

Vernonia hustles, holds breath as storm bears down

Posted by [bsherman](#) January 07, 2009 21:06PM

VERNONIA -- The rain fell as Jason Carlson and Nick Trammell filled sandbags at Vernonia Middle School on Wednesday, part of a 20-man crew of inmates from Northeast Portland.

It was a familiar routine -- the two were part of a similar operation when major flooding engulfed Vernonia in December 2007.

The townsfolk have since spoken fondly about how much they appreciated that the men from the Columbia River Correctional Institution mucked out soggy homes and moved people's belongings to high ground.

"It's not often society gets to see inmates doing good things," said Carlson, 33, who has about two months left on a five-year sentence for making methamphetamine. "It makes people here happy that we can help a bit."

For Vernonia, a logging town of 2,400 nestled in the foothills of the Coast Range, it's all about precaution and waiting. Officials continued with emergency preparations as river levels slowly ticked upward and the school district canceled classes for today.

The biggest worry is that heavy rains and higher-than-normal temperatures will melt a water-soaked snowpack in the Coast Range, inundating local creeks and the Nehalem River, which runs through the city.

The Nehalem is expected to rise to near flood stage at Vernonia, but the weather pattern isn't as extreme as in December 2007, said Bill Schneider, a forecaster for the National Weather Service in Portland. The river reacts quickly to rainfall and should begin to recede in as little as three or four hours after the rain stops sometime today, he said.

Still, as the heaviest storms stalled over western Washington, Vernonia's leaders kept a tense eye on a gauge that measures the height of the Nehalem 10 miles upstream. The gauge showed the river was still far from the 12-foot level that would cause minor flooding in the city. Once it exceeds that mark, Vernonia has about four hours before the high water reaches town. Even if it hits 13 1/2 feet, predicted early this morning, town leaders don't expect any buildings to flood.

"The storm has slowed down," said Jim Johnson, interim city manager. "But we don't know if that means it will move more slowly over us. Will it stay over Vernonia for a longer time, or will it miss us?"

Providence Health Systems is taking no chances. Its medical clinic on the bank of Rock Creek -- which provides the only doctor in a 47-mile radius -- was destroyed in 2007 at a cost of \$250,000. This time, the company wrapped the building in thick black plastic, anchored with wood and metal, to keep out water.

The \$6,000 to \$8,000 cost is a good gamble to prevent what happened last time, said Jim Powell, operations manager for Providence's property management division. Meanwhile, the clinic is prepared to treat patients at the Vernonia Learning Center.

Elsewhere, the city marshaled dozens of citizen volunteers, extra police officers and firefighters from the

state and Columbia County. Three shelters are stocked and ready to open.

The school district packed rental trucks with furniture and filled a semitrailer with wood and metal shop equipment. It had a freezer truck loaded with about \$30,000 worth of food. And it had tools and volunteers ready to remove a new wood-panel floor from the Vernonia High School gym.

In warnings to residents issued on leaflets passed around town, officials are telling people to put together emergency kits. If evacuations are necessary, the county will use reverse 9-1-1 calls to order residents to leave.

-- *Mark Larabee*; marklarabee@news.oregonian.com

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Rehabilitation in the pen Prison training program offers second chances on the outside

By Sean Hart
Argus Observer
Sunday, January 11, 2009



Riley (on leash, from left), Trinity and Kelsey live at kennels at the Snake River Correctional Institution Minimum Facility and are receiving basic obedience training and behavior modification from a group specially-selected inmates at the facility as part of the Pen Pals at SRCI program, a partnership between the prison and 2nd Chance Animal Shelter, Fruitland, to train dogs that were previously unadoptable.

ONTARIO ” Her former home was crowded, and she didn’t get along with her peers, so Aravis, a.k.a. Sis, was taken to the minimum facility at Snake River Correctional Institution about a week ago.

In that time, she has made great progress and is now on her way to rehabilitation.

On “death row” at her previous institution, Sis now has a new chance at life, and the inmates working with the boxer-Akita mix have the chance to accrue valuable dog-training skills they can use when they return to the workforce, thanks to the prison’s partnership with 2nd Chance Animal Shelter and the Pen Pals at SRCI program.

“They’re doing this in different areas of the country, and we have been looking into doing it for a while,” Barb Hutchinson, the president of the nonprofit Fruitland animal shelter, said Wednesday at SRCI on the program’s one-year anniversary. “(The first year) was wonderful. It’s had a real good impact out here, and it’s really had a good impact for us. ... A lot of these dogs would not be here today if we didn’t have this program.”

