

Building Bonds

From the Inside Out

By Elizabeth Craig

It is 12 p.m. on a sunny July Saturday at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility and inside the facility things are running as usual. Step into the outside courtyard and it is a completely different story: Eighty inmates, along with their children and caregivers, are participating in Through a Child's Eyes (TACE) — a unique summer event featuring an outside barbecue, interactive games, crafts, clowns, zoo animals, balloons, snow cones and more. This is not a typical day at prison, but is just one example of Coffee Creek's many unique programs and services that aim to strengthen family ties and to help break the cycle of intergenerational criminality.

The Oregon Department of Corrections encourages productive relationships between families and inmates in order to increase the likelihood of success upon the inmate's release. The period of a parent's incarceration provides an excellent opportunity for positive intervention with families at risk. With a departmentwide focus on children and families, Oregon's only womens institution offers several programs and services that concentrate on family, parenting and preparing inmates for reunion with their children.

Trying to Break the Cycle

Realizing that improving the relationship between children and an incarcerated parent is vital to preventing an intergenerational cycle of criminality, the Wilsonville Rotary partnered with the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in 2003, and the TACE program was born. The goal of the partnership is to provide new services and activities for the children of incarcerated mothers, to provide supervised opportunities for incarcerated parents to practice their parenting skills (with coaching if necessary), and to develop and reinforce a positive relationship with their children.

"Our goal is to provide as many opportunities for positive connections between inmates and their children while they are here so they can begin rebuilding the relationship," said Bill Hoefel, Coffee Creek's superintendent. "If we can help create a foundation, it is easier for them to build on that and to develop the relationship in a healthy and productive way upon release."

The summer TACE event is a unique opportunity for inmates to spend quality time with their children in a non-traditional prison setting. According to one inmate, "It was the closest I've come to feeling human and being able to set aside the guilt I feel on a daily basis."

Parenting 101

The TACE event is one of the facility's quarterly children's events, all of which exist to provide opportunities for positive interaction between inmate mothers and their children. The fall event features pumpkin painting; winter features gingerbread houses and a visit from Santa and Mrs. Claus, complete with gifts donated and wrapped by community members; and spring features interactive crafts.

Those inmates who participate in any of the quarterly children's events have to earn the right to be there. They must have clear conduct for at least six months and they must either be currently enrolled in, have graduated from or be on the wait list for the facility's parenting program. The parenting curriculum was developed as an outcome of Oregon's statewide Children of Incarcerated Parents Project in cooperation with the Oregon Social Learning Center, a research institute based in Eugene.

With nearly two-thirds of Coffee Creek's population being mothers, the parenting program is a critical piece in preparing inmates to be better parents. The program specifically teaches effective parenting skills to inmates, covering topics such as emotion regulation, child develop-



Courtesy Oregon Department of Corrections

Inmate Amy Grabeel and her daughter share a playful moment together during a visit.



Participants in the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars program, inmate April Christensen and her daughter, Katie, work together on a craft project during a troop meeting.

ment, communication, skill encouragement, problem solving, limit setting, child health and safety, common child problems, and positive involvement.

“We are striving to place an emphasis on the necessity of taking [the parenting program] as soon after the woman’s arrival as possible,” said Lory Humbert, assistant superintendent of transitional services. “Damage has already occurred with the family; whatever we can do to help the women learn and practice their skills as early as possible in their stay can only start the healing process sooner.”

The Oregon Social Learning Center is currently conducting a longitudinal study to determine the impact of the parenting program on the children of inmates who have taken part. This is a one-of-a-kind study in the nation and is likely to affect future funding decisions. Preliminary results are expected in early 2007 and final results analyzing data from 389 participants are expected in 2008.

Many minimum-custody inmates who successfully complete the parenting program will go on to participate in either the Early Head Start or the Even Start program, which both focus on strengthening the mother-child relationship. Additionally, both programs provide an opportunity for qualified early childhood experts to do hands-on coaching for mothers.

Early Head Start is a child-development program for inmates and their children ages 0 to 3 who spend time together two days a week in a healthy child development center on prison grounds. Activities with program staff are

designed to strengthen and enhance the mother-child relationship and the caregiver-mother relationship in preparation for the mother’s release. Comprehensive services include education, health and nutrition for children, family support services to mothers and caregivers as the primary educator of the child, and transition planning for the child upon the mother’s release. Staff members also provide monthly home visits to caregivers to bridge the relationship between the incarcerated parent and caregiver.

Another program offered to the women and children at Coffee Creek is Even Start, a federally funded literacy program for children ages 0 to 7 and their inmate mothers. The program’s goals include improving computer and reading skills of incarcerated mothers; improving mother-child interaction through planned activities; increasing parent skills in creative literacy activities with children; preparing mothers to understand the educational needs of their children upon release; enhancing the child’s literacy success in school; and promoting shared learning experiences.

