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Prisoners as caretakers: South Fork Prison Camp

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Nestled in the Tillamook State Forest along Highway 6 in the Oregon Coast Range sits South Fork Forest Camp, a level one minimum-security prison facility housing up to 200 men at a time.

Level one means there are no fences at South Fork, one of two such prisons in Oregon. The other is Mill Creek Correctional Facility in Salem.

Although both institutions lack fences, they share little else in common.

South Fork is the only corrections facility in Oregon jointly operated by two state agencies: the Department of Corrections and the Department of Forestry. That partnership has proved a benefit for the inmates and Oregon's forests alike.

Inmate crews fight fires, rebuild state parks, maintain wilderness trails, and run a fishery, among other tasks. And they do it for cheap.

South Fork provides up to 140 men for fire crews, each earning a maximum of \$6 per day, said camp manager Gordon Dana.

South Fork inmates plant trees near Highway 6, supervised by state forester Mike MacLeod

When the South Fork crews are needed, they're ready, said acting camp command Lieut. Mike Lange.



South Fork's administration building and inmate cabins sit in the hills of the Tillamook State Forest

first full year at South Fork. "But they fed us real good."

"All our gear is loaded into two trailers: six crews' worth (of material) in the big trailer, four crews' worth in the small one. They can call us up and tell us we need to be in Joseph tomorrow.

"We get our men rounded up, hop in the buses, hook up the trailers, set up a makeshift town overnight in Joseph and start fighting fires in the morning."

Or, as inmates remember from the 2008 burn season, they might be in Sisters, Pendleton or Umatilla, among other places.

Although fire crew members may complain about the long hours working, they have nothing but good things to say about the chow. "You'd be so tired after working that you wouldn't even talk to anyone," said John, an inmate in his first full year at South Fork. "But they fed us real good."

That kind of talk has newer inmates eager to start fighting fires, which camp officials said saves Oregon landowners in the neighborhood of \$1 million a year.

Dana said roughly 15 percent of the crews are dedicated to fire suppression; another 40 percent focus on forest management.

Toting trees

Forest management includes pre-commercial thinning, genetic research and tree planting, in addition to numerous other tasks.

South Fork crews annually plant 500,000 to 600,000 trees in the Forest Grove and Tillamook forestry districts alone. Inmates on planting crews are expected to plant between 200 and 250 trees each day, Dana said.

On a recent assignment up a winding one-lane dirt road some 16 and one-half miles from Tillamook, state forester Mike MacLeod's planting crew was loaded up with 2,800 trees. The 10-man inmate crew each filled their packs with either 100 hemlock plugs (a one-year-old tree ready to plant) or 132 noble fir plugs.

The prisoners, toting 60- to 70-lb. packs on their backs, climbed a couple hundred feet down a steep mountain that sprouted downed limbs and wood debris. The climb alone is tiresome; the extra weight makes it downright exhausting.

But they'll tell you that's a whole lot better than being behind bars.

Crew members were singing, joking, laughing, calling out to one another. Had it not been for "Inmate" stenciled on their sweatshirts, they would be mistaken for any civilian forestry crew.

"It's not bad here," said Brown, an inmate in his second day at South Fork after spending 12 years in another prison. "There ain't too many other places where you can get out into the fresh air. I like it."

In addition to planting trees, inmate crews help foresters who are researching Swiss needle cast, a disease devastating to Douglas firs, on progeny sites. The inmates perform maintenance at the sites and help build new ones so foresters can collect genetic data to find a genetic combination that resists the disease.

Then there are those engraved wooden signs in county parks and forests. Many are made in South Fork Camp's wood shop. Inmates are trained to hand-carve the letters into the wood. Then, they paint the signs, send them off to get finishing and install them up in the parks.

With budgets tight, inmates fix any broken equipment. About 20 percent of the inmate crews are dedicated to special projects, such as making forest signs and repair work.

The remaining crews work on recreation trails, state parks and campgrounds.

State forester Scott Vessey's crews have been taking care of the day-use and camping areas at Jones Creek for nearly 25 years. On Jan. 22, his workers were cleaning up debris from a snow and ice storm that left trees, limbs and branches strewn about the park.

During his tenure at South Fork, Vessey has overseen crews building bridges, fences, campgrounds - they even saved a man who dove into the river drunk. Vessey said his crew went into the water after the man, who had suffered a deep gash across his head. The inmates suspected he also had a broken back, and held him up out of the water until emergency teams arrived.

