forkert, N. Reyes, C. Grissom, J. Chavez, C. Whiteley, J. Perez, R. Perez, R. Alvarez, C. Martinez, B. Collins, J. Solazas, J. Bursby, A. Castillo, M. Jones, K. Thomas, M. Nickles and T. Colson.

PLANE STATE JAIL

Campus Recognizes Graduates from Windham Prep-to-Parent Program



HODGE UNIT

Hodge Unit Hosts Inaugural Art Show

By Wyatt Proud, Unit Reporter

Residents who are a part of the Developmental Disabilities Program (DDP) at the Hodge Unit submitted artwork for inclusion in the unit's first DDP art show. The event was initially scheduled for 2019, but it was put on hold due to the pandemic.

The purpose of the artwork was to depict "happiness" in some way, including the memories, activities, people or concepts that make the artist happy.

University of Texas Medical Branch facilitator Jennifer Whitmire encouraged all artists on their work and complimented them on their growth as an artist. These artists have mentored and motivated each other, finding inspiration through their peers and case managers to pursue art not only as a method of self-expression but also as therapy. Some of them explained the meaning of their art.

"Family—we used to fish every Friday," resident Joseph Harvey said when asked what inspired him. Harvey received an honorable mention award for distinguishing himself through his artwork, showing exceptional growth in both character and skill.

Seven artists entered and received recognition and awards in three categories: acrylic painting, pencil/pen and greeting cards.

Acrylic Painting:

1st place, David Horner; 2nd place, David Horner; 3rd place, Matthew Noyes

Pencil/Pen:

1st place, Carlos Hernandez; 2nd place, Daniel Plata; 3rd place, Matthew Cruz

Greeting Card:

1st place, Robert Battersby; Grand Prize Winner, Carlos Hernandez,

Honorable Mention: Joseph Harvey

Hodge Campus Honors HSE Graduates



Hodge Campus HSE graduates are David Horner, Jordan West, Levi Henderson, Joseph Miller, Derrick Franklin, Salutatorian Kevin Garcia and Valedictorian Corey Gooch.

MURRAY UNIT

Former Resident Speaks at Cognitive Life Skills Celebration

By Brenda Williams, Unit Reporter

The Murray Unit recently held a graduation ceremony to recognize 56 participants who completed TDCJ's Cognitive Life Skills (CLS) program. One of the guest speakers was Albert J. Yancey III, a former TDCJ resident and founder/CEO of Faith Beyond Incarceration (F.B.I.) Ministry. He spoke about how the changes he made in prison gave him the ability to make a successful reentry into society and to live a productive life

after serving more than 27 years. He now returns to TDCJ to bring hope to those still in prison.

Editor's Note: Speaker Yancey shared that while in TDCJ he earned his GED; participated in Toastmasters International; received his Associate of Arts degree in Liberal Arts; earned a certification in Computer Science from Windham and his Associate of Applied Sciences degree in Business Management from Alvin Community College, along with other training. He credits all of these accomplishments in helping him successfully reenter the community.

Restrictive Housing Graduates Life Skills Completers

By Brenda Williams, Unit Reporter

Murray Unit Life Coaches would like to offer a shout out to the following Restrictive Housing residents for stepping out of their comfort zone and into the unit's Cognitive Life Skills class. Each participant showed up every day and contributed to the success of the program. The participants are S. Gulley, A. Ball, L. Escolona, R. Williams, E. Johnson and S. Scott.

ROBERTSON UNIT

Ceremony at Robertson Celebrates 57 Graduates

Windham held a December graduation for 57 students at the Robertson campus in Abilene, with family and friends in attendance. The ceremony graduated 23 students who earned their HSE certificate, seven students from the Automotive course, four students from the Construction Technology course, six students from the Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC) Maintenance/Service Technician course, and

18 from the Small Engine course. Guest speaker Hayden Harris, a Windham alumnus, delivered the commencement address. He has achieved career success working as an HVAC Service Technician. After certificates were presented to graduates by Windham educators, families and friends enjoyed refreshments with their honorees to celebrate educational achievement.

Commencement speaker and successful service technician Hayden Harris encourages Robertson graduates to strive for continued success after graduation.



Speaker Hayden Harris (left) meets Principal J. Faulkenberry and Regional Principal R. Nuques.

STILES UNIT

Stiles Campus Recognizes HSE Graduates

By Timothy G. Scoggin, Contributor

Seven students at the Stiles Campus received their HSE certificates at a recent Windham graduation ceremony, preparing for future success. The graduates entered the Chapel of Hope to the traditional strains of “Pomp and Circumstance,” followed by the members of the unit’s Veterans Incarcerated Group color guard who presented and posted the colors.

Stiles Campus Principal Dr. J. Chua welcomed the graduates’ family members that were in attendance. He also introduced the 14 staff members in attendance followed by a short invocation by S. Granson, CTE instructor.

Class Valedictorian Baron Sargent encouraged his fellow graduates during the ceremony. He acknowledged that “Without God delivering them from the life they were living” prior to their



incarceration, they would not be celebrating this achievement.

Keynote speaker R. Smith, student advisor for Windham’s Stiles and Gist campuses, gave an enlightening speech about the importance of taking advantage of educational opportunities.

She used an illustration about the crow and the eagle. She said the crow is the only bird that will dare to fight with an eagle, but the eagle does not respond to the crow. The eagle simply opens its wings and soars higher than the crow can fly. She explained that when a person moves towards their goals, they can expect to face obstacles, but by pressing onward, those obstacles will fall away.

After each graduate was presented with their HSE certificate, Principal Chua gave the closing remarks. The graduates were then able to celebrate their educational accomplishments with family, faculty and friends.

DANIEL UNIT



Western Texas College Honors Graduates

Western Texas College recently graduated 14 Daniel Unit students from its Computer Maintenance and Repair Technology course. Graduates included Dennis Adams, Shedrit Bealer, Rafer Daniels, Shane Dixon, Dustin Fulton, Guadalupe Garza, Brandon Henley, Jerry Horton, Stephen Martinez, Gene Morriss, Bryce Naydan, Kashus Smith, William Whitlow and Michael Mallory.

Daniel Unit Cognitive Intervention Program (CIP) Celebrates Graduates



Daniel Unit CIP graduates celebrate program completion with Windham teacher Charlene Allen.

