Partners in Parenting at MCI-Concord

As a kid growing up close by, MCI-Concord always loomed large with its old Victorian buildings and imposing guard towers. It was another world completely apart from the one I inhabited, and that apartness was still strong last year as I walked through the doors to volunteer for my first Partners in Parenting class. I didn't know what to expect from these guys who were so apart from me.

Six months later, as we wrap up our second “semester”, I can see that my preconceptions were mostly wrong. This group of guys that I worried would be so hard to connect with turned out to be a bunch of dads who, like their counterparts on the outside, were concerned about their kids and eager to learn from us and from each other. Being in prison introduces a whole set of unique and difficult challenges, but the desire to connect with one's kids is universal.

The eight-week class covers a range of parenting skills, such as active listening and effective communications. But what it also does is give these guys a safe forum for sharing their parenting struggles and hearing...
**Partners in Parenting, continued**

from the others what works for them. And for me, it gives the opportunity to briefly know some guys that I wouldn't otherwise, and to learn from them as well. Though we are certainly apart, we are able to share an awful lot together.  - John Pallies

**Cognitive Skills**

Last fall, a new volunteer-facilitated program was launched at MCI-Concord: Cognitive Skills. The program focuses on seven cognitive skills that range from active listening to assertive communication to negotiating. At the Director of Treatment’s request at MCI-Concord, we have been focusing on one skill at a time, making sure everyone who wants to take that workshop has been able to, before we move on to the next skill.

If it were possible for you to drop by at the beginning of our workshop on active listening, you might find us attempting to follow step-by-step instructions to draw a bug or trying to remember what other people in our circle have selected to bring on a picnic. Yes, listening games you might associate with childhood...and we, too, wondered whether the games might feel too elementary as ice-breakers.

But we found that the listening games are not just simply fun for all of us. The laughter and equalizing effect set the table for the more personal conversations that follow. As we consider our own strengths and weaknesses as active listeners, observations and suggestions flow more freely. And when we need to lighten the conversation, we have shared jokes to call upon. The fledgling sense of team cohesion helps carry us into the second part of the workshop, one week later.

Incorporating more listening games into the curriculum was a suggestion offered by an early workshop participant. As other volunteers get involved, they too bring excellent ideas for how to further tweak the Cognitive Skills curriculum for our population and time frame.  - Phyllis Wentworth, PhD

- For more information on volunteering for Cognitive Skills, please see Volunteer Opportunities on page 4.

**Outside Library Program, continued**

often 20 or more books) checks them out. The other pair collects the books at the library to deliver and organize at the prison. At the end of Outside Library Night, they take the books the men have returned, plus their new request forms, back to the library. And two weeks later the process begins again..

- Leigh Buchanan, Nancy Lyons, Linda Reynolds, and Carolyn Shohet

- For more information on volunteering for the Outside Library Program, please see Volunteer Opportunities on page 4.

**Money Smart**

For years I had driven by the prison with the Victorian building and fountain in front, MCI-Concord. I wondered what the guards in the corner towers saw inside the twenty-five foot walls. What was it like only yards from the rotary that took me and my family to the Discovery Museum, indoor soccer, and apple-picking? How could I pass by so many times and never stop to help people who need a second chance?

I spoke with Carol Peters in December and learned about the Money Smart program and quickly found a talented friend to help. The prison orientation session was intimidating, but Gerry Silberman and I were cleared and passed through the “trap” early in February. In the classroom on the other side of the wall, we met twenty-three men eager to learn about personal finance, banking, and homeownership. In class, over the last nine weeks, the students have been respectful, attentive, and engaged. In the process, both my knowledge and pre-conceptions have been tested.

Inside the prison are people planning for their futures. They show up, pay attention in class, and ask thoughtful questions. They connect material discussed weeks earlier to current topics. They listen, question, and understand. In short, they are good students.

When I tell acquaintances that I volunteer at MCI-Concord, many ask first about my safety. As I surrendered my license at the window the first time, I wondered, “What I have I gotten myself into?” Now I know that the evening was the start of a positive, fulfilling experience. I’m very glad I slowed and took the right turn at the rotary.  - Steve McHugh

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With appreciation to the CPO newsletter team:
Lisa Daigle (editor),
Justin Dormitzer (graphic design)
Volunteers Needed for New County Prison Programs

CPO is looking for educators, tutors, and a variety of other volunteers to participate in new programs at the Middlesex House of Correction in Billerica. There are weekday and evening time slots available throughout the year. Because the inmate population is more transient, programs will run 4-6 weeks and meet 1-2 times/week.

Needs include:
- Tutors for math skills, especially algebra.
- Tutors for writing skills, including the 5-paragraph essay required for the new high-school equivalency test, HiSET (replacing the GED).
- Financial literacy programs for men just before they leave state custody.
- Emotional Literacy classes.
- Parenting skills programs.
- Read to Me, Dad to strengthen connections between inmates and their children.
- Victim Impact Awareness programs.
- Domestic Violence Awareness programs.