Vessey's most recent project is constructing Keenig Campground along Highway 6.

Prisoners also work at Tuffy Creek Fish Hatchery, a satellite of the Trask Hatchery that releases 60,000 to 70,000 steelhead and 120,000 to 140,000 Chinook salmon into the wild each year, said Dana.

How they're paid

The inmates at South Fork are paid for their work, whether in cash or through the performance recognition awards system (PRAS). With PRAS, inmates earn points daily that can be redeemed for money, although they never actually handle dollars.

Fifteen percent of all money earned by an inmate goes into a victim's assistance fund, paying for restitution, child support, operating costs or other corrections fees. The remainder is deposited into the individual's trust account.

That money can be used to buy items such as approved CDs and books, available clothing, snacks or telephone time.

Money also can be sent to family members, or saved.

John said he sends \$10 a month to each of his two young daughters. The rest is spent on soap, shampoo, magazines or other things that strike his fancy.

When an inmate approaches his release date, the prison designates a percentage of his funds money as non-spendable. That money must remain in his account so the inmate has funds when he's released.

Corrections officials said this savings policy has helped lower South Fork's recidivism rate -- how many of the inmatest return within three years of release.

According to the Oregon governor's office, the recidivism rate statewide is about 33 percent. Lange said South Fork's rate

is "much lower."

Whatever that "much lower" rate is, Lange said it can be attributed to several factors.

For one, South Fork's prisoners are a select group. They all are in the final four years of their sentences. Each has been chosen for the camp based on the nature of his crime, history of escape and behavior while incarcerated. Put simply, these are relatively low-risk inmates.

South Fork doesn't house men who have committed violent crimes using a weapon. A state statute prohibits sex offenders and arsonists.

When the inmates first arrive, Lange said, many have an attitude of "not wanting to talk with cops." But by the time they leave, he said, most are civil and willing to reflect on the day's events with him.

One inmate, Mike, put it this way: "It doesn't do anyone any good to be rotting behind a wall. We come out here and we're giving something back. The youth are going to be able to come out and enjoy these (trees he'd been planting) some day."

Officials said another reason the recidivism rate is low is the marketability of an inmate who has come out of South Fork Camp. Many have become trained firefighters, sporting the same credentials as paid or volunteer firefighters.

Others have developed skills in welding, woodworking, repairing boots or tools, sewing and working as a member of a team.

Dana said some reforestation companies in Tillamook look to South Fork when hiring new employees.

Said Lange: "Most of these guys are completely different people when they leave."

Camp began with Tillamook•Burn

South Fork began in 1951 as a temporary forest camp. As such, the facilities were shoddy at best.

The facility was powered by generators for the first seven years before an electric line was connected to Lees Camp, some four miles away. Even with this line, the camp would lose power at least once a week, said camp manager Gordon Dana.

In 2002, with the help of Tillamook People's Utility District and the Bonneville Power Administration, a substation was constructed on site.

The camp's location was chosen for its proximity to nearby Civilian Conservation Corps camps, as well as its proximity to the Tillamook fires of 1933, 1939, 1945 and 1951.

The camp was meant to provide labor to replant trees in the Tillamook Burn as well as provide meaningful work for "honor inmates," hand-selected by the director of the Department of Corrections, the director of parole and probation and the state forester.

The "honor inmates" were selected from the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem, based on their history as prisoners and as

a reward for good behavior.

Still, said Dana, South Fork continued to get "hard-core" criminals up until the mid-1980s.

At a time, said Dana, staff members were reporting one or two escapes a month.

Thanks to a reclassification system determining who gets assigned to the camp, he said, as well as the efforts of the Tillamook County District Attorney's Office and the Tillamook County Sheriff's Office, the camp recently saw five years without one escape.

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Serving the South Coast of Oregon

Coos Bay, Oregon

The World

Print Page

Under fire

By [Jolene Guzman](#), Staff Writer

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LAKESIDE — Life changed for Ted Ross in 1990.

An explosion took the sight in his left eye, severely injured his face and took some of his memory and decision-making ability.

Over the next six to seven years, doctors were able to treat Ross' physical wounds and rebuild his face. But they couldn't repair the emotional wounds that blew apart his life. Ross was left without insurance and no way of paying for the psychological therapy he needed to truly recover.



