The Magazine 1664

SPRING | 2026

ADDICTION DEFINED

WINNER OF AMERICAN PENAL PRESS AWARD FOR BEST MAGAZINE 2025

About 1664

1664 was established on Feb. 22, 2024. At that time there were a total of 1,664 federal and state prisons in the United States. Together these systems along with jails, juvenile facilities and immigration detention centers hold over 1.9 million people.

The mission of 1664 is simple: to provide names and faces where there were once numbers and statistics.

This quarterly publication features stories of incarcerated people and offers an anthology of creative writing from justice-involved individuals. Prisons are often factionalized societies with institutional, psychological, geographical and sometimes self-imposed barriers. 1664 aims to chip away at those barriers by sharing stories of humanity from behind the razor-wire.

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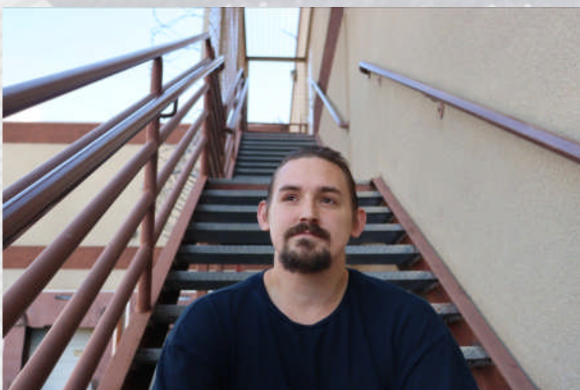

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1664 is produced at the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution. 1664 is available in print version at EOCI and available digitally on state-issued tablets at all correctional facilities in Oregon. The publication reaches the more than 13,000 incarcerated Oregonians as well as many outside the prison setting. All writing and photography (unless otherwise indicated) as well as the design of this magazine was produced by incarcerated people.

HOW TO CONTACT 1664

For incarcerated people in Oregon:
Send a communication form (a kyte) to Journalism Department, IWP at EOCI.

For non-incarcerated people or those outside of Oregon:
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For incarcerated people in Oregon:
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For incarcerated people in the United States:
1664 is available on the Edovo app at more than 1,200 prisons in the U.S. Incarcerated people on Edovo can type "1664" into the search bar to access current and previous editions.

For non-incarcerated people:
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From the Editor

By Phillip Luna

In February, I watched the 2026 Winter Olympics. Every time the games come around, I am surprised by how immersed and interested I become in sports I know little to nothing about.

It occurred to me while watching the games how each event is quantified to measure success. It is not enough to land a triple axel. Dozens of esoteric metrics are used to determine quality and every athlete's performance can be boiled down to a single number – one number that is the result of many factors.

This need to quantify everything transcends from the highest level of sports to every part of life, and even occurs in the correctional setting. In prison, what comes to mind is the Automated Criminal Risk Score, or ACRS.

The Oregon Department of Corrections introduced ACRS in 2009 as a way to predict recidivism. Every incarcerated person has a score ranging between zero and one. Higher scoring individuals are more likely to reoffend.

The score is determined by seven static factors: age, earned time, sentence length, revocation, number of prior incarcerations, prior theft convictions and type of crime.

The system allows the department to allocate resources. Higher scoring people get lots of attention. Lower scoring people get less attention. Objectively, it is a way to manage tax dollars and be efficient with resources and personnel.

When I came to prison in 2015, during my one and only meeting with my counselor, I was told I was the lowest ACRS possible. I also learned the metrics are weighted. For example, a person sentenced to more than 25 years in prison will have the lowest score regardless of all other factors, because the risk of reoffending does not exist while a person is in prison.

For me and many others, a low score means limited access to counselors, classes and programming.

The irony, of course, is that many people seek post-conviction relief and some of these remedies consider programs and classes taken while in prison.

Additionally, I have learned the score does not factor in job skills, education, mental health, sobriety or programs completed while incarcerated. In other words, the things we do in prison to rehabilitate.

And perhaps more importantly, ACRS does not factor in potential.

In this edition of 1664, our stories are tied together through the theme of substance use disorder. But each story is an example of someone exceeding expectations and reaching their potential.

While watching the Olympic Games, I also noticed that in almost every event, the commentators and experts talked about eye placement. Where was the athlete looking? Whether snowboarding on a half pipe, figure skating in a rink, or curling a stone to the button, the importance of looking at the right spot was made clear.

