

CPO Concord Prison Outreach



Fall Newsletter 2013

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CPO's Mission: Help prepare today's inmates to be tomorrow's good neighbors (photo: gardening & landscaping program)

Writing Course at Billerica House of Correction

In January 2013, I began teaching a writing course at the Billerica House of Correction. Now retired, I spent over 40 years as a high school English teacher. Helping others with their writing was and is always satisfying. I missed teaching, so I spoke with a friend who leads a writing group at a women's minimum prison on the North Shore. She suggested that I consult *Writing Alone and with Others*, written by Pat Schneider. This book and its approach helps those who are reluctant or lacking in confidence about their writing skills to respond to prompts. The goal is to write and to turn off any self-censoring ideas, to keep pushing the pencil to let your thoughts lead you where they may.

At each class I give several prompts, they write for about ten minutes, then we listen to each person's work. At times I provide a writing sample from a published writer to serve as a model for their own work. As a teacher, I write as well.

I am interested not so much in helping them produce polished writing as helping them get what's in their hearts and minds onto paper, and then share their writing with others.

continued >

The Fatherhood Project Comes to MCI-Concord

Sometimes silence in a class reflects lack of interest, detachment, but the 15 dads at the prison were quietly working hard to make sense of what I was offering with my first comments. What does it mean for them that their children are six times more likely to be incarcerated than the children of fathers who have never been in prison? What does it mean for them as fathers that statistically half of them are likely to return to prison after their release? What does it mean that children who have emotionally engaged fathers fare better behaviorally, academically, socially, and emotionally in their lives? And of course, should I listen to this guy who doesn't understand my life and has never been in prison?

By the emotional tone in the room, the questions asked, and their willingness to tell parts of their own father stories in a class in which no one knew more than four others, these 15 men are motivated to be better fathers and believe they can benefit from involvement.

Our class meets once a week for eight Tuesdays. I am the Director of The Fatherhood Project in the Department of Psychiatry at Mass General Hospital. Our mission is to increase the emotional engagement of fathers and children in many contexts, usually but not exclusively with underserved fathers. I taught our prison program, *Fathering from the Inside*, at Shirley Prison in the Spring and hope to continue our efforts. *continued >*

Writing Course, continued

Here is a sample of the prompts, most taken from Pat Schneider's book: Write a 7-minute autobiography any way you want – for example, list important moments, good and bad times; Write a letter to anyone, living or dead, fictional, known or unknown; Answer the question "What matters?" in any form you choose; Write about "The first time I..."; Write your first, middle and last names, and then reflect on your name; Write about a moment in your life. Then, using the same moment, write about it from the perspective of a person who is observing you.

Recently, I used the "write a letter" prompt. Here's what I got, in shortened form: "Dear Dad, where were you when I needed you.... Dear Susan, I've written you five times, and have not heard back. Are you still there?..... Dear Son, I wish I could be with you on your 15th birthday." - Al Rossiter, Volunteer

In Memoriam, Jonathan Roosevelt

Concord Prison Outreach has lost a valued friend with the passing of Jonathan Roosevelt, a long-time prison volunteer who ran a book discussion group at the Special Housing Unit at MCI-Concord and later at MCI-Shirley. Jonathan was a passionate volunteer who was revered and loved by the many men who passed through his groups.

In describing his work, Jonathan once wrote: "The inmates are literate, insightful and forthcoming... A week rarely passes without one of the inmates using an insight gained from our discussion to reflect upon his life. Nor does a discussion conclude without an inmate expressing his appreciation that we have come behind the walls to share a part of our lives and how he looks forward to seeing us next week."

"Participating in this group has become a pivotal event of our week. The insights we share in our discussion lead to a rapport with inmates that is not friendship so much as it is a connection to their humanity, detached from their crimes and from our stereotypes."

The Fatherhood Project, continued

Most of the men have contact with one or more of their children, even if episodic. The class emphasizes the importance of their children knowing that, while incarcerated, their fathers think of them and try to be in contact. This protection against feeling abandoned by their fathers is of critical importance. I also ask the men to tell their stories about their relationships with their own fathers including the emotions they have, and we move toward accepting what they missed and seeing how their fathering styles are influenced by the internal images of their own fathers.

Most have absent fathers, abusive fathers or fathers who were episodically present without consideration for their children. Many have fathers who were themselves incarcerated. They are then asked what kind of father they want to be and they share their goals for themselves. At this point, I teach them the skills of relating, using a combination of empathy in understanding their children and being authoritative in setting limits on their children's behavior. These men care about being good fathers and they see that solving their life problems with violence and breaking the law will interfere with being the fathers they want to be.