World Photo by Lou Sennick

Fire Chief Ted Ross is the focus of controversy in the Lakeside Rural Fire Protection District, where two board members are the subject of a recall effort.

"No one would or could provide the kind of treatment I needed," Ross said.

His life spiraled. He made bad choices and surrounded himself with people who took him down further.

Ross had multiple run-ins with the law. In 2002, he was arrested and convicted on burglary and menacing charges. According to court documents, he had broken into the home of a ex-girlfriend he had been ordered to say away from.

Going to prison was his salvation.

"I was blessed," he said. "I don't have words to describe it."

Today, Ross is Lakeside's fire chief. But allegations about the recent firing of a district employee and the circumstances of Ross' 2007 appointment as chief have brought his past to center stage.

After being found guilty, Ross spent time in a state prison. Then he was transferred to Shutter Creek Correctional Institution and enrolled in the boot camp program. That program, Ross said, gave him the discipline and coping mechanisms he had searched for in the years before.

"I was honest, open and willing, and because of those things, they were able to reach me and re-establish me to who I was prior to the accident," Ross said.

Three days after his release in 2004, he joined the Charleston Rural Fire Protection District as a volunteer. Then and ever since, Ross said, he made sure his colleagues knew about his past. In November 2004, Ross moved to Lakeside and joined the volunteer crew there.

After he had served in the department a few years, the district experienced a trial of its own. The long-term chief resigned in January 2007. Ross said the fire board offered him the job, but he declined.

Board member Calvin Walker said the board brought in three different chiefs over the next several months, all from other communities. They didn't work out for various reasons. All the while, the volunteers looked to

Ross as their leader.

"The firefighters followed Ted," Walker said. "He was the man they wanted in the position."

The board followed the volunteers' lead and made Ross chief in September 2007. Walker said all the board members knew about Ross' background.

Before putting Ross in charge, Walker called the legal department of Oregon Special Districts Association and the Oregon Fire Chiefs Association. Neither organization had a problem with the appointment, Walker said.

The board also did some analysis of its own.

"We looked at the nature of the crime and really felt that the good that he had done for the community far outweighed the crime," Walker said.

Not everybody in Lakeside thinks Ross has earned the right to serve in the \$500-a-month job.

Julie Coy, who is leading a recall of two district board members, said she doesn't think someone with a criminal record should be fire chief. Moreover, she accuses Ross of discriminating against "people he doesn't like."

"I'm tired of this," she said. "I would like to see a reliable fire chief. One that doesn't discriminate against the people of Lakeside."

Ross' supporters say nothing could be further from the truth. Walker, who was fire chief himself for five years, said Ross brought in grants and equipment and has trained the department's volunteers to a level that no other chief has.

"If Ted is forced to go, I'll go with him," he said.

The recent turmoil already has brought some fallout. Ross voluntarily gave up his state certifications after someone reported his record to the Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training. He was offered an administrative hearing, but he opted not to defend himself. He said a family member had fallen ill, and he didn't have time to prepare for the hearing.

"The timing didn't work well in my life," Ross said.

Firefighters, including chiefs, don't have to be certified to serve in Oregon, said Eriks Gabliks, the deputy director of the department. Gabliks said requiring firefighting certification is up to individual boards.

"He could still be a firefighter or fire chief if the community wants him to be," Gabliks said.

District Operations Manager Rod Schilling said he hasn't known Ross long, but he believes Ross has overcome his past.

"I never would have guessed he had that in his background," Schilling said. "When you make up your mind that you are that kind of person, you carry it with you. I didn't see that in Ted."

Ross doesn't talk about the possibility of leaving the department. He says he looks at every day as an opportunity to do something better.

"I walk out the door and try to do the next right thing," the fire chief said.

-- CLOSE WINDOW --



Saturday, February 21, 2009

Pendleton man loses sight, sees the light

Blind faith

"Now, I have my dog on my left hand and God on my right."

Saturday, February 21, 2009



Doug Jerome is the first U.S. Episcopalian priest ordained solely for ministry inside prisons. He teaches inside the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution.

Doug Jerome still has trouble being blind. He occasionally bumps into posts, stumbles over his grandchildren's toys and misidentifies voices.