WAINWRIGHT UNIT

Wainwright Unit Recognizes Graduates of Cognitive Life Skills Class

By Johnny Wooten

Life Coaches P. Davis, R. Hernandez and M. Webb honored members of the fifth Cognitive Life Skills class on the Wainwright Unit in an honor ceremony. In attendance were special speakers Rehabilitation Programs Division Director Chris Carter, Regional Chaplain Randall Clarke, Senior Warden Muniz, Assistant Warden Blackshire and Major Rodriguez. In total, the class had 36 graduates from general population and medium custody.

Speaking for the G4 population, G. Chavez spoke to the residents about sharing what they learned with someone else, and W.

Jones representing the general population, talked of being committed to being the type of person the Life Skills program portrays. Chaplain Clarke spoke of maintaining a true bearing while Director Carter spoke on the “Thief of the Mind” and encouraged residents to “soar like an eagle, not cluck around like a chicken.”

“This class has taught me how I should treat myself and others — especially my family,” participant D. Tickner said. Several graduates were blessed with visits from their family during the graduation, and they enjoyed a meal with their family members. The residents of the Wainwright Unit thank all TDCJ staff and leadership for helping make these programs available to the residents.

HUGHES UNIT

Hughes Unit Hosts IMPACTful Basketball Tournament

By T. Rod, Contributor

The Hughes Unit recently hosted a unit basketball tournament that integrated the motto: Inmates Making Positive Attitude Changes Together (I.M.P.A.C.T.). The acronym set the tone for men within their prison community to work in a unified effort to promote principles such as accountability, responsibility and keeping a momentum of positivity even when doing time.

“There are no drugs, alcohol or negative behaviors stronger than a made-up mind,” League Commissioner Lennox Watson said.

Each building’s tournament was complete with musical entertainment, fellowship, community meals and spoken word

messages aligned with the theme: “How to Get Unstuck in Life.”

After several weeks of battling, it out on the court, each building sent one team to the championship weekend. The championship game came down to Team Dynasty from Three Building and Team Showtime from Four Building. The teams were evenly matched with Team Dynasty enjoying a slight lead going into halftime. The second half was a different story as Team Dynasty showed its superiority by gaining a large lead and never looking back. The final score was Team Dynasty, 46, and Team Showtime, 35. Dynasty team members made significant contributions to the victory by playing exceptional team ball, with the high point man being Brice Harrison, who scored 12 points.

Participants thank the warden and Food Service Department sergeants for making this event possible.

JOHNSTON CAMPUS

Johnston Campus Celebrates HSE Graduates in Commencement Service



Thirteen Windham students recently passed the HSE exam to earn their certificates. Graduates include: Robert Batista, Jason Chaney, Cardel Cummings, Wade Gallegos, Antony Gerdes, Austin Ingalls, Salutatorian Darrell Mayhem, Valedictorian Jorge Medina, Eliezer Morales, Iran Perez, Teodoro Serna, William Vick and James Williams. Pictured with the graduates are Johnston and Telford Windham Principal Allison Cole (left) and literacy teacher Lynda Warren (right).

LEWIS UNIT

Card Design Contest Sparks Holiday Spirit

Windham’s Gib Lewis campus recently held a holiday card design contest and service project, with students working on the cards outside of class. After the judging, the projects were collected by Windham staff and distributed to community residents at The Orchard, a nearby Woodville assisted living facility. Shown are (back row, l. to r.) Michael Harvey, Jorge Mar, Alberto Garza, Antonio Pinto, (front row, l. to r.) Alberto Pineda, Colten Crowder and Grand Prize Design Winner Brandon Charles.



WYNNE UNIT

Cognitive Life Skills Program Celebrates Graduating Class



The Wynne Unit recently hosted a TDCJ Cognitive Life Skills (CLS) Program graduation ceremony on Nov. 8. The class consisted of 10 G1s, 11 G2s, and 12 G4s. CLS is facilitated by Life Coaches who help their peers understand that thoughts and perceptions are the primary factors that drive behavior.

They also learn that everyone can develop patterns of unhelpful and destructive perception, which distorts their interpretation of the feeling and behavior of self and others. Life Coaches help participants become aware of how thoughts, feelings, and behavior are connected for healthier lifestyles.

Wardens R. Bowers, C. Garcia and T. Mitchell; TDCJ Region I Chaplain R. Clarke; Wynne Chaplain P. Amobi; Cognitive Life Skills Case Manager A. Bertsch of TDCJ's Rehabilitation and Programs Division (RPD) and Wynne Major C. Montgomery were in attendance to see the men celebrate this milestone in their journey to successful change. A total of 34 men participated in the graduation, which included live music by the Wynne Unit Band. Refreshments were provided by the Wynne Unit kitchen and volunteers from First Baptist Church of Huntsville. CLS is offered by TDCJ's RPD Division.

Individualized Treatment Plan Expo Debuts at Wynne

By Edgar Arturo Sazo, ECHO Staff Writer

The Wynne Unit hosted its first Individualized Treatment Plan (ITP) Expo in the gym on Dec. 11. Residents received information on various topics, including but not limited to re-entry, substance use treatment programs, post-secondary

education, peer support and peer education programs. Representatives from various departments and programs throughout TDCJ and agency partners came to offer resources and information. The Wynne Unit is proud to be a part of helping residents equip themselves with the tools, knowledge and information required to be successful during incarceration and also post-release.



Hanukkah Celebration is Observed at Wynne Unit

By Whitney Lee Reeves, Contributor



“A Great Miracle Happened There!” is the message that reminds Hanukkah observants of the reason for their celebration. The Hebrew letters on the Dreidel, a traditional small four-sided spinning top, represent these words. Hanukkah, which means “rededication,” is also known as the festival of light. The Wynne Unit has had a Jewish congregation celebrating Hanukkah since at least 2006.

Hanukkah dates to around the year 165 Before the Common Era (B.C.E.), when the Syrians and Greeks had conquered Israel and defiled the Temple in Jerusalem. After the Jewish people recaptured it, cleansed it and rebuilt the altar, the High Priest decided to use the one day's amount of oil that remained to light the menorah

even though it would take eight days to prepare more oil. The menorah lamp remained lit until new oil was made. This is the miracle granted in response to the dedication of the High Priest. In memory of this miracle, the Jewish people light candles for eight days: one candle on the first day, then two on the second day, and so on until all eight candles are lit.

Originally, the Jewish people were not allowed to study Jewish religious texts, so they would gather with a dreidel and coins for markers discussing Judaism until troops patrolled nearby, then they would spin the tops and toss coins, playing a make-believe game. Traditionally, dreidels are played every Hanukkah. The Wynne Unit celebration included traditional symbols, foods, and worship.

