Sesame Street Comes to MCI-Norfolk

On February 22, 2014, MCI-Norfolk hosted a kickoff for Sesame Street’s Little Children Big Challenges: Incarceration. The morning included several projects for children: decorating frames, making balloon animals, face painting, reading a book, and getting the opportunity to meet Elmo and have a family picture taken with him.

The Department of Correction is partnering with Sesame Street to help support young children who have an incarcerated parent. According to a Pew Charitable Trust report, there are 2.7 million children nationwide with an incarcerated parent.

Last year, Sesame Street introduced a new character, Alex, whose father is in prison. Alex gives voice to some of the feelings these young children have to deal with: sadness, anger, isolation, and guilt. They have also produced a tool kit for families that includes a book for children and a pamphlet and DVD that provides information for parents about how to help young children deal with the issues they face. Some of the suggestions include being honest with children about where their parent is, providing a child with

Entrepreneurship Class at MCI-Concord

For the incarcerated, the tough economy has exacerbated the difficulty of obtaining a job via the conventional hiring route. In response, CPO decided to offer inmates a course on Entrepreneurship. The idea was to provide inmates with basic business planning tools so that, upon their release, they would have a better chance of entering the workforce as their own boss. Thankfully, Department of Correction leaders, especially Dale Bissonnette, were very receptive to the program proposal.

As a result of this collaboration, the first Entrepreneurship class was offered this past January to 15 eager students at MCI-Concord. The course was taught by four volunteers with extensive entrepreneurial experience—Allison Haar, Jay Luby, Richard Herman, and Larry Green.

Jay Sweet, the Principal at MCI-Concord, helped screen applicants to determine the 15 participants most likely to benefit from taking this class. The first few classes were spent brainstorming and identifying viable low-cost businesses that would represent a good fit, given a student’s interest, experience, and skill set. The participants were very eager and attentive throughout the program and identified yard care, construction, an Internet startup, food, and other services as worthwhile opportunities to pursue.

Once students selected an entrepreneurial business to consider, they were encouraged to establish some short- and long-term goals, identify their personal and business strengths and weaknesses, and determine how best to maximize their competitive advantages. Part of the process emphasized the importance of
Sesame Street, continued

a photograph of their family, encouraging children to talk about their feelings, reinforcing that it is not a child’s fault that their parent is incarcerated, and encouraging correspondence between the child and his/her incarcerated parent.

Concord Prison Outreach has supported families for a long time by providing volunteers at both Family Days and at the Kid’s Corner. When children come to visit their fathers at MCI-Concord and the Northeastern Correctional Center, the volunteers in the Kid’s Corner read books with the children, provide paper and crayons for drawing pictures, and play games with them. This program provides parents with the time to discuss topics they do not want their children to hear, as well as provides entertainment for the children and a chance to move around during a long visit. - Kai Shaner

CPO’s Mission: Help prepare today’s inmates to be tomorrow’s good neighbors.

Volunteer Openings

CPO offers more than 25 programs at Concord-based prisons. We are looking for volunteers for several programs, including:

- ESL Tutoring
- Kid’s Corner
- Landscaping & Gardening
- Nonviolent Communication
- Parenting Skills
- Substance Abuse Support Group
- Veteran’s Support Group

“For me, this is about a growing community of teachers”  
(Dave Smith, Nonviolent Communication)

For more information, please see CPO’s website at: www.ConcordPrisonOutreach.org

Thank you

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

Entrepreneurship Class, continued

market research, fundraising, and realistic budgeting focused on the student’s chosen market opportunity. In addition, time was spent discussing potential competitive threats and how perceived challenges can actually represent wonderful marketing opportunities.

By the end of the class, a key goal was to provide participants with the knowledge and tools to establish an initial business plan that could be expanded and refined over time. Given the interest in and success of this first Entrepreneurship class, plans are already underway to offer this course again in September. - Jay Luby

Gardens Grow Behind the Walls

A prison yard glowing with flowers? Certainly a strange idea. But at both Concord prisons this is a reality—although only those who live or work there ever see it. Five years ago at MCI-Concord, the yard was a dust bowl, without grass or any color. Then, a bequest from Mary Ann Bodecker made possible the purchase of a rototiller, which led to grass—and then the first flower beds. Correction officers, who were initially dubious about flowers in a prison, found that traffic control was easier along the paths. Some inmates, at least, found the colorful flower beds and the birds they attracted calming in a stress-filled place. There are now about 20 small flower beds behind the wall!

Some highlights: over the years these gardens have expanded—there’s now a greenhouse at each prison where seeds are started for earlier bloom, and new varieties tried out. We have experimented with some of the seed-saving packets available at Concord’s Fowler Library, and have even been able to return seeds for the following year. The goals of the program include teaching more environmentally-healthy gardening, eating, and composting methods, both in the prison setting and when men return to their own families; and a second goal is preparing those who may work in landscaping companies in the future to qualify for more technical, better-paying jobs.

