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### Tending Gardens

*To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow. ~ Audrey Hepburn*

The gardening programs at MCI-Concord and NECC are in their eighth year and going strong. I had the chance recently to chat with Win Wilbur, one of the founding members of the programs, and am happy to be able to share our discussion with you, our extended CPO family.

In 2009, Win Wilbur, Lisa duBois and her daughter Kirsten Mong (who runs Applefield Farm in Stow) envisioned the gardening program as a way to meet three goals: to help men develop skills for working in gardens and landscaping companies; to help the grounds and prison yard become more cheerful, colorful and serene, and more humane for those living and working there; and to expand the personal experience and horizons of the men involved.

There have been many changes as the program has grown over time. Since its inception, the program has had a lot of support from Lois Russo, the Superintendent of the Concord Complex. CPO was able to donate a rototiller using some monies from a generous bequest. This made it possible for the prison to plant grass and over time, to dig out gardens for flowers. Later, CPO donated a greenhouse to MCI-Concord (there is also one at NECC) for the men to start their own seedlings each spring and then keep houseplants and other types of plants in the winter. Thus the men have been able to learn the skills of maintaining a greenhouse and working at propagating various kinds of plants. Each year the men collect the best seeds from their better plants and save these to replant the next year.

For the past six years, the dedication of volunteer Master Gardener Tony Bonanno has truly transformed the program into a vibrant and year-round endeavor. He has spent a lot of time teaching the men about organic theories for developing healthy produce. The men grow about 30 different varieties of herbs, fruits and vegetables. They are often able to use what is grown in the NECC cooking school and the meals that are served to the public in the culinary luncheon program. The men have also shared recipes with each other. And each summer, when the vegetables ripen, the men pick any extras, and volunteers take them to the Open Table in Concord and the Lowell Veterans Community Care Center to share with those who need food. The men feel a great sense of pride in being able to share with the community.



*From barren...*



*...to lush!*

Over the years, volunteers have shared their particular passions and expertise with the men, such as how to prune rosebushes and flowering fruit trees, garden planning, and combining colors, and heights shapes to create beautiful landscapes. A variety of practical skills have been honed, such as planting perennials and shrubs, understanding climate conditions, the soil health, etc. It's particularly gratifying to see how much knowledge and confidence the men get from participating in the program. Some have passed on the information they are learning to their families and bring questions to the class from their families as they start home gardens. They really enjoy sharing their expertise with others.

At MCI-Concord, the gardening program is more focused on outdoor flower gardens and house plants. As you can see from the photos on this page, the transformation from barren to lush has been truly amazing. When in bloom, the grounds are filled with bright yellows, pinks, reds, and purples, and the scent of the garden often fills the air. From just three beds planted the first year in the open dirt in the center of the prison land, the garden has grown to about 12 different gardens, each designed by one of the men in the program and carefully tended with patience and care. These gardens include perennials of lilies, daffodils, tulips, daisies, coneflowers and

### ***Tending Gardens (continued)***

many others, and annuals, like cosmos, snapdragons, marigolds, calendulas, and zinnias. These gardens are centrally located in the yard, so most of the men pass them at least three times a day as they go to meals. The gardens hold a sense of hope and healing and beauty.

For me, these gardening programs epitomize what CPO is about. What is more compelling than joining together to transform barren soil to a harvest of sustenance and beauty? What better symbol for the work we are committed to and the optimistic belief that the seeds we sow today will bear fruit in the form of a brighter, more humane future. We are all involved in tending gardens one way or another.

Anyone who would like to join the CPO gardening team, please send a note to Outreach@ConcordPrisonOutreach.org. Our intrepid gardeners would love to have you!

Debbie Dormitzer, CPO Board Member and Volunteer

*Out beyond ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

~ Rumi

### ***Houses of Healing Presentation***

This past February, Concord Prison Outreach was treated to a visit from Robin Casarjian, the nationally renowned author of *Houses of Healing*, a book used in prisons across the United States and the text used in the CPO-run Beacon programs. As the featured speaker of the combined meeting of the CPO Board and Steering Committee, Casarjian drew a lively group of volunteers out on dark winter's night, to be warmed by the light of her hopeful stories.