Throughout the year, 47 dogs, many of which would have been euthanized for behavioral problems, have lived at the kennels built at the prison for the program and have received basic obedience training, learning commands like sit, down, come and stay, Hutchinson said.

“It’s real customized to what the dog needs,” she said. “They come out with a lot of self-confidence.”

When the dogs are crate- and house-trained and ready for adoption, they are added to an online directory, www.petfinder.com, for interested parties to browse. The trained dogs can be adopted for \$150, which includes all vaccinations, a leash and spaying or neutering.

The program has been successful, and all of the dogs that have gone through the program have been adopted, SRCI Minimum Facility Manager Lisa Blacketer said, adding SRCI staff members have personally taken home a number of the well-mannered animals.

“I love (Pen Pals at SRCI). It’s really beneficial for the inmates that participate in it. It gives them a chance to give back to the community by giving a family a dog they can love,” Blacketer said. “It’s great for the shelter, too. It’s a second chance for (the dogs), and it’s a second chance for the inmates.”

TRAINING THE TRAINER

Chris Larkins, Sis’ handler and one of the first two inmates involved in Pen Pals at SRCI, has only a few months left on his sentence, but he will leave the institution with more than a year’s worth of experience training problematic, “unadoptable” dogs.

“It’s an awesome program. It’s gave me something to focus on. ... It gives you a good goal,” Larkins said Wednesday with Sis, who was untrained when she was taken to SRCI last weekend, obediently lying at his feet. “It’s helped me keep my sanity in here.”

Hutchinson puts on a weekly training ” covering dogs and the business of dog care and training ” at the prison for the inmates in the program.

“I can’t say how much Miss Hutchinson has helped us,” Larkins said. “She’ll come out here at a moment’s notice if we have a problem.”

The eight specially-chosen handlers, along with several alternates, spend at least 10 hours studying the books and DVDs Hutchinson has provided for them, Larkins said, not to mention the time spent with the dogs.

“You learn from every dog,” Larkins said. “It’s amazing the personalities that these dogs have. They just need a chance.”

When he is released in April, Larkins plans to put to work the skills and knowledge he learned from the Pen Pals at SRCI program.

“I’m going to continue this (dog training),” he said. “I’ve already started the business part of it. It’s already planned out.”

Check out the dogs that have gone through the Pen Pals at SRCI program that are available for adoption at www.petfinder.com.



January 14, 2009

Salem woman will get a closeup at inauguration

Laura Franco got tickets that will give her access at event

*By Mackenzie Ryan
Statesman Journal*

It started as a joke between friends.

Laura Franco of Salem was watching president-elect Barack Obama's acceptance speech. Seeing the excitement, the enthusiasm among the crowds, she thought: the inauguration will be even better.

She joked with friend Michael Washington of Portland about going. She had watched Obama's campaign closely and saw him speak at a rally in Portland.

The joke turned into searching flights to DC, then contacting friends for a place to stay, then contacting their respective congressmen for inauguration tickets.

"Our chances were slim to none," Franco said of getting tickets. "We were just happy to attend the inauguration, just to be in D.C. We thought it was going to be neat to just be there."

But Franco hit the jackpot, and got tickets that allow her closer standing access to the ceremony.

Oregon congressmen have been flooded with requests for inauguration tickets, which give people standing access closer to the capitol.

"There was tremendous, tremendous enthusiasm. It was a historic election and it's going to be a historic inauguration," said Julie Edwards, a spokeswoman for Sen. Jeff Merkley. Their office received nearly 1,000 requests for tickets but had 390 to hand out, which they did on a first-come, first-serve basis.

U.S. Rep. Kurt Schrader had 198 tickets to distribute, and spokesman James Atkin said requests were coming to Schrader's predecessor even before the election. Their office set up a lottery system to distribute tickets, as did Sen. Ron Wyden's office.

Local congressmen distributed the majority of tickets to constituents, although some reserved a handful for family, friends or large campaign donors.

Tickets are not required to attend, as the National Mall will be open to the public and the ceremonies viewable on JumboTrons.

"We were really excited to be picked," Franco said. "It'll be an experience of a lifetime," Franco said.

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A second chance at LIFE

Unique business education program bolsters Coffee Creek inmates' prospects after their release

By [Josh Kulla](#)

La'Dema Taylor is a mother and grandmother.

But she's also an inmate at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, serving a lengthy prison term for identity theft.