House Church Encourages Graduates' Faith Lifestyles

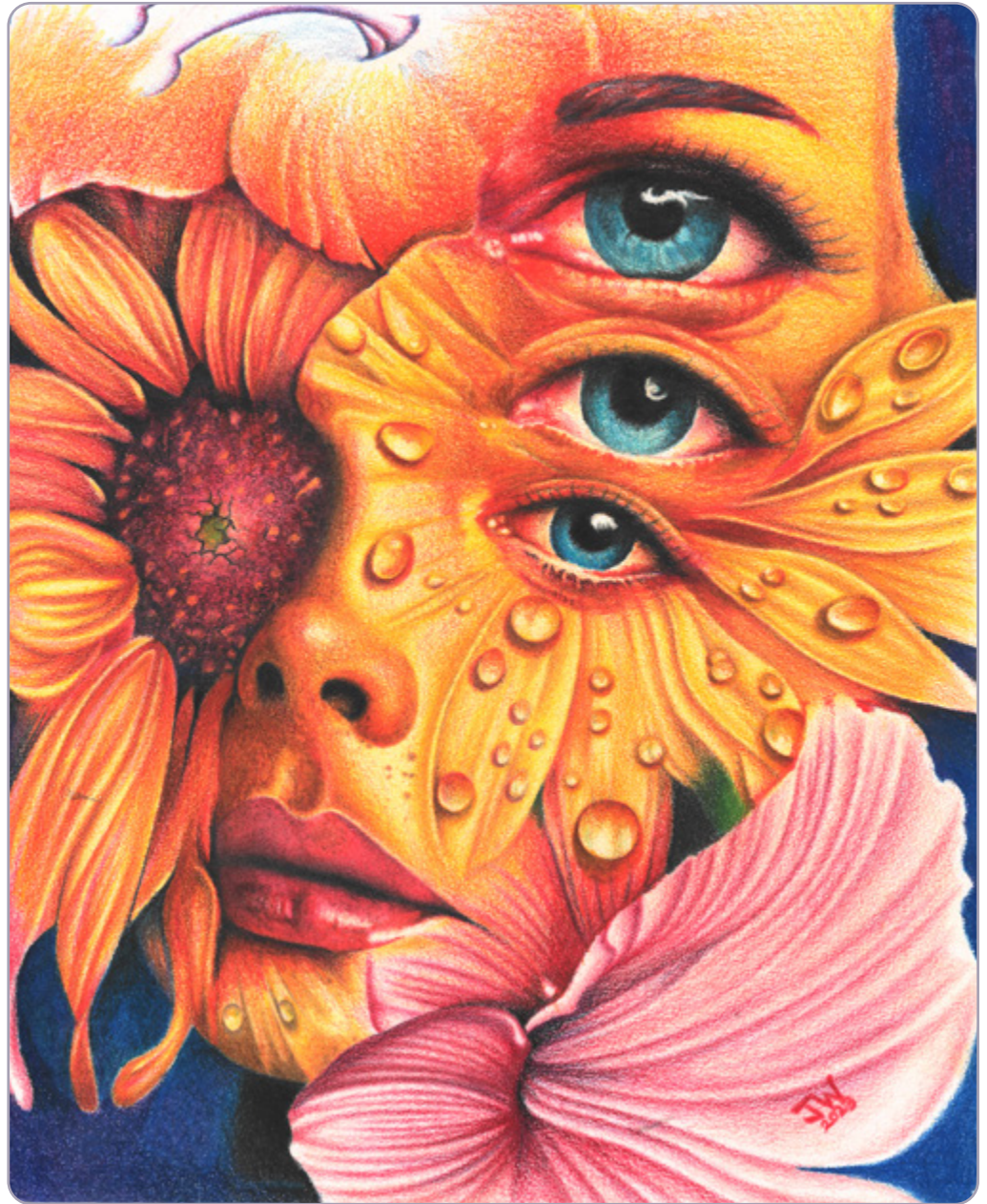
By Edgar A. Sazo, ECHO Staff Writer

The Wynne Unit recently hosted a “House Church” graduation for 30 residents. This volunteer-led program aims to encourage residents' Christian faith

and fellowship activities. In attendance were former students who spoke about living successfully in the community as men of God. As a special treat after the graduation ceremony, there was a general call out to listen to a Christian hip-hop concert by the “Eyes on Me Inc.” ministry team.