At MCI-Concord, a year ago, COG Design, an organization that provides landscape architects to help design non-profits’ outdoor spaces, gave three sessions on landscape planning to the men working on the gardens. Teaching within the limits of what one can bring into the prison is always an adventure! But they taught ways to measure distance using one’s stride or hand span (and recording what it is), observing through slides the kinds of plantings that “work” with various styles of houses, and then had each class member design a 3-D diorama with flower beds for the prison yard, focusing on a model of the Chapel and the land around it. An amazing variety of plans emerged—and trees were a common feature. (There are no trees behind the wall, in reality.)

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

"Our lives are unique stones in the mosaic of human existence -- priceless and irreplaceable."

- Henri Nouwen

Concord Prison Outreach has lost a dear friend with the passing of Noel Doyle, a dedicated prison volunteer. Noel gave a lifetime of service as a sister of Notre Dame de Namur, working with the poor and disenfranchised. On her retirement, Noel came to MCI-Concord to teach the BEACON Emotional Literacy program, and went on to run this program at MCI-Concord, NECC, and South Middlesex Correctional Center. Dedicated to the very end, she had just completed a class in December and was scheduled to start a new program the week she died.

Noel ministered in many directions in her life, supporting friends, family, and neighbors as well as the incarcerated. She had an unshakable belief in the value of every human being, which blossomed in the love she brought to all she touched. Her diminutive frame housed a rare combination of energy, warmth, and humor that delighted her co-facilitators and mesmerized her students.

In Memoriam, continued

Gardens Grow Behind the Walls, continued

CPO has provided volunteers to teach gardening skills and horticulture at the two prisons. At NECC (the Farm) a Master Gardener heads the team, with lessons that include advising on planting times and pruning of shrubs and perennials. The vegetable garden there produces food for the prison kitchen and sends surplus tomatoes, eggplant, lettuce, and broccoli to Concord's Open Table and to the VA hospital. For the men who work these gardens, the chance to give back to society is important.

Mrs. Bodecker's bequest continues to fund a variety of special programs at Concord's prisons, but none have changed lives more fruitfully than this gardening program. - Win Wilbur

In Memoriam, continued

Noel’s sense of fearlessness was never more apparent than when you attempted to deny her... ice cream! She will be greatly missed. - Carol Peters, Executive Director

"The purpose of life is to live it, To taste experience to the utmost, To reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experience."

- Eleanor Roosevelt

continued, next column

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A Message of Gratitude from Carol Peters, Executive Director

As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them. - John F. Kennedy

In my role at CPO, I feel such gratitude for the many people who contribute their time, expertise, and resources to our mission at CPO. Together we accomplish so much. It is in the teamwork that we are strong—a body of individuals moving forward with a vision of serving those who are so often forgotten. We have so much to be grateful for.

I am also grateful for our strong collaboration with the Department of Correction, and the support we are receiving for our programs. This year, the DOC has increased the number of orientations, making it much quicker and easier to get new volunteers working behind the wall. We are also collaborating on increasing the availability of classroom space, and CPO is working on new program applications for a Parenting Skills class, a Veterans Support group, a Couples Reentry Workshop, a Desktop Publishing class, and a study group for the BEACON Emotional Literacy program.

We all at CPO are so grateful for your efforts and support, as we continue our mission of helping the incarcerated build better lives for themselves and their families. You make it possible. Thank you.

Nonviolent Communication Program Provides Volunteer Training

On January 11, Dave Smith and Pauline Vastardis facilitated a Nonviolent Communication (NVC) training class for people interested in teaching “Transforming Anger with Nonviolent Communication” to inmates. Eight people (including myself) attended the full day training in Concord.

NVC is a process developed by Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD, to empower people to communicate purposefully and empathetically. Attendees at the January training reviewed the basic tenets of the program as described in Rosenberg's book. We used some real life examples and supported each other in applying NVC principles and exploring possible outcomes.

As a result of the training, four more people have joined the community of NVC facilitators, and others are interested as well. Recently, the first 12-week program at MCI-Concord concluded, and a new section at NECC (led by one of the recent training participants, Karen Baratta) has begun.

Since its inception last year, five consecutive NVC programs have been offered at Concord prisons. Program participants have been challenged to seek deeper understanding of their own feelings and needs and those of others, and to utilize skills like observation, choice, empathy, and connection. Expansion of this program behind the walls can provide important tools for more inmates that struggle with anger-driven behaviors. - Debbie Dormitzer

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“When one flower blooms, spring awakens everywhere.” John O’Donohue
Concord Prison Outreach provides more than 25 volunteer programs to prisons in Concord. Our nearly 100 volunteers contribute more than 5,000 hours of programming in education, job skills, personal skills, and the humanities. Every dollar you provide is paid back many times over in the value of services we are able to provide.

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

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