One of the most important outcomes of this program is the parent’s involvement with their children’s school and parent-teacher conferences. “For many of the mothers, their first parent-teacher conference has taken place as part of this program,” Humbert said. “Some have had school-age children for years and feared going to teacher conferences. It is amazing how empowering this experience can be for them — it shows them what it is like to advocate for themselves and their children and provides a tremen-

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Danny Abrego

Inmate Shannon Welch spends a rare and special moment with her children, Casey, Kiley and Doug, during the 2006 TACE event.

“With the Girl Scouts program, I am still able to function as a mom even though I am incarcerated,” explained Kimberlee Peterson, an inmate who has participated in the program since September 2004. “The program gives us great learning tools on how to communicate with our children, which in turn helps us to teach our daughters how to make healthy decisions and how to build healthy relationships. It is also a place where I get to spend quality one-on-one time with my daughter and with the other inmates and their girls, helping to show how to interact with other people appropriately.”

As part of the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars program, the Girl Scouts ages 8 to 15 produced a documentary entitled “The Circle is Round,” which illustrates the importance of the program and having connections to their mothers while they are incarcerated. The documentary offers the viewer a striking look into the lives of children who face the day-to-day challenges of having an incarcerated parent.

Following in the footsteps of the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars program, the Boy Scouts came to Coffee Creek in October 2004 as part of the Wilsonville Rotary’s sponsorship. Alternating with the Girl Scouts, the Boy Scout troop meets every other Saturday and provides an opportunity for inmate mothers to bond with their sons as they work through the scouting badges. Moms have helped their sons race cars, understand the merits of good citizenship, and learn about geology, government and proper care of the American flag.

dous amount of motivation for the mother to really be invested in and supportive of her child.”

Coffee Creek’s efforts to strengthen family ties are not only found in its programming. Step into the medium-security facility’s visiting room and the most family-friendly room in the entire facility can be found. A colorful landscape mural featuring fish, flowers, frogs, trees, birds and butterflies covers the side wall; small colored chairs in different sizes are stacked in one corner so each child may choose the seat that is right for him or her; children’s tables atop decorative carpets sit next to the wall mural; and an oversized refrigerator painted on the wall is adorned with drawings that the children have created.

A small side room decorated with a bright seascape mural and equipped with children’s books, games and play equipment provides an opportunity for inmates to positively interact with their children. The Teen Table is a quiet, private conversation spot that provides a special place for adolescent visitors and their parents. Adjacent to the main visiting room is an outside area with playground equipment and benches for families to share and have fun together.

“The staff, inmates and families came together to make this space as comfortable and fun as possible, given that we are a prison,” Humbert said. “Several of our security sergeants who oversee visiting have been instrumental in observing a need and after discussion with the inmates and families, formulating ideas to present for approval and then overseeing implementation. This has really increased the buy-in from all the people involved.”

A Visiting Room Made Special

This same visiting room is also where every other Saturday inmates in the medium-security facility participating in the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars program meet with their relatives — daughters, granddaughters, nieces and sisters. A Girl Scouts Beyond Bars meeting also takes place simultaneously in the minimum-security facility. The girls and inmates participate in structured activities together that help to re-establish the adult-child relationship and reduce the cycle of intergenerational criminality. The program focuses on Girl Scout values and healthy decision-making skills.



Courtesy: Oregon Department of Corrections

Striving to create a greater sense of home, magnetic paint provides inmates a “refrigerator” on which to hang their children’s artwork that they make during regular visits.

Looking Out for Their Best Interests

The Oregon DOC has an interest in finding ways to help the children of incarcerated parents because research shows that they are five to six times more likely to become incarcerated than their peers. In Oregon alone, more than 15,000 children have a parent in prison. Due to separation from their parents, these children often suffer emotional and psychological effects. Lack of consistent parenting can result in poor social and academic skills and puts these children at a high risk for negative behavior, substance abuse and eventual incarceration.

The department leads the Children of Incarcerated Parents Project, a statewide partnership that has the best interests of children in mind. The project was established in 2000 and has drafted legislation requiring that work be done to improve the situation of children with parents involved in the criminal justice system.

Throughout Oregon, project work groups are beginning to form to discuss strategies to provide parents involved with the criminal justice system with tools for successful parenting. The groups work on how to connect caregivers with resources for children, and strategies to provide positive programming and activities for children and families at the community level.

The DOC and Coffee Creek Correctional Facility strive to provide every opportunity for a successful transition from incarceration back to family and community. The path to reentry begins the day a person enters DOC custody. For two-thirds of the nearly 1,000 women housed at the facility, part of this path leads toward becoming a responsible and accountable parent. Although it is not every day that inmates get the opportunity to eat snow cones, play games and enjoy a barbecue with their children and families, the experiences and skills that they take away from Coffee Creek will hopefully allow them to do these things one day soon outside the prison walls.

Elizabeth Craig is a community resources manager at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville, Ore. She can be contacted at (503) 570-6803. To order "The Circle is Round," contact Anita Noble at (503) 598-6504 or noblea@juliette.org.