ART EX PO

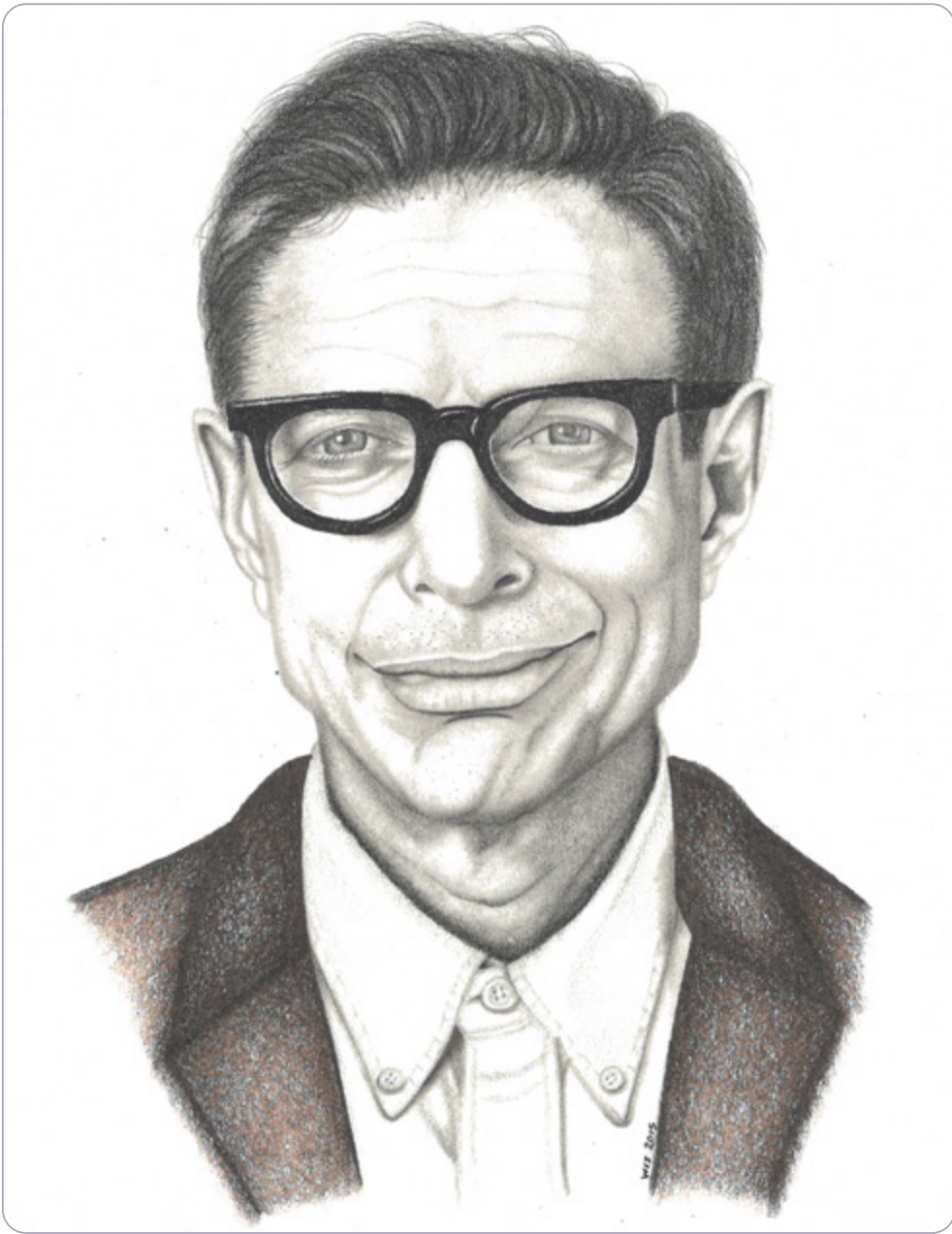


Untitled | Jason Wimberly
Colored Pencil on Illustration Board | 15" x 20"



Runnin' Wide Open | James Garner
Pencil on Typing Paper | 8.5" x 11"

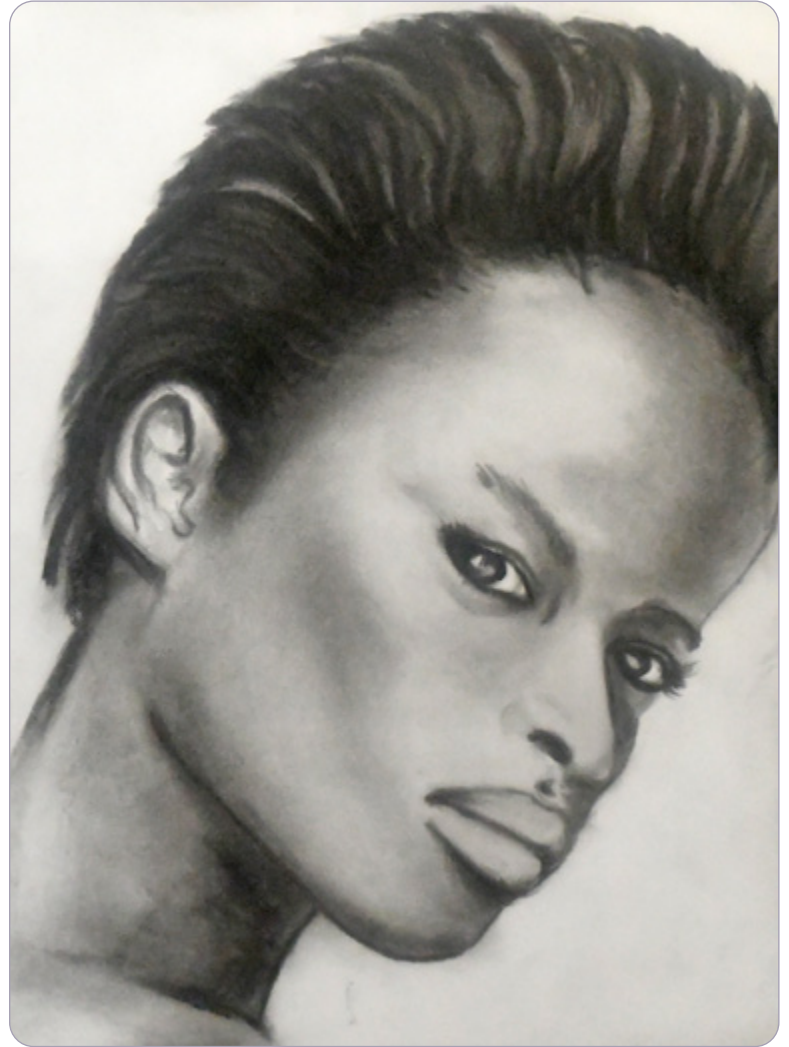
Want your art featured in the ECHO? Send it to:
The ECHO c/o WSD Admin.
Bldg., P.O. Box 40, Huntsville,
TX 77342-0040.
Drawing pads and/or
illustration boards preferred.
Half and quarter boards welcome.
Artwork cannot be returned.



Jeff Goldblum | Ricky Moulder
Graphite on Drawing Paper |
9" x 12"

Dear God | Robert Trevino
Watercolor on Illustration Board |
10" x 15"





Two Women | Lewis Campbell
Graphite on Drawing Paper | 9" x 12" (each)