This is something most of us learned growing up: keep your eye on the ball; don't look at the ground when you run; aim for the back of the rim; aim small, miss small.

And this, I think, is the fundamental flaw of ACRS.

The score measures the likelihood of failure and ignores the potential for success. It is a predictor of reoffending, not a predicator of rehabilitating. It is the equivalent of trying to land a triple axel while staring down at the ice and hoping not to fall.

Numbers help us understand complex things, but they also become a boundary that prevent, and sometimes confine us to failure. However, part of what makes the Olympic Games interesting is people defying the numbers meant to define them. We are more interested when an athlete breaks a record or accomplishes some never-been-done-before feat.

Incarcerated people are not Olympic athletes, usually. But, they are people defined by numbers and it is more interesting when they exceed expectations.

We hope you enjoy the stories of success and expectations exceeded in the Spring 2026 edition of 1664.

A Second Chance, From Someone Who Started Without One

Opportunity Oregon co-founder and formerly incarcerated Nancy Pance brings felon-friendly career fairs into Oregon prisons

Written by Kurtis Thompson | *Photography by* Phillip Luna *and* Chris Ainsworth

NANCY PANCE HAS MADE it her mission to give people the one thing she never had when she got out of prison: a second chance.

Pance served seven years in an Oregon prison for a robbery in 2007. She got clean and changed her outlook, held a prison job and did everything right. But when she released, Pance faced a harsh reality – no one would hire her.

"I had changed everything about myself," she said. "I broke the cycle, but nobody was giving me a chance when I asked for employment. Not even Burger King."

Now, more than a decade after her prison sentence ended, after going back to school and earning a degree in business, after co-founding a non-profit organization that helps formerly incarcerated people, after getting her criminal record expunged, and after the Burger King that denied her employment was closed and converted into a parking lot, Pance finds herself back in Oregon prisons.

She tours correctional facilities, staging career fairs where incarcerated people can meet with employers and, hopefully, find a second chance.

Founding Opportunity Oregon

After Pance struggled to find work, she decided to go to college. Two years after graduating, Pance and her brother Joseph Carmack purchased a gym franchise. They opened an Anytime Fitness in 2015.

After success as an entrepreneur, Pance and Carmack started Opportunity Oregon in 2021 to help formerly incarcerated people find jobs. At first, they structured their business as a recruitment agency. They operated in Lane and Linn counties, offering in-person job search services until they expanded to remote assistance in 2022.

"Less than a year into it, we expanded into other counties when we realized remote appointments were just as effective," Pance said.

Also in 2022, Pance brought Opportunity Oregon outreach workshops into Coffee Creek Correctional Facility and Oregon State Penitentiary. Eventually, the workshops would expand to more facilities.

Opportunity Oregon was working with people during their incarceration. If people do their time right – taking accountability for their actions, working and staying clean as Pance did – her organization will help them draft resumes and set up job interviews before they release from prison.

Pance said they expanded from just a handful of workshops a year, to more than 40 with almost 1,200 participants in 2025.

But job-search and resume services were only part of Pance's plan.

Pance and her team established a database of employers willing to give people with criminal records a chance to work. Multiple unions – including ironworkers, roofers and transportation services – work directly with Pance's organization.

"We've made contact with 630 businesses across Oregon," Pance said. "384 have confirmed themselves as fair-chance employers. In addition, we've added 10 union partners, bringing the total to 394."

According to a 2022 Prison Policy Initiative report, it takes six or more months for a previously incarcerated person to find employment. Without assistance, people returning to the community are significantly more likely to commit new crimes, studies show.

Opportunity Oregon was lining up job interviews for people exiting prison, but Pance decided to take the next step. She would bring the felon-friendly employers face-to-face with incarcerated people.