Casarjian filled members and guests in on new projects she and her staff at the Lionheart Foundation have been pursuing. For example, she told us about Lionheart's most recent program, a primary prevention tool for at-risk teen mothers. In research funded by the National Institutes of Health, to augment Lionheart's parenting curriculum, the young mothers wore a wrist band that gathered galvanic skin response data. The data collected by the wrist bands was monitored, and, as appropriate, triggered text messages back to the young mothers, with relevant reminders for regulating their emotions.

Another new program the Lionheart Foundation is piloting at three prisons in California is a self-study program for people in solitary confinement. In addition to the *Houses of Healing* curriculum, it offers a weekly section on how to psychologically survive solitary confinement. Among the topics covered are: creating your living quarters; staying as clean as possible; getting physical exercise; practicing mindful movement; sticking to a daily routine; coping with anxiety and depression; finding a way to serve; and goal setting. It also includes a resource list so those in solitary can write for books, pen pals, and support from meditation communities. Men and women who work with the materials receive a certificate of participation upon completion of the self-study program.

In conclusion, Casarjian asked volunteers to share their own reflections on the use of *Houses of Healing* as part of courses offered through CPO. Several attendees offered their own thoughts on how the Beacon program impacts the community at large, including the incarcerated men, the correctional officers, as well as the teacher/facilitator. The presentation and discussion were very moving and left us all to contemplate this perennial truth: what a powerful experience it is to volunteer behind the walls.

Phyllis Wentworth, Recording Secretary for the CPO Board

### **A Reflection on Social Action**

*From my talk given on Sunday, December 27, 2015,  
at First Parish in Concord*

For many years, Concord Prison Outreach has sponsored the Holiday Gift Bag Project. It provides a set of simple, useful gifts – like toiletries and socks – plus a homemade holiday card with an uplifting message – to each of the men incarcerated in Concord's two prisons.

On behalf of CPO, I want to thank all of you who have supported the gift bag project this year and in years past. You have volunteered your time, donated gift items, or contributed money – all of which are greatly appreciated.

Today I want to tell you about the experience of giving the gift bags to the men. For MCI-Concord, eight CPO volunteers are selected to pass out the gifts on the appointed day. This year I was privileged to be one of the eight. We arrived at the prison's main entrance, went through security, and then were escorted to the large gymnasium. The gift bags had arrived already and were being placed on a row of tables by some of the men who were there to assist.

The rest of the men are brought to the door of the gym, one cell-block group at a time. Just inside the door, each man is checked off a list by prison staff. Then the men come over to us and receive their gift bags. The first two volunteers in line actually hand the bags to the men with a smile and greeting, then the men continue along the line of volunteers shaking hands and exchanging holiday greetings with each of us – Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, Feliz Navidad, Peace be with you, God bless you – whatever feels appropriate.

Nearly all the men respond with a holiday greeting, a smile and a handshake. One man, who seemed to be happily surprised at what was happening, exclaimed for everyone to hear, "You guys are awesome!"

Most of the men are young or young-ish. A disproportionate number are black or Hispanic. A few faces seem frozen, acknowledging the gift with just a nod, if that. I particularly notice the relatively small number of men who are old, disfigured, or have some sort of disability. Even more vivid to me are the men who remind me of myself – or myself at a younger age. I know that for some of the men, this is the only card or gift they will receive.

Once, during a pause in the line, I asked the volunteer next to me, "Dick, how often do you think, 'This man could have been me'?" He said, "Only with every one of them." Indeed, who among us can know how different our life might have been if we had been born in a different zip code ... or had minutely different DNA ... or been abused in childhood ... or gone to a rotten elementary school ... or experienced the loss of a parent ... or had a sudden, stupid, failure of impulse control ... or

### ***A Reflection on Social Action (continued)***

gotten in with the wrong crowd ... or had a learning disability ... or been born with skin of a different color? Or maybe six or eight of these circumstances combined?