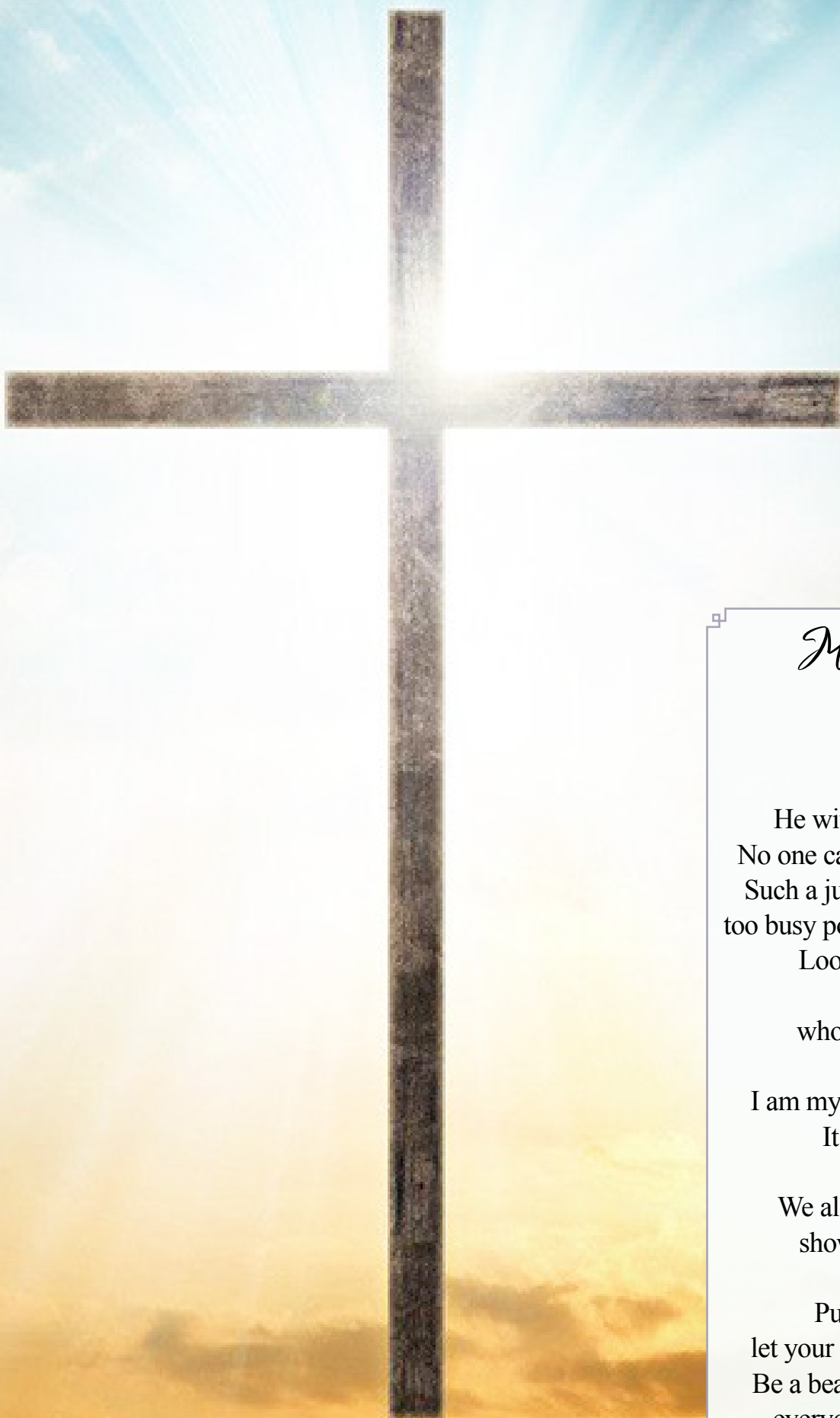
Soul Train | Dorsey
Watercolor on Drawing Paper |
9" x 12"

Poetry Corner

One Day Closer

Submitted by:
Brenda Morgan
Lockhart Unit

The sun's coming up, and it's a brand-new day,
I'll gladly lower my head and pray.
Even if things don't go my way,
I'm a whole lot better than I was yesterday.
Cause I'm one day closer to going home.
Yes, I'm one day closer to going home.
When I've paid for my mistakes,
it will be my turn to run out that gate.
No matter how long it takes,
when that day comes, I'm going to celebrate.
I'm one day closer to going home.
Yes, I'm one day closer to going home.
We've all known since the day we were born:
This old world is not where we belong.
If you agree, then come along.
We're all just one day closer to going home.
Yes, we're one day closer to going home.



My Brother's Keeper

Submitted by:
Candace Castillo
Marlin Unit

He without sin: throw the first stone!
No one came forward, so leave them alone.
Such a judgmental society we've become,
too busy pointing fingers to get our jobs done.
Look how you gossip about and
shun the sinners,
who are babies in their walk and
still only beginners.
I am my brother's keeper and so are you.
It's time to show the enemy
his time is through.
We all cut and bleed the same color,
show kindness, compassion and
really love one another.
Put your old sinful self away,
let your new light shine bright every day.
Be a beacon of light for the world to see,
everyday be the best that you can be.
They say, "You can't save the world."
I say, "I can save one."
If everyone saves one, together
we can save everyone!
Jesus died on the cross to pay your fee.
So, we can all join Him,
in heavenly eternity.

Coffee

Submitted by:
Joanne Jeanis
Hobby Unit

So who likes to drink a hot brewed
coffee in the morning?
Well then, get your mug or cup
ready and start pouring.
The aroma of coffee brewing
will certainly entice your nose,
it may open your eyes, so you
don't go back to bed and doze.
This beverage is said to be a wake-me-upper,
but people drink coffee for
breakfast, lunch and supper.
So pour yourself a cup of joe if
you're feeling sluggish or groggy,
invite a friend for coffee,
or make one for your buddy.
It comes in many flavors,
so there are lots of varieties of this drink,
and the caffeine in coffee helps you
stay alert, so you can think.
You can have it in espressos,
cappuccinos and lattes, too.
It comes from three plants:
Robusta, Liberica and Arabica!
Who knew?
You can make coffee either hot or ice cold.
Go to Starbucks or any
coffee shop where it is sold.
You can make it black or add creamer,
milk or a dollop of whipped cream.
Make it for everyone at work
or for your sports team.
You can drink your coffee
with just about anything
like pastries, muffins or toast.

Americans consume so much coffee
in the mornings,
we have it the most.
It's a stimulant and diuretic,
so it could alter your mood.
It can also be addictive,
because it taste so good.
It's the caffeine in coffee that
gives our body an energy burst;
We don't necessarily make
coffee cause we thirst!
Although coffee is the choice of drink
we condition our minds
to try, like teas and sodas
we add coffee to our list
of groceries to buy.
Control your intake, though,
and don't consume too much.
It may trigger nervousness, anxiety and such.
It can also keep you awake
and you may not be able
to go back to sleep, due to
all of the caffeine in your system —
every time you take a sip.
You can drink a cup of coffee at
home or take it with you to hold.
Buy it at any convenience stores
wherever it's sold.
Coffee, coffee: many of us like
the way you taste,
and you're our kind of drink.
Afterall, you've helped a lot of us
to stay alert and think!



Dear Mama

Submitted by:
Jeremy Fitzgerald
East Texas Treatment Facility

We may not see each other face-to-face,
as long as you know that nobody on
this earth can take your place.

I pray that God heals you,
more and more each day.

So keep God first, Mama,
and hold on to your faith.