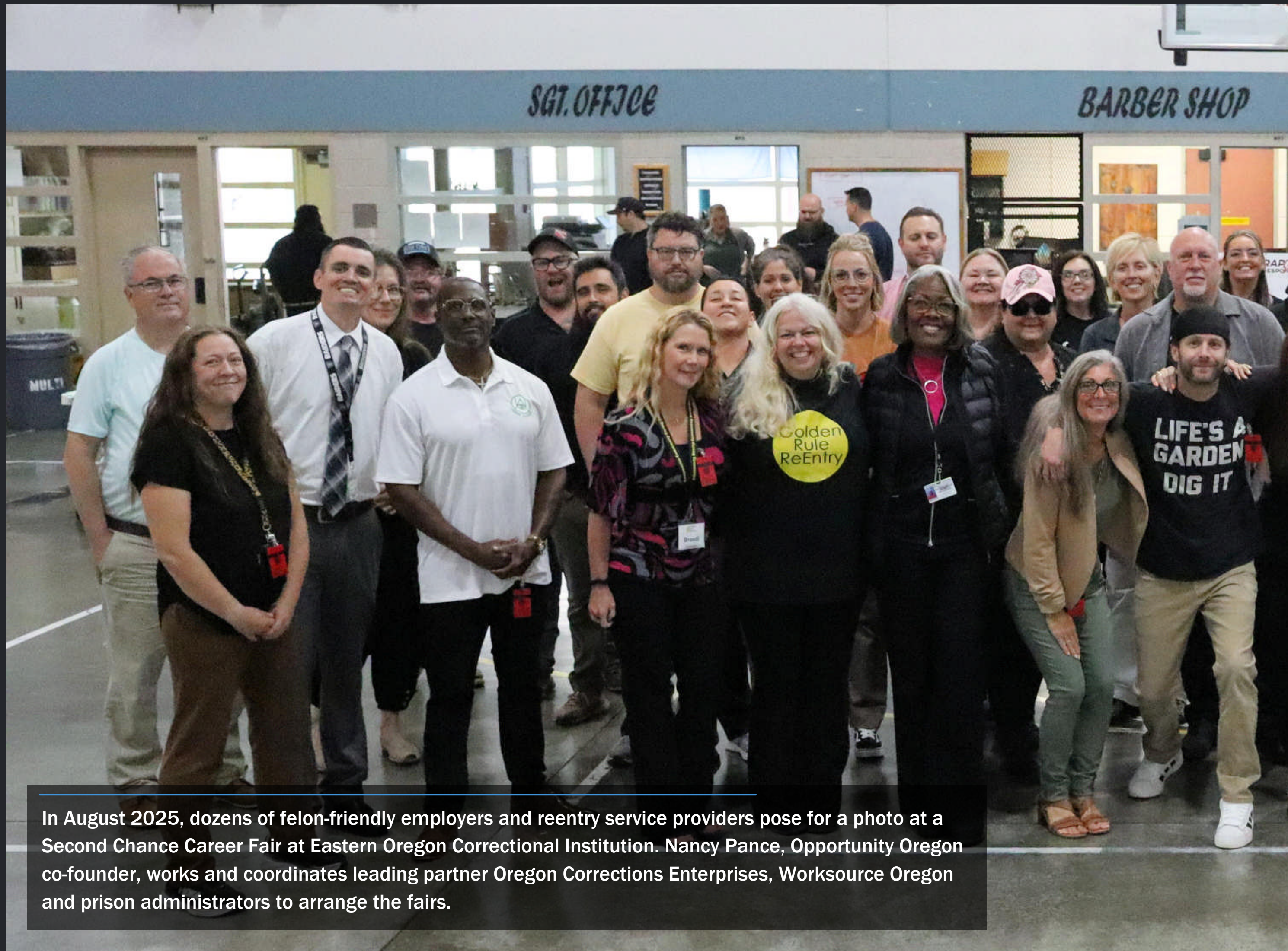
Second Chance Career Fairs

Working with Oregon Corrections Enterprises, Worksource Oregon — a state-run employment agency — and the Oregon Department of Corrections, Pance helped set up career fairs behind prison walls in 2023. Dubbed "Second Chance Career Fairs," Pance arranges for dozens of potential employers to meet with incarcerated people.

In 2025, Pance said they had eight career and resource fairs in Oregon prisons.

"For 2026, we're looking to adjust the number of fairs to ensure each facility receives the focused

Incarcerated people gather during an August 2025 Second Chance Career Fair at Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution in Pendleton. Nearly 400 incarcerated people met with dozens of felon-friendly employers and reentry services.



In August 2025, dozens of felon-friendly employers and reentry service providers pose for a photo at a Second Chance Career Fair at Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution. Nancy Pance, Opportunity Oregon co-founder, works and coordinates leading partner Oregon Corrections Enterprises, Worksource Oregon and prison administrators to arrange the fairs.

attention and support it deserves," she said.

But Pance said people leaving prison need more than a job – they need wraparound services. Second Chance Career Fairs also include providers of housing, clothing, reentry and treatment services.