He occasionally sits on his cat, Sweet Pea, who likes to curl up in his favorite chair.

However, though he's still not the perfect blind man, he's carved out a new and vigorous life for himself since darkness descended upon him 15 years ago. Jerome, 69, who once conducted energy audits as a small business owner, now is an Episcopalian priest who calls the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution his church.

Previously, Jerome attended church only sporadically. It took blindness, he said, to make him see the light.

Blindness is relatively new for Jerome and came in 1993 as the result of a heart attack.

Jerome had just arrived home after hunting. He wandered into the backyard and started splitting wood for his stove. Suddenly, he felt funny.

"My chest felt like I'd just taken a deep breath in 20-degree weather," he said.

He carefully put his tools away, then collapsed by the front door, where his wife Phyllis found him. Soon, an emergency room doctor was telling Phyllis that her husband might not make it. Medics laid him on a gurney and loaded him in a helicopter bound for a Portland hospital.

The doctors did angioplasty to widen a coronary artery. Things went awry, however, Jerome said, when the artery didn't seal and he bled internally for about four hours.



Doug and Phyllis Jerome pose with Doug's first dog, Brogan. The portrait was painted by Jerome's sister-in-law, Ellen Jerome.

His body, from his belly to his toes, turned black from the internal blood seepage and affected his eyes. When he awoke, he saw only the dimmest light.

"His eyes were open," said his wife, Phyllis, "but there was no recognition in them."

His last clear vision had come as the helicopter lifted off in Pendleton.



Thousands of Doug Jerome's pocket crosses have traveled to military personnel in Iraq, Afghanistan and other parts of the world.
Photo by Kathy Aney

"I looked out the tail end of the chopper and saw Phyllis standing with a priest," Jerome said.

Home in Pendleton, Jerome said he sat in a living room chair, depressed, for about a month.

"I went through all five stages of grief," he said.

When he got to the anger stage, he looked heavenward.

"I was especially mad at God," Jerome said.

Finally, family members prodded him to leave the recliner and get on with life. A mobility specialist helped him learn to navigate Pendleton with a cane. One day, despite his cane, he walked into a power pole headfirst. He decided to get a guide dog.

He traveled to San Rafael, Calif., to Guide Dogs for the Blind and trained for a month with his first dog, Brogan, a yellow lab.

"Brogan and I bonded immediately," Jerome said. "He wouldn't leave my side."

Together, he and Brogan learned the town. Brogan died at age 13 and Jerome now has a new sidekick, Taz, a black lab.

Jerome's initial anger at God disappeared. Inside Jerome, sparks of spirituality grew to flame. He started attending church regularly again and gradually evolved into a man of deep faith.

"Now, I have my dog on my left hand and God on my right," Jerome said.

Early in his blindness, Jerome visited an EOCI program called Pathfinders and talked to inmates about dealing with hardship. He found himself caring deeply about the men.

Jerome still remembers his first time inside prison walls.

"The steel doors slammed shut - that spooked me a little," he said. "I walked into a room with 25 guys and walked out

with a new outlook."

Jerome found he had a heart for these men who had lost their way. Eventually, the Episcopal Church granted Jerome's application to become a priest, the first U.S. priest ordained solely to minister inside prisons, Jerome said. Murderers, rapists, arsonists, embezzlers, kidnappers, robbers - these were his parishioners now.

Each week, Jerome guides a discussion group called Education for Ministry. A dozen inmates, dressed in varying shades of blue, discuss theology as Taz snoozes nearby on the cool tile floor. On Christmas and Easter mornings, Jerome and his wife lead prison worship services. He has baptized seven inmates this year already.

The inmates seem to connect with Jerome.

"He's not a con, but he's familiar with hardship," said John Wills, a member of Jerome's discussion group. "He's able to cross the boundaries."

"I see Doug as a symbol of hope and inspiration," said inmate David Hill.

Jerome, they say, is able to bring out the good person living inside each of them.

At this year's Relay for Life event at the prison track, Jerome walked with inmates, stopping only to badger participants in a prison baseball game.

"I offered to be umpire," he said. "The real umpire said, 'You can't do any worse than I am.'"

Jerome and a team of others visit local care facilities on Sundays to give communion and scripture readings. One Sunday a month, Jerome preaches at St. John's Episcopal Church in Hermiston.