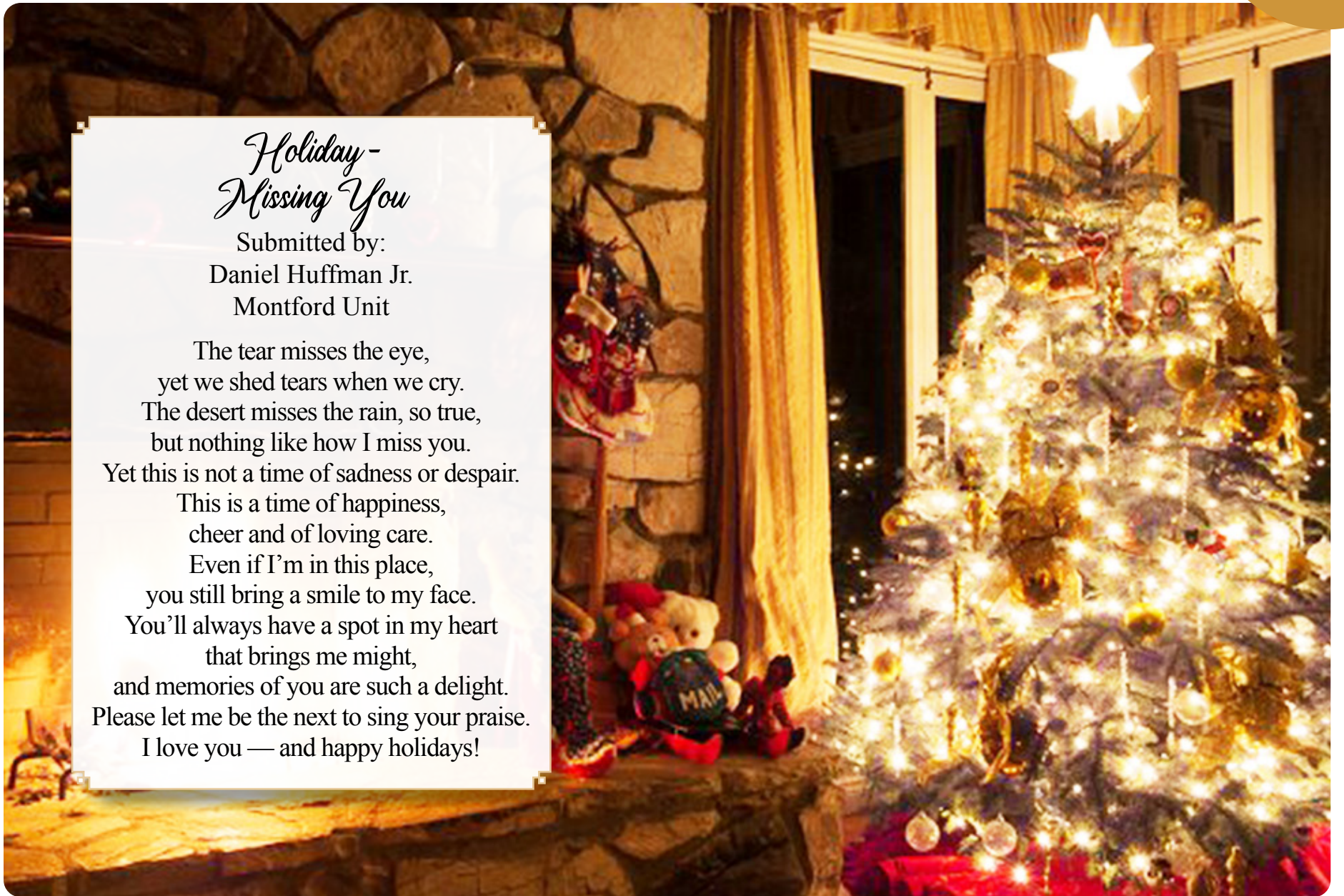
Because when you get to the
end of the road and don't
know which way to go,
Just believe and trust God.

He'll be there by your
side to carry you home.

*Holiday -
Missing You*

Submitted by:
Daniel Huffman Jr.
Montford Unit

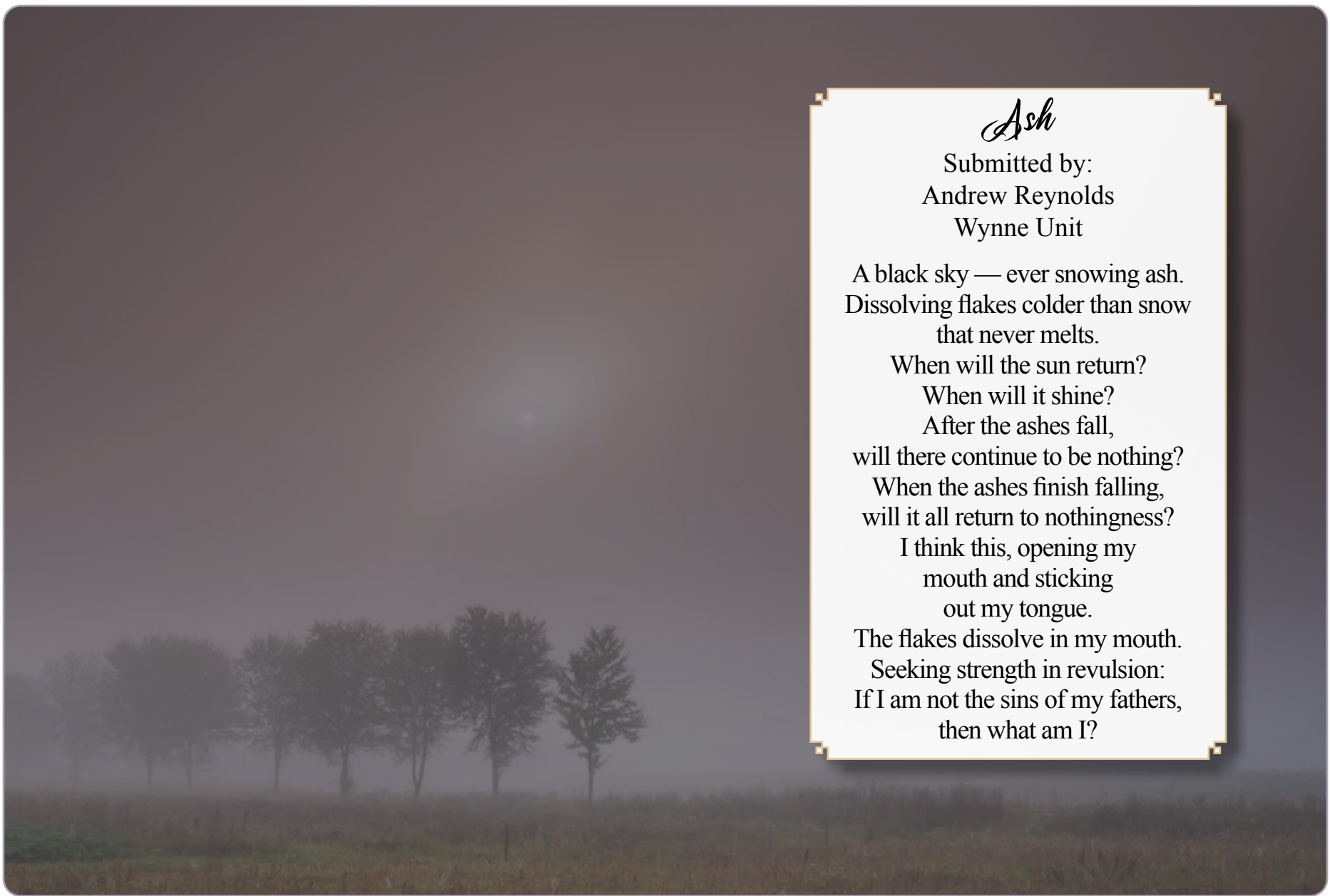
The tear misses the eye,
yet we shed tears when we cry.
The desert misses the rain, so true,
but nothing like how I miss you.
Yet this is not a time of sadness or despair.
This is a time of happiness,
cheer and of loving care.
Even if I'm in this place,
you still bring a smile to my face.
You'll always have a spot in my heart
that brings me might,
and memories of you are such a delight.
Please let me be the next to sing your praise.
I love you — and happy holidays!