Golden Rule Reentry, for example, offers peer support and free clothing; The Miracles Club assists African Americans releasing from prison; and Worksource Oregon supplies work clothes, transportation job search services and more.

Ryan Huebner, an incarcerated person who attended a career fair, said, "It's amazing to see how many people are willing to help with our transition."

According to Pance, every organization at a Second Chance Career Fairs helps people make the transition back into society easier. Like Opportunity Oregon, many of the organizations employ or are led by formerly incarcerated people.

Ben Pervish, who spent 25 years in prison, is the director of Urban Alchemy, a non-profit specializing in housing services.

"I am – or was – that one a lot of people felt didn't deserve another chance," said Pervish.

Urban Alchemy operates three tiny-home villages in Portland for people without a residence.

Pance helped Pervish get a job at Urban Alchemy. Now, similar to Pance, Pervish is back in prison working with incarcerated people.

Another partner of Opportunity Oregon is Frank Patka. He was previously incarcerated and is the executive director of Changing Patterns.

Changing Patterns built a coalition of 77 resource providers, mostly led by people experienced with the justice system.

"When I was in prison, only two people came back to speak positively to us," Patka said. "The career fair allows us to come back in and show the people in prison that we made it and we can help."

The culture is changing because of people and organizations coming together to support incarcerated people, said Pance.

"It's not just Opportunity Oregon – there's a whole network of reentry organizations across the state ready to help," she said. "Reentry isn't about competition; it's about collaboration and how many lives we can impact together."

Pance and her brother founded Opportunity Oregon because they believe in second chances, and working with others to help people, she said.

A Long Road

It was May 9, 2007. Pance weighed 100 pounds and 14 years of intermittent drug use had left its mark. Methamphetamines had kept her up for 10 days. Pance was in Bend, Oregon, and needed to get out of town. She robbed a gas station.

"There were all these roadblocks put up,

Nancy Pance, center, poses with two employees of Opportunity Oregon at a career fair in August 2025. Pance and her organization arranged eight career fairs in Oregon prisons in 2025.

and police were tearing through people's houses looking for me," Pance said. "I knew I was in a lot of trouble … I was just a mess. I was scattered. I didn't know what to do."

She said her breaking moment came as her friend was driving her around town while she tried to figure a way out of her situation. Pance couldn't think of anything, so she got out of the car.

"I got out and I wept," she said. "I said, 'Lord, save me, because I can't even think right now. Please help me, show me what you need me to do.'"

Pance said she had a sudden moment of clarity. As morning rays crested mountains the next day, she called the Bend police department from a payphone.

"I hear you're looking for me," she told them.

They didn't swoop in for a dramatic arrest – BPD invited her to the station, instead. She was lodged in county jail on May 10, and eventually sentenced to a six year prison sentence.

"Inside [prison] I was able to rebuild myself," Pance said. "I earned certifications … and learned the value of showing up for work every day, even when I didn't want to."

The programs she joined in prison and her newfound faith changed her, she said. Pance was able to release after three years on good behavior and after completing prison programs.

"I'm grateful I went to prison, because honestly, it saved my life," she said.

A Growing Future

At Second Chance Career Fairs, Pance is known for her energy and passion. And Pance has a good reason to be excited – her vision is playing out all around her.

"My goals are for Opportunity Oregon to continue being successful here so that we can eventually expand across the country," she said. "Other states are already reaching out … Opportunity USA has a nice ring, doesn't it?"

In 2025, Pance and Opportunity Oregon organized eight career fairs in Oregon prisons, connecting more than 2,100 incarcerated people with potential employers and reentry services.

Pance said they plan to host nine career fairs, along with 40 outreach workshops in 2026. Their goal, she said, is to reach more than 3,000 people — or almost 25% of incarcerated Oregonians.

But even in the midst of such a vast venture, Pance still has her eye on the distant future.

"I'd like to finish writing my book and one day run for office," she said, "but that's another story." ■

Everyone Deserves A Chance.

About Opportunity Oregon:
Opportunity Oregon was founded in 2021 by siblings Nancy Pance and Joseph Carmack, rooted in lived experience and a shared commitment to second chances. What began as a local effort to support justice-involved individuals has grown into a statewide organization serving applicants across all Oregon state prisons. Today, Opportunity Oregon serves as a centralized portal that connects incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals to fair chance employment, reentry providers, critical resources and state agencies, delivering wrap-around support to applicants no matter where they live in Oregon.

