The Heart of Volunteerism

I’ve been teaching in the prisons for over a decade, and every class is an adventure in learning about myself. When I walk into a new class behind the walls, I walk into a room full of strangers. The men are as different from me as you can imagine—all male, many different races and languages, different socio-economic backgrounds, different generations. At first it might seem scary, but I know from experience that I walk into a room full of strangers today, and 12 weeks later, when I finish my class, I will know and care deeply about each of them. And so we start the process of building the common ground of our humanity—which is like to be human and how we can manage our thoughts and emotions so that we can live to the fullest within the limits of our humanity. I am always moved to realize how much we all have in common.

I’ve had many moving experiences over the years, but I want to share one story that captures some of the reason I keep returning to this work. In one of my classes, many years ago, I had a student who was tall and thin, wiry and strong, covered with tattoos—the kind of person you wouldn’t want to meet in a dark alley at night. I noticed he

Victim Impact Awareness Program

Do you know what V.C.R. means? Does an outdated electronic device replaced by DVDs come to mind? Members of the new Victim Impact Awareness Program at MCI-Concord are learning a different meaning: Validate, Challenge, Request.

Available to inmates who have previously participated in emotional literacy programs, including BEACON Emotional Awareness and Nonviolent Communication, this new class began its piloted round in September with volunteers Nora Wright (MRP) and Betty Case (PhD), and assisted by Carolyn Shohet. Its intention is to provide inmates with the resources and learning space to understand their experiences as both victims and as perpetrators of violence. The Victim Impact Awareness Program focuses, in particular, on restorative justice as one model for accountability that considers the voices of all people involved in violence.

Our texts for the course are Teens Who Hurt by Kenneth Hardy and Tracy Laszloffy, and The Little Book of Restorative Justice by Howard Zehr. These books consider the ways in which we can empower all people to engage in the process of healing and making amends.

The VCR approach suggests that when we seek to help people change their behavior, we have to start by Validating them and identifying their strengths. The second part of the model is Challenging. We address the behavior that needs to be changed directly. The final step is a Request. Requests invite someone to use the strengths we have identified to make a significant change

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in response to our challenge. This model sounds challenging; yet our students are already using it. Several weeks ago, one participant used the VCR approach with a family member with success!

Indeed, the men are learning from each other and from us about tools and tips for validating, challenging, requesting, and taking responsibility.

- Betty Case and Nora Wright

Recreational Guitar Behind the Walls

Most of the students in Recreational Guitar class are there for about a year, and I have been blown away, over and over again, at the progress they are able to make in one short year. Some of the guys come in there already knowing a lot, having picked up skills on the street. Others have literally never held a guitar in their hands before at all. But no matter where they are starting from, there is always someplace meaningful to go!

We choose songs we can all play together at the same time—some guys hitting the basic chords and others doing more complex overlays. We usually sound a little wobbly the first few times through, but once we find the groove, things really take off.

There is something uniquely special and transporting about creating music, live, in the moment. It is a soul-feeding thing, and when we get musical lift-off, we can all feel it. Sometimes we mess up and crack each other up. But other times, we find ourselves far beyond the prison walls—creating something powerful together. Suddenly, we're soaring!

A few of the guys have composed their own songs for us to play. One wrote a song to his daughter. We rehearsed and rehearsed it, and then he performed it for her live on the day he was released. Another inmate created a song I still sing to myself: I'm Gonna Clean Up What I Messed Up; Starting My Life All Over Again. Today he is outside the walls, living the truth of his song.

- Anna Huckabee Tull

Nonviolent Communication: Free Workshops on November 15th & 16th

Come join us to develop skills in Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and learn more about our volunteer programs in the prisons:

Saturday, November 15, 2014, 10 am - 5 pm
Topic: NVC Principles

Sunday, November 16, 2014, 10 am - 5 pm
Topic: NVC community-building, advanced training, and strategic discussions about NVC programs in prison.

Attend one or both workshops. A detailed agenda and location information is available at concordprisonoutreach.org.

Email CPO@ConcordPrisonOutreach.org for more information and to register, or call 617-286-6728.
Basic Computer Skills Class

CPO has offered a course in Basic Computer Skills for several years at the Northeastern Correctional Center. Volunteers help the inmates learn Microsoft Word and Excel. Some of the men come to class with a working knowledge of Word and Excel, while others need to learn how to use a keyboard.

There is no lecture; sessions are run as a tutorial, where the men are given tasks and get help from CPO volunteers and each other. In 10 sessions of 90 minutes each, they learn more than basic skills; in fact they learn some skills beyond what a college student would know. Most of today’s jobs, whether working in a restaurant or repairing cars, requires computer skills.

The men get a chance to experience both the frustrations of dealing with computers that are very inflexible, but also the satisfaction of seeing finished work that is high quality. They have a chance to exercise that “left side” of their brain and many find it enjoyable.