The last class will include Andre Dubus, a local writer with a history of violence while growing up with a detached father in Haverhill (see his memoir *Townie*) who will tell his story, including the transformative moment in his life when he decided that violence, partially from his anger at his father and partially because his father wasn't present to set limits on his aggression, no longer served his purpose.

The men are involved and motivated; the teacher offers specific skills after helping them to be emotionally ready to change. We have lofty goals that are ambitious and movement toward success is likely to occur. - Raymond A. Levy, Psy.D., Director of The Fatherhood Project, Massachusetts General Hospital

Caroling Night at NECC

Please join us to share holiday cheer
Friday, December 6, 2013
from 6:45 to 9:00 pm



Registration in advance is required by November 29th:
Email your full legal name, date of birth, and phone number to events@concordprisonoutreach.org or call 617-286-6728.

*Thank
you*

Special thanks to Middlesex Savings Bank for supporting the printing and mailing of this newsletter.

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- ◆ Justin Dormitzer, Graphical Designer

Holiday Gift Bag Project, 2013

"I am one of the men who came into Concord without anything.... Many men at Concord greatly appreciate your Seasonal gifts."

See the Newsletter Insert for details or visit www.ConcordPrisonOutreach.org

**Superintendent Thompson Speaks of Prisons as Healing Environments**

Michael Thompson is in charge of one of the state's largest prisons, MCI-Concord, as well as the Northeastern Correctional Center, located across the rotary on Route 2. I recently sat down with Michael in his office and found him to be sincere, dedicated, and knowledgeable, with 34 years of experience in a variety of capacities in the Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC). Among those positions, Supt. Thompson spent 6 years working in minimum and pre-release administration at Pondville and a good deal of time at DOC headquarters working on re-entry and department-wide endeavors.

What struck me during our talk was Michael's dedication toward building a 'Healing Environment' within the prison. Commissioner Luis Spencer of the DOC has set forth this DOC-wide, humane vision. Michael and I talked at length about progress thus far and the necessary cultural changes to move this program forward. This visionary approach will positively impact inmates and staff, once fully in place. According to Supt. Thompson, "Each interaction with an inmate is an opportunity to

create healing. And, when a correctional facility aims at creating a healing environment, the institution, in effect, becomes the program."

On September 19th, Supt. Thompson addressed CPO's Board of Directors and Steering Committee. He spoke about the DOC's history, its policies, and the "Healing Environment" initiative. Enthusiasm and support are the words that best describe the response of the audience. After his talk, CPO members talked about current and proposed volunteer programs to support a healing environment.

"I enjoyed getting to know Supt. Thompson and CPO looks forward to our working relationship. We wish him well in his new and important position within the DOC.

- Mark Fingerle, CPO Board Chair

"Each interaction with an inmate is an opportunity to create healing."

A Message of Hope, from Carol Peters, Executive Director

At CPO we are lighting candles of hope every day. When our volunteers enter behind the wall bringing the gifts of human kindness, wisdom and knowledge to those who are incarcerated, we also bring healing and hope. These are everyday miracles of love made manifest. This is the essence of CPO's mission.

Yet we continue to strive to reach more of the incarcerated. CPO is stretching to bring its programs to every man incarcerated in Concord. We would like to expand our programs to offer about 1000 seats in classes each year at MCI-Concord, thus providing the opportunity to every man who qualifies and wants programs. Currently we serve about 800 men. Can we find the resources to expand existing programs and add new programs to meet this goal so that every man, every year can participate in programs that will build skills and improve his chances of succeeding when they leave prison? *continued, below*

This year, we have seen the fruits of our efforts with new programs like *Writing for the Workplace*, *Math Prep for College Placement*, a chess program, and a recreational guitar group. This fall we have a new program in parenting skills called *Fathering from the Inside*. We've expanded our *Nonviolent Communication* class to include MCI-Concord, and we now have four *BEACON* classes running concurrently, teaching emotional literacy skills. Many of these programs are very popular and we hope to train volunteers and expand our offerings so all can benefit from these exceptional programs.

And this is only the beginning. We can use our expertise to expand our programs to other prisons in the state. We know how to do this. Please join us. Consider volunteering behind the wall to share your kindness, skills, and knowledge. Consider helping CPO extend this outreach to prisons beyond Concord. Help us build our base of support in faith communities throughout the state so that we can be there for more of the incarcerated.