Ash

Submitted by:
Andrew Reynolds
Wynne Unit

A black sky — ever snowing ash.
Dissolving flakes colder than snow
that never melts.
When will the sun return?
When will it shine?
After the ashes fall,
will there continue to be nothing?
When the ashes finish falling,
will it all return to nothingness?
I think this, opening my
mouth and sticking
out my tongue.
The flakes dissolve in my mouth.
Seeking strength in revulsion:
If I am not the sins of my fathers,
then what am I?



SPORTS VIEW

By William E. Hill - Staff Writer



2023 ECHO-LADES

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!

A BRAND-NEW YEAR FULL OF PROMISE IS UPON US, BUT BEFORE WE move forward into the unknown, let us take one last look back at 2023. The past sports year had its share of great performances and disappointments, championship aspirations realized, crushed dreams and new faces in new places.

The “Queen of the Mountain” Award: Mikaela Shiffrin.

MIKAELA SHIFFRIN SCHUSSED HER WAY TO THE PEAK OF Alpine skiing by descending very tall mountains at high rates of speed. When she won her 87th victory at the World Cup Championships in Austria in February, she passed legend Ingemar Stenmark as the winningest skier ever. Since setting the new standard, Shiffrin has refused to stop, and in December, she captured her 91st World Cup victory when she won the downhill race in St. Moritz, Switzerland. Still at the top of her game, she has the potential to put the record far out of reach of any mere mortal that dares follow in her ski tracks.

The “Welcome to the 21st Century” Award: Major League Baseball (MLB).

MLB instituted a pitch clock rule prior to the 2023 season that shortened the average length of games by almost a full 30 minutes and made it an enjoyable pastime again. The new rule, which went into effect this past season, has helped to decrease the average length of games by restricting the amount of time pitchers have to deliver a pitch. Pitchers are only allowed two disengagements (stepping off the pitching rubber) per at bat. Batters must be ready to hit at the eight-second mark, or it becomes an automatic strike against them.



66
In my annual predictions column, I predicted that the Dallas Cowboys would defeat the Buffalo Bills in Super Bowl LVIII. What I meant to say was that the Texas Rangers were going to win their first ever World Series Championship, and the Texas Longhorns would make the College Football Playoffs. Yeah, that's it.

*The “Put Some Respect on the Name” Award:
University of Connecticut (UConn) Men’s Basketball.*

UConn Huskies rolled to its fifth national title since 1999, the most by any men’s Division One program in that period, in historic fashion. The Huskies won their seven tournament games by an average of 20 points. Their smallest margin of victory was 13, and the championship game was a laugher as they won by 17 points: 76-59. When most people talk about the bluebloods of college basketball, they mention Kansas, Kentucky, North Carolina, UCLA and Duke, but they conveniently overlook the Huskies. They cannot do that anymore.

*The “Welcome Home” Award: Kim Mulkey,
Louisiana State University Women’s Basketball.*

Mulkey won her third national title as a head coach while leading her Louisiana State University Tigers to their first national championship. Angel Reese, who scored 15 points and grabbed 10 rebounds was named the tournament’s Most Outstanding Player.

*The “You Want Us to Play in This Weather?” Award:
2023 Masters.*

THE 2023 MASTERS WILL BE REMEMBERED FOR THE INTENSE weather conditions that plagued the final two rounds of the tournament. During the second round, high winds knocked over three trees surrounding the 17th hole’s tee box. Finally, someone came up with the idea that it might be better, not to mention safer, to postpone the round until the following day.

*The “Who Are You?” Award: Sam Bennett, Texas
A&M University Golfer.*

BENNETT, A COLLEGE GOLFER AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY, not only made the cut at the Masters, but he played in the final pairing in the third round. Although he did not win the tournament, he was named the low amateur, which comes with a silver medal. Not bad for an Aggie.

*The “Laughing All the Way to the Bank” Award:
Jimbo Fisher, former Texas A&M University Football
Coach.*

FISHER WAS RELIEVED OF HIS FOOTBALL HEAD COACHING responsibilities by the Texas A&M University, but he relieved the university of almost \$76 million for the privilege. Yes, you read that correctly, the Aggies are paying Fisher to NOT coach their football players. I guess all that oil money comes in handy. To add insult to injury, the university named Mike Elko, the former Duke University football coach, as Fischer’s successor. When you must hire a football coach from Duke, maybe you aren’t ready to play with the big boys just yet.

*The “Laughing All the Way to the National Football
League (NFL)” Award (maybe): Jim Harbaugh,
University of Michigan Football Coach.*

HARBAUGH IS WITHOUT QUESTION A GREAT COACH. HE has turned losing teams into winning programs on both the collegiate and professional levels. As the San Francisco 49ers head coach, he led the team to three consecutive National Football Conference finals appearances and a berth in Super Bowl XLVII. Since returning to his alma mater, he has guided the Wolverines to the College Football Playoffs after the 2022 and 2023 seasons. However, in 2023, his program was implicated in a sign stealing scandal resulting in him being suspended for the final three games of the regular season. In the past two offseasons, Harbaugh has flirted with the NFL before returning to Michigan. With a National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) investigation still underway on the sign stealing scandal, and an unrelated Federal Bureau of Investigation probe, this might be the perfect time to take all the millions of dollars that NFL owners are so willing to throw at coaches with a proven record of winning.

