

www.tillamookheadlightherald.com: Tillamook facility stresses building life skills for residents

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(Part 1 of a three-part series)



Camp Tillamook puts up pole barn: Residents work to complete construction of a pole barn on the grounds of the youth facility recently. (Courtesy photo)



Camp Tillamook pantry raisers: Raising the Roof – Camp Tillamook style means first building a building, then taking it apart to transport it to Garibaldi where a 24-foot by 30-foot building was reassembled to become a new food pantry and food bank for the community. (Courtesy photo)



OYA's "geekers" clean up: They are Camp Tillamook's version of the famous "Geek Squad", taking older computers and repairing or re-purposing them for use by staff and other residents at the Oregon Youth Authority facility located just south of Tillamook. They also have helped improve the computer access and capabilities for many of the other residents, including helping a new wireless educational program get off the ground. Team coordinator for the group, Gary Westoby, stands with current members (from left) Nathan S., James T. and Stephen K. (Photo by Brad Mosher)

By Brad Mosher

Camp Tillamook is in the building business.

The recent construction of a high school, pole barn, chicken coop and greenhouse are just some of the latest examples.

But the one thing that the camp director, Denessa Martin, is proudest about is the fact that what the camp is really building is a path for the people living there to become successful in life.

The overall correctional facility has its own high school, a team of residents and a counselor who re-purpose computers, vocational shops, greenhouses and nursery – and it also handles a major portion of the riparian recovery along the coast of Tillamook County.

The facility is part of the Oregon Youth Authority system, one of 10 secure facilities throughout the state, designed to provide a structured environment to give underage offenders the opportunity to remake their lives into success stories.

The facility on Officer Row near the Tillamook Air Museum is divided into two separate, but connected sections. The youth correctional facility section has approximately 50 offenders, where they are under adjudication or have a conviction.

The other section is known as Camp Tillamook and usually has 25 residents who are more than 16 years old and within 18 months of either release or parole.

According to the OYA, most youth offenders who go through the system will not reoffend.

One of the core benchmarks used by the OYA is education. According to the authority's statistics, the more education the lower the recidivism rate drops. The cost of education is also a benefit, with a return on investment ranging from 7-to-1 all the way to 25-to-1.

The entire mission of the OYA is to both protect the public, but to also reduce crime by holding the youthful offenders accountable, while also providing the opportunity to reform in a safe environment.

The youth in the OYA close custody are required to work toward a either a high school diploma or GED certificate.

According to the facility director, Martin, some of the graduates may leave at 25 years old, transitioning back to their homes or community, but some would make that transition at a younger age.

In addition to having Trask River High School on the main grounds, the teaching staff is supplied through the Tillamook School District. While the school is operated normally, the students are under constant observation.

One recent development has been creating sports programs at the high school level to compete against other facilities. "Our uniforms are black and red and say 'Trask River' on them," Martin said. So far, the athletics are limited to basketball and volleyball, in addition to soccer tournaments.

“We want to make their time [is] as normal as possible, while giving them the tools to handle themselves,” she added.

The high school building is brand new on the grounds, one of the latest improvements in to the facility which was originally built in 1964.

In 1994, Oregon Youth Authority took over the facility and one of the main structures was built in 1996 as boot camp designed to change the behavior of youthful offenders assigned there.

The overall facility covers more than 36 acres and offers a variety of options for the offenders. There are off-campus work crews. There are also opportunities to further their education after high school or a GED, Martin added.

“One student is going to Portland State. Quite a few are getting an associates degree or are close to getting one,” the director said.

The facility also has a tree farm and is working with The Tillamook Estuaries Partnership. That is one of several partnerships that is helping to make a difference locally and in the OYA facility.

Recently, Camp Tillamook work crews helped build a 24-foot by 30-foot building as a food pantry in Garibaldi, first on the facility grounds, then taken apart and reassembled in Garibaldi. Once it was rebuilt in Garibaldi, the work crews helped to finish the interior and make it ready to be used as a local food bank.

Just outside Garibaldi, work crews have been involved in a reforestation program near Miami Cove. The program is “our bread and butter,” Martin said. For some, the vocational education programs help make a little money for the offenders. “It is really cool to see a guy leave with his own money,” she added.

The facility has a new pole barn that was constructed by the residents, with assistance from the Tillamook Estuaries Partnership and the Meyer Memorial Trust.

According to Marty Boge, the maintenance manager at the correctional facility, the new tree farm is a big part of the partnership. Boge, who also is a former general contractor, said the residents not only have constructed the pole barn, but are also building tree cages to help protect the young trees from wildlife after they are transplanted.

One of the vocational shops used by the residents has allowed them to build everything from artistic projects to large rotating chairs.

Recently, the student/residents were able to finish a small custom teardrop-style trailer, which also had solar-powered lights.

In the greenhouse/nursery area, the residents work with a teacher from the Tillamook School District to grow a variety of plants. Some of the vegetables end up on the dining room table.

A recent addition was a small number of fertilized eggs. The residents were responsible for the eggs and watched the new chicks emerge. They also built a moveable two-floor chicken coop where the upper floor provides some protection from the rain.

Now, they have a rooster and four hens, along with a constant source of eggs.

With the chickens, they also have fertilizer to add to a compost pile and the raised beds that are used for the plants.

Inside, Gary Westoby works with a handful of students focusing on learning how to repair and repurpose computers. For some, it is a chance to learn a job skill, for others it is just one part of their interests.

Although the “geeker squad,” as they were nicknamed, had only a limited amount of space, the group has already had a major impact, finding and setting up computer programs and offline educational servers, which could be used by the residents and the facility administrators.

The Rachel-Pi educational wireless server is a short-range wireless education server that does not access the Internet. It has been adopted by the OYA to expand the educational resources at each facility. Among the programs available offline are Wikipedia for Schools, Khan Academy (math and science classes), along with textbooks, educational games and Gutenberg World Literature eBooks, which contain a library of popular books.

“The Rachel server is going to change the way we do education in a youth correction facility,” said Frank Martin, the education co-ordinator for the state's youth authority program.

“It is going to create a normal environment for our young people,” he said in the introductory video posted on the Rachel website. “They will have additional access to digital content.”

He also stressed the security of the system. “Administrators do not have to worry about youth getting on the Internet,” Martin said.

An additional facet of the work at the Tillamook facility is residents working with counselors to also learn new skills and prevent them making the same decisions that led them into trouble.