At CPO, we believe in the worth of all people, and we want every person to have the chance to grow and develop to their full potential. This is how we will create a more just and peaceful world. Please join us.

Small deeds done are better than great deeds planned. - Peter Marshall

Concord Prison Outreach, Inc.
PO Box 383
Concord, MA 01742



*"No one has ever become poor
by giving." - Anne Frank*

The 2013 Holiday Gift Bag Project: A Fine Tradition with A Bit of Change This Year

For many years, CPO's Holiday Gift Bag Project has brought hope and holiday cheerfulness to each of the inmates in Concord's two prisons. This year about 1700 gift bags will be provided. Here are a few things you need to know, including a few changes.

The list of gifts approved by the Department of Correction is largely the same this year, but please note the specifications:

- 1 bar of deodorant soap (4 - 5 oz.)
- 1 plastic bottle of shampoo (12 - 15 oz.)
- 1 stick deodorant (no roll-ons, 2.75 oz. or larger)
- 1 tube toothpaste (5.8 - 6.0 oz.)
- 1 pair of white CREW socks (no tube socks, knee highs, or "tennis" socks) preferably 5 inches of ribbing or less.
- 1 pad WHITE paper 6"x9" or 5"x8", 100 pages (no wire)
- White envelopes #6 3/4 (6 1/2" x 3 5/8")
- A hand-made holiday greeting card (Please see **ConcordPrisonOutreach.org** for *revised* card-making instructions, including that **no type of glue or tape or stickers** can be used.)

Please comply with the above list of items and sizes required by the Department of Correction in their effort to assure security and safety. Items which do not comply will be distributed to shelters and other organizations serving the non-incarcerated needy.

We welcome donations of the above items in any quantity. They do not need to be in sets. Many donors give multiple units of one item on the list. All donations are sorted, and each gift bag is assembled by volunteers. **Cash donations are also welcome** -- they enable CPO to purchase items when necessary. Your tax-deductible check should be made out to "Concord Prison Outreach," earmarked "Holiday Gifts," and mailed to:

Concord Prison Outreach, Holiday Gift Bag Project, PO Box 383, Concord, MA 01742

NEW LOCATION for the project this year: St. Matthew's United Methodist Church

The church is located at 435 Central Street, Acton, MA 01720

Drop-off dates for the items are from December 3rd through December 10th at St. Matthew's. *Please observe the deadline.*

Adult Volunteers are needed on weekday mornings from Tuesday, December 3rd through Tuesday, December 17th, from 9:00am to 12 noon. In addition, there will be two evening sessions: Wednesday, December 4th, and Tuesday, December 10th, from 7:00 to 9:00pm. For the two evening sessions, please sign up in advance. See contact information below.

For information or to volunteer, please contact:

- Carol Miller carolhmiller@comcast.net or 978-369-3755, or
- Nancy Smith nancesmith@aol.com or 781-894-5526

For more information on this and other CPO programs, go to **ConcordPrisonOutreach.org**.

Remember: A holiday gift bag is kindness tied with a colorful ribbon. Most inmates will be released eventually. Wouldn't it be good for them to know that there are people on the outside who think of them and care?



Concord Prison Outreach



“Our greatest glory consists not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”

- Confucius

Thank you for supporting Concord Prison Outreach’s mission. We hope you will consider contributing to our 2013-2014 program year.

“When our volunteers enter behind the wall bringing the gifts of human kindness, wisdom and knowledge to those who are incarcerated, we bring the gift of healing and hope,” Carol Peters, Executive Director of Concord Prison Outreach.

-----**Please return this section with your donation**-----

Yes, I’d like to contribute towards the 2013-2014 program year:

\$ _____ New programs at MCI-Concord: *Fathering from the Inside* (based on The Fatherhood Project at Mass General Hospital) and *Nonviolent Communication*

\$ _____ Annual *Holiday Gift Bag Project*, where CPO assembles and distributes about 1700 gift bags at two Concord prisons

\$ _____ Books for *Read to Me Daddy*, where children's books are read aloud by incarcerated fathers on DVD, and books/DVD are sent home to their children

\$ _____ CPO’s general budget

Your name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip: _____

This donation is in memory/in honor of: _____

Please make your check payable to Concord Prison Outreach, and mail to:
PO Box 383, Concord, MA 01742

We appreciate your tax-deductible support. Concord Prison Outreach is a 501(c)(3) non-religious charity.