Please contact Carol Peters at CPO@concordprisonoutreach.org.

Holiday Gift Bag Program

The Holiday Gift Bag Project was once again successful in bringing holiday cheer and goodwill to the almost 1700 men in the two prisons here in Concord. The bags of toiletries and writing materials convey a meaningful message far beyond the usefulness of their contents.

Here are some of the inmates' comments following the distribution of the gift bags:

"Prison is a very unforgiving world, and to have kind light shed upon me was blissful."

"Seeing all you nice people that came here and who put the packages together for us gives me hope that I can truly turn my life around and be like you guys."

"It is hard to go through the holiday season without being with loved ones but your kindness brings hope for better days to come."

And from one of the volunteers distributing the gift bags:

"I have to say that in the many years I've been going inside to teach or establish educational programs, I have never been moved in quite the way I was on Thursday. I was truly humbled. There were many times I found myself fighting back tears, emotionally charged not only by the numbers, but by the diversity of circumstances written on the men's faces or captured in the way they walked. I was moved by their gratitude and the many ways they chose to express it. And I was touched by the genuineness of their handshakes. - Carol Miller"

Who We Are:

Staff: Carol Peters, Executive Director • Holly Lapp, Administrative Assistant and Interim Outreach Coordinator

Board of Directors: Mark Fingerle, Chair • Kai Shaner, Vice Chair • Richard Leaver, Treasurer • Karen Paradise, Recording Secretary • Karen Ippolito, Corresponding Secretary • Debbie Dormitzer • Alice Kaufman • Michael Krupa • Lanny Kutakoff • Jay Luby • Don Miller

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With Gratitude to our Supporting Faith Groups: Acton Congregational, Acton • Acton Monthly Meeting, Quaker, Concord • Carlisle Congregational, Carlisle • Church of the Good Shepherd, Episcopal, Acton • Concord Bahá’í Community, Concord • Congregational Church, UCC, of Littleton • Congregational Church, UCC, of Weston • Faith Community, Hopkinton • First Church of Christ, Congregational, in Bedford • First Parish, UU, in Bedford • First Parish, UU, Chelmsford • First Parish, UU, in Concord • First Parish, UU, in Lexington • First Parish, UU/UCC, in Lincoln • First Parish, UU, of Stow and Acton • First Parish, UU, of Sudbury • First Religious Society, UU, in Carlisle • First Unitarian Society, UU, in Newton • Framingham Friends Meeting, Quaker, Framingham • Friends Meeting, Quaker, at Cambridge • Grace Chapel, Lexington • Hancock UCC, Congregational, Lexington • Harvard, UU, Harvard • Holy Family Parish, Catholic, Concord • Kerem Shalom, Jewish, Concord • Newton Highlands Congregational, UCC, Newton • Park Avenue Congregational, UCC, Arlington • Second Church, UCC, in Newton • SSJE Chapel, Jesuit, Cambridge • St. Anne Parish, Catholic, Littleton • St. Anne’s-in-the-Fields Episcopal, Lincoln • St. Bridge Parish, Catholic, Maynard • St. Catherine of Alexandria, Catholic, Westford • St. Elizabeth of Hungary Parish, Catholic, Acton • St. Irene, Catholic, Carlisle • St. John Evangelical Lutheran, Sudbury • St. Matthew’s United Methodist, Acton • St. Paul’s Episcopal, Brookline • St. Peter’s Episcopal, Cambridge • South Acton Congregational, UCC, Acton • Sudbury United Methodist, Sudbury • Trinitarian Congregational, Concord • Trinity, Episcopal, Boston • Trinity Episcopal, Concord • United Church of Christ, Congregational, Boxborough • United Methodist, Newton • United Parish, UCC/Methodist/Baptist, in Brookline • West Concord Union, UCC, Concord
Looking Back/Looking Forward from Carol Peters, Executive Director

As I think back over my past five years as Executive Director, I remember fondly all the people who have walked beside me in this ministry: all the volunteers trudging into the prisons week after week; all the countless helpers on the holiday gift bag project; all the board and steering committee members devoting their time to support CPO; the organization’s officers who maintain the records, manage the budget, and keep the vision; all the members who carry our messages to their communities; the faith communities that support us; the many donors who contribute the resources to make it all happen; the people who show up again and again to put out the mailings; and the list goes on.

But most of all I remember the men behind the walls, their willingness to work, their struggles to change, their wisdom born of pain, their frustrations and fears, their strengths and foibles. They are the reason we are all here.

And I see today, as I have so often in the past, that this work changes lives. CPO is vital to empowering volunteers to reach those who need our help and humanity. And we are here in great numbers.

I am so grateful to the men and women who founded CPO decades ago, and kept it strong and thriving for all this time. It is a legacy that I treasure and carefully pass on to my successor. I deeply thank you all for your kind and generous hearts, and your indomitable humanity. Together we change the world. Thank you.