How Can Opportunity Oregon Help You Find Your Chance?

Resume and cover letter writing for formerly incarcerated people

Pairing people exiting prison with potential employers

Bringing Second Chance Career Fairs into Oregon prisons annually

By the numbers in 2025

150 Career placements

125 Business developments

40 In-prison outreach workshops held

1,138 In-prison workshop participants

8 career and resource fairs

2,160 career and resource fair participants

211 career and resource fair outside employer and resource provider participants

For incarcerated people, contact transition services or your counselor to find out how to sign up for Opportunity Oregon at your prison. Services may vary by facility. Opportunity Oregon supports all counties in Oregon.

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One Size Fails All

Substance use disorder and mental illness often go hand and hand; Oregon's incarcerated population finds pathways to health and sobriety

Written by Logan Gimbel *and* Phillip Luna

"I WANTED TO USE so I was not focused on my problems," said Jacob Butler, an incarcerated person at Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution.

Butler, 45, said he often used methamphetamine to cope with his mental health issues. He has an anxiety disorder and a tumor in the emotional and cognitive parts of his brain, which makes dealing with new situations and regulating emotions difficult.

He is one of many adults in custody with mental health and substance use disorder needs.

In 2025, the Oregon Department of Corrections hired Falcon Correctional and Community Services Inc. to assess the prison healthcare system. Falcon's report found that 64% of incarcerated people in Oregon had a substance use disorder need.

Additionally, the Bureau of Justice Statistics found in U.S. prisons 42% of incarcerated people have a mental illness and a substance use disorder.

Although drug use can worsen mental health conditions, Butler said most people don't think about the long-term effects in the moment.

"People don't think about their darkest moment when they want to get high," said Butler. "They don't think about how two days after, they're thinking about killing themselves because they're tired of being broke or going to jail."

Eventually, Butler realized drug use was a short-term, short-sighted relief. He also noticed the negative impact of drug use on people around him.

"I was watching a lot of people doing opiates. I was watching people sell their souls. They would steal from you and lie about it. People I could trust, I couldn't trust anymore." he said. "Then it opened my eyes. What if people think this about me?"

Butler has been sober since he was incarcerated in 2021.

But for some, prison didn't stop their drug use. It increased it.

Over and Over Again

Jesse Wilson, 21, had used some drugs, such as marijuana, before he was incarcerated. In prison, he used meth, cocaine and spice for the first time. He has most frequently used spice, he said.

Spice is a synthetic marijuana that is illegal in Oregon.

"I used spice to hide what I was feeling," said Wilson. "I have used a lot of drugs since I've been down. I fell back into addiction, over and over again."

Wilson had periods of sobriety. But, to deal with depression, anxiety and stress, which he said became more of an issue in prison, Wilson often used drugs.

His experience is not unusual. In the past three years, correctional staff said there has been an increase in suboxone, spice and other synthetic drugs in the prison setting.

"With the increased use of drugs, we end up with behavior consistent with mental illness," said Tye Stewart, assistant superintendent of security for EOCI.

Stewart said the effect of drugs can mimic a mental health crisis which is complicated for security staff to address. Often, prisons use segregation as a disciplinary action or as a temporary measure for the safety of a person in crisis and those around them.

Wilson has been to his prison's disciplinary segregation unit multiple times after testing positive for drugs in urine analysis tests.

"I think going to the hole was the best option," said Wilson of his most recent trip to segregation.

Of incarcerated people in Oregon, more than

64%

have a substance use disorder

- Falcon Services

In state prisons

42%

of incarcerated people were found to have both a **mental health condition** and a **substance use disorder**

- Bureau of Justice Statistics

People with multiple arrests are

3x

more likely

To have a serious mental illness

- Prison Policy Initiative

Since returning to general population in October 2025, he has been sober.

Unethical and Harmful

Whether mental health-related or drug-induced, time spent in segregation has been shown to worsen mental health conditions.

EOCI sorrectional counselor Zhu Ming said, "The isolation, sensory deprivation and lack of social interaction in segregation can cause a host of psychiatric symptoms."

Zhu works primarily with people in EOCI's segregation unit.

"Placement in segregation is widely recognized as an unethical and harmful practice," Zhu said.

He said that people exiting prison have an increased risk of premature death and likelihood of overdose. And, those who spend time in segregation are at an even higher risk.