As we light the Social Action Candle today, let us think of the more than two million men and women who are incarcerated in our country.

Don Miller, CPO Board Member and Volunteer

## **Teaching Behind the Walls**

Kaia Stern, CPO Executive Director, recently worked with volunteer Allison Alter to craft some questions regarding volunteer work behind the walls. We think this is a great tool for volunteers to connect with each other and share their own personal experiences as a volunteer. Allison kindly offered to share her reflections with our greater community. We hope others might be inspired to share their stories with us – the questionnaire will be on the website and all are encouraged to send responses to Outreach@ConcordPrisonOutreach.org

*What initially sparked your interest in contacting CPO/working with incarcerated populations?*

I taught reading as a Special Education Teacher several years ago at MCI-Concord, and it was one of the most rewarding and least stressful jobs I'd had. I spent many years teaching high school age at-risk adolescents in English and history, and I have always been proud of what I helped my students achieve. However, my work with the men at MCI-Concord, while it was a classification prison, developed my skills more than any other teaching position I'd had. It was a goal of mine all the years since my departure to return to the corrections system in some capacity, either as a teacher once again or in some type of administrative role. I hoped to be able to share the skills I learned as a teacher in the DOC. My work with CPO is ideal for me. I will have the opportunity to teach what I love, as well as take part in the aspects of administration I found most exciting.

*What were your expectations before you started teaching?*

It was hard to know exactly what to expect. There was, and likely still is, very little testimonial online that provides insight, and television glorifies the potential horrors of what the corrections system could contain. My greatest quandary before starting was with behavior management. My experience was with teenagers who often end up in the penal system, but I had no notion of what working with adults in this setting would entail.

*What surprised you once you started working with this population?*

I was most surprised by the duality of my students. On the one hand they were the most eager students I ever taught. Their excitement learning new skills was awe inspiring. I never considered grammar and spelling to be so engrossing, but they were riveted every time. The energy and enthusiasm among them made it almost easy to forget where the classes were held. But, in a moment one student might become frustrated with a peer for some social faux pas, and I would see a glimpse of a more hardened person. The next moment that same individual would offer support and encouragement to a peer who was struggling more than the rest in a way I seldom see among those outside the prison walls. I had been concerned about

possible disciplinary issues that never materialized – I simply didn't expect the commitment, determination, appreciation, and respect all of my students had for me and my literacy classes.

*What do you find most useful in your volunteering experience and what advice would you give to prospective volunteers?*

I think it's easy to focus on contributing in areas that are practiced either professionally or personally, but I think the biggest impact is excitement in the material. It feels like a leap down the rabbit hole, and in some ways it is just that. But, I've never regretted this leap.

Allison Alter, CPO Volunteer

## **Why Try Tutoring?**

In March, Anita Splendore, a teacher at NECC, held an orientation for tutoring English Language and/or Math skills. She had been teaching a group of about 20 men with a huge variance in education levels – from barely literate to capable of writing essays at a high school or greater level. Obviously, it was quite challenging to provide all of the individual tutoring the students needed. During the first class, the men looked warily at the five strangers, put their heads down over their papers and began working without looking up. No one volunteered to have a tutor assist him. Undaunted, Anita cheerily assigned each of us to a reluctant student and we joined the class.

Anita has tons of materials at all levels and is right there ready to help you. Over the weeks, I have had the opportunity to individually help with: English pronunciation, reading, reading comprehension, spelling, vocabulary, grammar and essay writing. Every student is at a very different skill level – which means you have to try different ways to engage each of them. In one case, a very shy older man, who spoke only Spanish, was tongue tied when I sat down with him. He had a list of English words in one column and the Spanish equivalent in the second column. After a strained few minutes, I tried saying the words in the Spanish column and he started correcting my pronunciation, which was atrocious. The ice was broken and he could relax and stumble over the English words and smile as I stumbled over the Spanish words.