While Taylor is set to be released back into society within a year, being a convicted felon will make it especially difficult for her to find employment when she's released. This is made worse by her conviction for identity theft, which carries a stigma of dishonesty many employers won't touch.

But there's there is a way around those obstacles: create and run your own business.

And now, it's not merely a pipe dream for the 1,100 female inmates at Coffee Creek.

Instead, a collaborative program with Mercy Corps Northwest dubbed LIFE, or Lifelong Information for Entrepreneurs, is helping women with 12-18 months left to serve to learn to and operate their own businesses. It doesn't matter if they have any practical business experience prior to coming to prison.

It's an attractive proposition for Taylor and other inmates.

"I want to own my own business," Taylor said. "I want to own a restaurant."

It's just common sense, said Mercy Corps instructor Doug Cooper, who visits the minimum-security wing at Coffee Creek once a week to lead a two-hour class session.

"The fact we're locking up more people, especially with the meth epidemic, all of those people coming back to these communities," Cooper said during a break in a recent session. "And with the women, they generally have dependents. So, if we can help them become economically



Photo By Josh Kulla

Tanya Wheeler is just one Coffee Creek inmate to benefit from Mercy Corps' LIFE program, which teaches basic business skills to women on track for release.

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independent, it's going to have benefits for them and their families and for society."

The program grew out of economic development work done by Mercy Corps internationally. It is the backbone of the Portland-based organization's work, whether at home or abroad.

"It's very applicable here," Cooper said. "For some of these women, this could be a very viable way to earn additional income. We think that, if nothing else, the change to an entrepreneurial mindset, if that's the only thing the class accomplishes, then that's huge."

Inmates interested in the program – and there is a sizeable waiting list – must have no more than 18 months and no fewer than 12 months left in their sentence. This ensures they leave Coffee Creek with coursework and sound business principles fresh in their minds. Prospective students are interviewed by LIFE instructors and former students prior to being accepted.

Once they're in, the roughly two dozen students enrolled in each 26-week course are thoroughly taught the ins and outs of business. From hiring employees, writing a business plan and contract law to liability insurance and funding, nothing is left uncovered.

There is also ample focus on the human side of business, including how to communicate effectively with business partners, employees and even superiors.

Once they graduate, the women turn around and serve another 26 weeks as instructors and mentors to new students. The goal is simple: whether a woman ultimately starts a business or not, they will be educated on foundational business principles that will serve them well in many aspects of their lives.

"It can help you be a better employee," said inmate Joanne Miranda, a mother of two who was in prison to open a hair salon when she's released. "You're learning about profit and loss and all that go along with your own bills."

Inmate Tanya Wheeler is currently entering final 12 months of an original 100-month sentence for manslaughter. For her, the LIFE program has not only taught her business. It also has provided an outlet for the depression which followed her conviction in 2000 for killing her 8-year-old daughter in a car crash after Wheeler had been drinking.

Unsurprisingly, it was the lowest point in her life.

"My daughter died," she said. "And when I came to prison I felt so damaged (and) wounded. I thought I wouldn't be able to be successful. But this class has given all of us a lot of hope. The thing I said was that I want to live a life that will honor her. We want to make amends."

Wheeler did just that, going on to graduate. She is now a two-time mentor in the program.

"I've been here for six-and-a-half years, and the transfer back to the outside is so difficult," she said. "I thought that maybe running my own business I'd have better options than being an employee. They've showed me my own potential, and I've realized I'm not dumb because I'm an inmate."

Mercy Corps also provides counseling and other assistance to LIFE graduates once they are released from prison.

The class has even inspired children of graduates to study business themselves.

"My son is taking a business class because I'm taking this class," said inmate Heidi Blanton.

Now nearing completion of an 11-year sentence for manslaughter for her role in a fatal, alcohol-related automobile crash, Blanton said the course has given her hope for the future.

“For me, it’s about my kids,” she said. “I’ve never thought I could do anything as I’ve gotten older. But I realized I wasn’t committed to doing anything; I was my own worst enemy.”

That’s definitely changed, however.

“I never took a business class in my life,” Blanton said. “But I wanted to be able to be part of a ‘can do this’ attitude.”

Cooper said that overall the program is proving successful at Coffee Creek, with inmates going to create and sustain hairstyle, ornament-making and other arts and crafts ventures, to name a few. He added plans are being formulated to expand the program into other correctional facilities in Oregon and other states.

“We wrote the curriculum,” he said. “We’re getting a lot of interest nationally.”

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