But Zhu said segregation housing is changing in Oregon prisons.

More programs and classes have been added in the last three years. Zhu also said the length of sanctions — the amount of time spent in segregation for an incident — have been reduced.

Changing Training Models

Oregon prisons have also adjusted their staff training model, focusing more on crisis intervention and de-escalation.

John Taber, administrator of the Professional Development Unit with the department, said he has never seen improvement in an incarcerated person's mental health or behavior after a long stay in the segregation unit.

"We saw some finally break and give up, but that's not improvement," he said.

Taber is responsible for training security staff in Oregon's prisons. He said the department has moved away from a "one -size-fits-all" approach to addressing a mental health crisis.

"We've spent a lot more time focusing on the concepts of crisis intervention," said Taber. "We've presented multiple de-escalation models over the past few years and tried to help staff understand how different mental illnesses might impact de-escalation efforts."

Searching for Solutions

Oregon prisons use medication assisted treatment programs for opioid use disorder. MAT programs have been shown highly effective in reducing the risk of overdose, and the National Institute of Health called them the "gold standard" of treatment.

Treatment is especially important when a person is exiting prison. One study by the Vera Institute found that compared to the average person, people releasing from prison are 129 times more likely to overdose in the two weeks after their release. As a result, the program is typically only available to people close to their release date.

Jacob Nebeker, 36, has been to segregation six times for drug use since he was incarcerated in December 2022. He has used suboxone, a synthetic opioid, every time.

But Nebeker is ineligible for the program because of his sentence length.

"I've been on the waitlist for over a year," he said. "They keep pushing me to the end of the list because I'm a lifer."

However, Nebeker has been designated as part of the High Risk Transitional Caseload. This designation requires him to take urinalysis drug tests weekly, and have regular check ins with security staff and his counselor — which he said has helped.

In February 2026, Nebeker attained four months sobriety. Despite his recent success, he still believes the MAT program would help him.

In addition, the department has tried to reduce the presence of drugs in correctional facilities by setting strict mail rules. Suboxone, for example, could be hidden inside an envelope and sent through the postal service.

In February 2025, the department banned non-white envelopes and cardstock, with the intention of reducing the potential for drugs entering facilities.

The rule ended holiday cards for incarcerated people and made receiving mail from educational programs or government departments, such as the IRS or Department of Education, difficult because they use security envelopes with checkered patterns inside.

Mail rooms have taken a one-size-fits-all approach by refusing mail in violation without testing for illicit substances. Because refused mail is untested, it is unclear if the rule has reduced drugs from entering facilities.

Proponents of the rule cite the importance of erring on the side of caution.

"Drugs create a black market economy that often leads to assaults, extortion and overdoses," said Assistant Superintendent Stewart. "Drugs can make it difficult for incarcerated people to focus on sobriety and rehabilitation."

The department has taken steps to address substance use disorder and mental illness, with varying success. But one thing is for certain — for incarcerated people, the two often go hand and hand. ■

Compared to the average person, people releasing from prison are

129x

more likely

to have an overdose within two weeks

- Vera Institute

In 2020, Oregon ranked

First

in the nation

for methamphetamine and opioid misuse and

Last

in treatment options

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Eric Burnham, center, facilitates a 7-week course he created called Emotional Intelligence Awareness on Feb. 10, 2026. Burnham earned a doctorate in psychology and counseling while incarcerated.

A Legacy of Empathy

Oregon prison introduces a pilot program teaching emotional intelligence, created and facilitated by currently incarcerated Eric Burnham, Ph.D

Written by Kurtis Thompson *and* Phillip Luna | *Photography by* Phillip Luna

ON FEB. 10 AT EASTERN Oregon Correctional Institution, a dozen incarcerated people gathered in a small room packed with tables and chairs. At the head of the table, Eric Burnham wrote on an under-sized whiteboard with a red expo marker.

It was the last class of Emotional Intelligence Awareness, a course created by Burnham who holds a doctorate in psychology and counseling. The group was covering Maslow's hierarchy of needs – a theory of human behavior developed by Abraham Maslow in the 1940s.

Collectively, the 12 men had served more than 150 years, and counting, in prison.

They embraced the course and Burnham as the facilitator. After all, he was incarcerated, like them, and understood firsthand their experience.

In 2001, Burnham was sentenced to prison after taking a man's life. At the time, he said he lacked education and purpose. But that would change.