I have participated in various CPO programs and, after six weeks of tutoring, I can report that it is one of the most rewarding. I especially enjoy tutoring because you can see real progress from week to week and can be creative in your methods to establish rapport. It's a very goal-orientated program with the potential to be of great benefit to the men. If you are looking for something new – try tutoring!

Edythe Salzman, CPO Volunteer

*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.*

~ Nelson Mandela

**Concord Prison Outreach, Inc.**

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*Never believe that a few  
caring people can't change  
the world. For, indeed,  
that's all who ever have.  
~ Margaret Mead*

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## **More About Concord Prison Outreach**

### **Website and Volunteer Opportunities**

If you are interested in learning more about our programs or in specific volunteer opportunities, please contact Concord Prison Outreach at [Outreach@ConcordPrisonOutreach.org](mailto:Outreach@ConcordPrisonOutreach.org). Also, take a look at our redesigned website where you can view some pictures relating to our programs (including a beautiful picture of the colorful blooms at MCI-Concord), read more about current programs and volunteer needs both inside of and outside of the walls, read about CPO, its mission and history, and find links to other organizations and websites of interest. We hope you'll visit our site at [www.ConcordPrisonOutreach.org](http://www.ConcordPrisonOutreach.org).



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Debbie Dormitzer, Paul Dormitzer, Justin Dormitzer, Holly Lapp and Jay Luby

## **A Message of Gratitude from Kaia Stern**

In the spirit of tending gardens, I celebrate the seeds that have grown in the darkness with no witness. I celebrate those who have tilled the soil and the seeds that are now blossoming in the sunlight. Yes, the beauty of our collective gardens is humbling. There have been many moments these past 10 months when I have been deeply grateful for Concord Prison Outreach. The opportunity to distribute the Holiday Gift Bags was profoundly moving, an honor I will never forget. Being a part of Karen Baratta's Transforming Anger with Nonviolent Communication course at NECC was such a gift that on my drive home on those Tuesday evenings, it felt like my soul was singing around the Route 2 rotary. And, most recently, I was inspired to sit in a circle with CPO Program Leaders, and to learn more about our extraordinary volunteers and the work that they are doing to offer educational programming in prison.

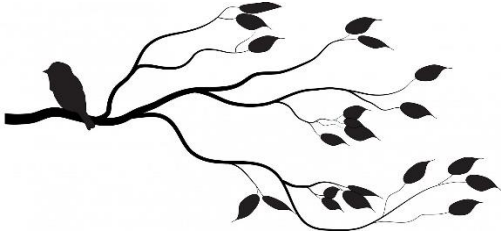
I offer my sincere gratitude to the extended CPO family of volunteers, faith communities and other donors for their dedication and support. You have made a remarkable difference in many people's lives and we are grateful. Of course, none of this would be possible without the efforts of Department of Correction administrators and staff at MCI-Concord and Northeastern Correctional Center, administrators and staff at Middlesex House of Correction, and Department of Correction Director of Volunteer Services, Bill Milhomme. Many thanks for their dedication to the populations they serve and their support of CPO programming.

I would also like to extend my personal thanks to Allison Alter, Holly Lapp, and our stellar CPO Board, for the hard work and commitment that they put into this blessed organization. Thanks to you all, Concord Prison Outreach is working tirelessly to bring human kindness behind prison walls. – Warmly, Kaia Stern, Executive Director



# Concord Prison Outreach

Human Kindness Behind Prison Walls



*Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.*

~ Henry David Thoreau

*Thank you for supporting our volunteer-led programs.* Your donations help to pay for books and teaching materials that support our volunteers. Please consider supporting us so we can continue and grow CPO programs. Because we are a volunteer organization, your donations go a long way toward providing these services.

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

Yes, I'd like to contribute \$\_\_\_\_\_ toward CPO's mission of helping people in prison

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Email address (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

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.***

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