I have found it rewarding to lead the class. There is always room for volunteers to assist or run a new session. - Tom Lemaire

Wisdom of The Ages

At a meeting some months ago, each member of the CPO Board and Steering Committee was given a gift. Lynn Holbein, a member of the Steering Committee, presented to each a colorful, postcard-sized work of her art with a quote from Rabindranath Tagore, Bengali poet and novelist. In 1913, Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The quote reads:

“I dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted, and behold—service was joy.”

This fall, I got back to tutoring math at NECC (“the farm”) after a hiatus of six months or so. At the end of the first afternoon back, I said to two staff members, “I had forgotten how much I enjoy doing this.” My friend Rabindranath would have smiled. Maybe he did.

- Don Miller

With appreciation to the CPO newsletter team:
Lisa Daigle (editor), Justin Dormitzer (graphic design)

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“I dreamt that life was joy.”
A Message of Gratitude from Carol Peters, Executive Director

I want to thank all who have contributed to our efforts at CPO thru volunteerism, financial support, and the many projects that keep CPO thriving. We are truly blessed to have so many individuals and faith communities standing beside us in this ministry to help the incarcerated develop the skills they need to succeed when leaving prison. We come together with the steadfast belief that all human life is of value and that all deserve the opportunity to grow and become the best we can be. We work to provide these opportunities to the incarcerated.

This has been a bountiful year for Concord Prison Outreach. We have 15 programs that are either new or restarting this fall, including a new Victim Impact Awareness program that helps the incarcerated understand the impact of their behavior, why they do the things they do, and how to make better choices. We have a team of volunteers teaching a new parenting skills class that helps men understand the needs of their children and develop skills to be better parents. We have a new support group for incarcerated veterans to help them deal with their unique issues—to name just a few.

CPO is grateful to the prison administration for providing needed classroom space and more orientations to get volunteers started quickly. We send our deepest thanks to Sup. Thompson, Dep. Sup. Bissonnette, Director of Treatment Kim Lincoln and Ellen Flaminio, Director of Classification Joann Lynds, and DOT Assistant Bonnie Corsini for their tireless support of our efforts.

We are also so grateful for your donations which give us the resources to develop new programs and recruit and train volunteers to work behind the wall. Your financial support is essential to providing the funds to buy textbooks and teaching materials for our programs, especially now, as we raise funds to cover the teaching materials we’ll need for our many new programs. Thank you.
The 2014 Holiday Gift Bag Project

Again this year the Holiday Gift Bag Project will bring a bit of hope and holiday cheerfulness to each of the inmates in Concord's two prisons. This year nearly 1700 gift bags will be needed.

To help, here is what you need to know:

The list of gifts approved by the Department of Correction is the same as last year. As always, please follow the specifications:

- 1 bar of deodorant soap (4 - 5 oz.)
- 1 plastic bottle of shampoo (12 -15 oz.)
- 1 stick deodorant (2.5 oz. or larger; no roll-ons)
- 1 tube toothpaste (5.8 to 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 with an uplifting message. Note that no type of glue or tape or stickers may be used. Please see ConcordPrisonOutreach.org for more card-making instructions.

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.

LOCATION: Again this year the Holiday Gift Bag Project will be in Acton at:
St. Matthew’s United Methodist Church, 435 Central Street, Acton, MA 01720

Easy Directions: Take Route 2 to Exit 41 (just 4.7 miles west of the Concord rotary.) Follow the sign toward W. Acton for just half a mile; the church will be on your left.

Gift items can be dropped off at St. Matthew’s from December 2nd through December 9th.

Adult Volunteers are needed on weekday mornings from Tuesday, December 2nd through Friday, December 12th, 9:00 am to 12:00 noon. In addition, there will be two evening sessions:
- Wednesday, December 3rd and Tuesday, December 9th, from 7:00 to 9:00 pm. 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. And think about this: most inmates will be released eventually. Wouldn’t it be good for them to know that there are good-hearted people on the outside who think about them and care?
Where does peace begin?

“We all carry within us places of exile, our crimes, our ravages. Our task is not to unleash them on the world; it is to transform them in ourselves and others.”

~ Albert Camus

Thank You for supporting our volunteer-led programs. Due to our success in adding 15 new programs this year, CPO faces special challenges to pay for books and teaching materials to support our volunteers. Please consider supporting us so we can grow these programs. Because we are a volunteer organization, your donations go a long way to providing these services.

Please return this section with your donation

Yes, I’d like to contribute $_______ toward CPO’s mission of helping the incarcerated.

Your name: ________________________________________________________________

Address: ________________________________________________________________

City, State, Zip: __________________________________________________________

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.

Concord Prison Outreach is a 501(c)(3) non-religious charity.

www.ConcordPrisonOutreach.org