The “What I Meant to Say” Award: Will Hill, ECHO Staff Writer.

IN MY ANNUAL PREDICTIONS COLUMN, I PREDICTED THAT THE Dallas Cowboys would defeat the Buffalo Bills in Super Bowl LVIII. What I meant to say was that the Texas Rangers were going to win their first ever World Series Championship, and the Texas Longhorns would make the College Football Playoffs. Yeah, that’s it. That’s exactly what I meant to write.

The “Best Idea Whose Time Has Come” Award: Paying College Athletes.

NCAA PRESIDENT CHARLIE BAKER PROPOSED IN DECEMBER 2023 to establish a new tier of Division 1 sports required to offer at least half of their student/athletes a minimum of \$30,000. Baker also proposed that all Division 1 schools be allowed to offer unlimited educational benefits to their student athletes and allow the schools to enter into Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) deals with their own players.

Although there is no firm timeline for when this proposal would become a reality, it is an idea that is long overdue, and it is only the first step towards recognizing college athletes as what they really are: employees. Be prepared to read more about this in upcoming issues as information becomes available.

The “Ain’t That Too Bad” Award: Florida State University Seminoles, College Football.

FROM THE LOWEST LEVEL OF LITTLE LEAGUE TO THE HIGHEST echelon of professional sports, the overwhelming message that is hammered into players is that sports are a meritocracy. Don’t try and tell that to the Seminoles. They played in one of the Power Five conferences, they went undefeated during the regular season, they beat two teams in the vaunted Southeastern Conference, and they won their conference championship. Yet the College Football Playoff (CFP) committee snubbed them when picking the four-team playoff, instead picking the University of Michigan Wolverines, the University of Washington Huskies, the University of Texas Longhorns, and the University of Alabama Crimson Tide. The CFP did not pick the four most deserving teams for the playoffs.

The “Ain’t That Too Bad” Award II: University of Georgia Bulldogs, College Football.

NOT ONLY DID THE CFP COMMITTEE NOT PUT IN THE FOUR MOST deserving teams for the playoffs, but they also failed to pick the four best teams in the country. If the two-time defending national champion Georgia Bulldogs played any of the four teams in the playoff on a neutral field, they would be favored to win. That’s not Will Hill saying it, that is what the people in Las Vegas that determine point spreads said. The Bulldogs have lost one game in three years, and yet they are not going to be allowed to defend their championship. If this was next year when the playoff expands to 12 teams, then all of this would be moot. Of course, if ifs and buts were candy and nuts, then we would have all had a Merry Christmas!

From the lowest level of Little League to the highest echelon of professional sports, the overwhelming message that is hammered into players is that sports are a meritocracy.

The “Laughing All the Way to the Bank” Award: Shohei Ohtani, MLB.

OHTANI WAS THE NUMBER ONE FREE AGENT AS SOON AS THE hot stove league started. After meeting with several teams, the designated hitter/pitcher signed a 10-year, \$700 million contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers. His new pact is 64% higher than baseball’s previous record high. The \$70 million annual average of the contract is more than the entire 2023 payroll of both the Baltimore Orioles and Oakland Athletics. Ohtani and the Dodgers got creative and deferred all but \$680 million of that money until the end of the contract. That allows the team to avoid paying more in luxury tax, and it helps them be able to spend to keep a competitive team. Ohtani can do that because he makes so much money from endorsements both here in America and in his native Japan.

It is hard to say that one person is worth that type of money, but in Ohtani’s case, he is. His career stats as a hitter include: .274 batting average, 171 home runs, 437 runs batted in and 86 stolen bases. As a pitcher, he has compiled a 39-19 win/loss record, 3.01 earned run average, 608 strikeouts in 481 2/3 innings pitched. According to Baseball Reference, Ohtani has a 34.7 Wins Against Replacement score, which is the highest in MLB in 2023.

The “First Time is Always the Sweetest” Award: Texas Rangers, MLB.

ISAVED THE BEST FOR LAST. AFTER MOVING FROM THE NATION’S CAPITAL in 1972, the Washington Senators rebranded themselves as the Texas Rangers. During the more than half-a-century in Arlington, the team has provided their fans with plenty of great moments: including a no-hitter by Hall of Famer, Nolan Ryan, and a perfect game by Kenny Rogers. The Rangers had been one strike away from the title in 2011 until Nelson Cruz forgot how to catch a routine fly ball in game seven. But hey, I’m not bitter.

The Rangers victory leaves five MLB franchises without a title: Milwaukee Brewers, San Diego Padres, Seattle Mariners, Tampa Bay Rays and Colorado Rockies. Come on, you guys, what are you waiting for?●

SPORTS TALK



Dear Sports Talk,

I have never been much of a baseball fan, but I got pulled into watching the series between the Houston Astros and the Texas Rangers. It was like the announcers were speaking a different language, one that I couldn't understand. I asked some of the sports guys on my block, but none of them knew either. Finally, one guy suggested that I write *The ECHO's* Sports Talk column and ask them. So, that is what I am doing. What is war, and what is it good for?

Warless

Polunsky Unit

Dear Warless,

Nice Edwin Starr reference! I will play my part by saying it is good for absolutely nothing. However, what the announcers were probably talking about is Wins Above Replacement (WAR). As for what it is good for, there are two camps: to the sabermetricians it is the greatest thing since the invention of numbers, and to old school fans like me, it is completely overrated.

Basically, it adds up a player's hitting, fielding and baserunning to ascribe a numerical value to that player's worth. A WAR of five is considered an All-Star caliber season, a WAR of 10 is considered one of the all-time great seasons while a WAR of 75 is considered Hall of Fame worthy. I do not know the algorithm used to calculate WAR, but one book that I consulted to research this topic said that the two major baseball websites, Baseball Reference and Fangraphs, each use different formulas. My question for the analytics group is this: why do you need a statistic to tell you that a player such as Shohei Ohtani is a really good player?

I hope the Astros/Rangers series helped convert you to a life of baseball fandom. I also want to thank you for the positive letter. It was good to receive one that wasn't talking smack about the Dallas Cowboys for a change. Please write again if you have any other questions or to submit a hot take of your own on a sport.

**SHARE YOUR SPORTS OPINIONS,
QUESTIONS & THOUGHTS!**

**The Journey
of a thousand
miles begins
with a single
step.**

-Lao Tzu