Jerome still finds time to nurture his love of nature. A lifelong hunter, Jerome doesn't let a little thing like blindness get in his way of hunting deer and elk. His son Jim mounted a pistol scope on his rifle so either he or Jerome's son-in-law Cody Pursel can sit behind him and give him verbal commands.

"The deer have to want to commit suicide," Jerome maintains.

He has shot five elk and 15 deer since becoming blind. He also serves on the board of the Oregon Hunter Association of the Columbia Basin.

About eight years ago, Jerome found another passion. He sands and polishes wooden crosses cut out by friends and sends them around the world, mostly to military personnel. He's sent 5,000 crosses to the Middle East alone.

Most of the pocket crosses are made of juniper, though some are of other woods, such as mahogany. His dog wears one made of black walnut.

A waitress at Miss Patti's, Barb Bertels, has connections with the Obama campaign and sent two to Joe Biden with a letter about Jerome. Bertels suggested Biden and Obama slip the crosses into their pockets for the inauguration, but no word came back on whether the crosses made it to the swearing in ceremony.

Bertels is effusive about Jerome.

"He's one of the most interesting people you'll ever come across," she said. "One person can make a world of difference - he's one of those people."

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Serving the South Coast of Oregon

Coos Bay, Oregon

The World

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Taking that First Step

By [Jessica Musicar](#), Staff Writer

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NORTH BEND — Only a few months ago nearly everything about the interior of 1942 Sheridan Ave. seemed to scream correctional facility. From its metal-framed prison bunk beds in stark quarters to its group shower room.

But the downtown North Bend building, owned by the Oregon Department of Corrections and most recently used to house an alternative incarceration program, is on its way to ditching the institutional persona.

“We certainly did a lot to make it not feel that way,” said Steve Sanden, the executive director for Bay Area First Step.

Late last year, First Step, an alcohol- and drug-free housing provider, leased the building from the state and began renovations to transform it into a haven for people recovering from substance abuse.

This Friday, First Step is set to open the doors to the public and then move in a first wave of clients, Sanden said.

“We consistently have a long waiting list of people interested in getting services from us and it’s going to allow us to serve more people,” he explained.

On Tuesday, the executive director said only a few finishing touches need to be made, as he walked through the building’s orange-tiled halls and showed off some of eight bedrooms that resemble a college dormitory. The facility is intended to house 24 men and women. Each bedroom contains three beds, closets and desks.

The building will be their home for about 90 days as clients go through treatment with partners such as ADAPT, Coos County Corrections Treatment Center or Serenity Lane.

While the facility will house some ex-convicts in recovery, they will make up only about 4 percent of the population, and all potential clients will be screened before being accepted, Sanden noted.

The new space also will leave more room in First Step’s other facility at 1741 Newmark Ave., which will be used for long-term housing.

Following residents’ stay and graduation from Sheridan, they will — ideally — move into the Newmark facility, Sanden said. It can often be challenging for people coming out of recovery to return to their old neighborhoods and friends where they once abused alcohol or drugs. Providing substance-free housing like this can keep them on the wagon.

“There would be less temptations. That’s for sure,” Sanden said.



World Photo by Lou Sennick

Kenneth Annaloro is a resident manager for the new Bay Area First Step Sheridan facility in North Bend. He said he also is available to clients if they want to learn how to play the guitar.

That same morning Kenneth Annaloro, a resident manager and First Step graduate, worked in the open kitchen where he will soon cook for and oversee residents. He has already moved into one of the staff bedrooms.

"It's a step up ... because we're able to accommodate more people than we have in the past," Annaloro said.

Renovations included repairing the 5,000-square-foot building's roof, fixing the floor and cleaning up and re-striping the parking lot.

The building also now offers six bathrooms, four of which feature showers, along with bedrooms for two resident managers, a large kitchen, and laundry facilities.

Work cost about \$175,000 and was funded by First Step, the Coquille Tribal Community Fund, the Zonta Club of Coos Bay, and Bay Area Hospital, among others, Sanden said.

The organization is fundraising to replace windows. It also has a wish list that includes refrigerators, freezers, area rugs, window coverings and landscape improvements. First Step is leasing the facility for \$500 a month on a five-year renewable lease.

Annaloro said he likes the look of the facility.

"We want to make it more like home. We're not an institution," Annaloro said.

[-- CLOSE WINDOW --](#)