He attained his GED in 2003 and continued on to college. He joined 12-step programs and worked as a tutor in his prison's education department for 16 years. In 2021, he reached the pinnacle of education, earning his doctorate through Liberty University.

Then Burnham wrote the course for emotional intelligence, which he published in his book, "Emotional Intelligence Awareness: New Ways of Interacting after Trauma & Incarceration."

Five years later, in January 2026, he began facilitating a 7-week pilot program based on the course he created.

A Peer-Led Class

"This class helped me realize that I have a unique light," said participant Kenneth Nance. "Who knows? Maybe I'm the guy who's going to get a degree, or be a talker."

Correctional counselor Joe Byrnes, who helps Burnham coordinate the class, said peer-led programs are "definitely more effective" than traditional, staff-led classes.

"Guidance tends to be better received when the instructor has walked in those shoes and can relate personally to the struggle," he said.

While Maslow is a central topic, the class' primary focus is empathy and balancing personal wellbeing with the wellbeing of others – concepts which resonated with participants.

"I feel like selfishness and lack of empathy is what got me here in the first place," said Jesus Villarreal. "With classes like this, it helps you understand that other people do matter and that you're a part of the universe, not the center of it."

Some may consider the course rehabilitative, but Burnham disagrees. Rehabilitation, he said, means restoration to a previous healthy or productive state.

"Many of us need habilitation – we never had it right to begin with," he said. "We need to learn to balance our needs and motives against the needs and motives of others in appropriate ways. That has been the primary overarching theme of this course."

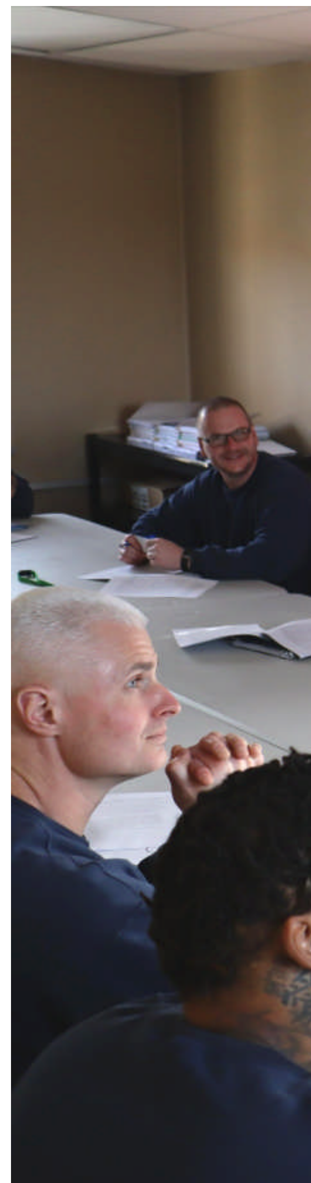
Finding Liminal Space

The class examines behavioral roots by dissecting thoughts and emotions, which Burnham said is crucial to developing empathy.

He said emotional intelligence has two forms: intrapersonal and interpersonal.

Intrapersonal is internal and involves self-regulation, personal responsibility and behaviors. Interpersonal involves interactions with others, including social relationships, awareness of one's effect on others and handling consequences.

"Trauma and emotional wounding leave scars that impact how we process emotions, shaping both our intrapersonal and interpersonal relational flexibility and resiliency," Burnham said.



Burnham said understanding these inner workings is important, because responding rather than reacting on impulse is a class tenet. For that concept, Burnham teaches on liminal space – the space between internal process and external action, like the doorframe between rooms.

"When you are standing in a doorframe," he said, "you are neither in the room nor out of the room. I use this metaphor in class. It's the space between feeling and acting – being aware of what you are feeling without being prisoner to reaction."

Participant Mychael Lee said that visualizing liminal space gives him time to consider negative interactions.

"I'm able to stop, sit in the emotion and decide if it's going to be a positive reaction I'm going to have," Lee said. "This has totally changed my way of thinking."

Cementing and Expanding

Byrnes said he received excellent feedback from the class participants. He hopes to make the class a permanent offering at EOCI.

Regarding expansion to other facilities, however, Byrnes said it is too early to tell.

"It's hard to say because we are still at the beginning stages," he said. "But feedback from participants is trending towards a popular program."

Burnham said he could see the class expanding to other prisons, even women's correctional facilities.

Eric Burnham, right, answers a question from class participant Michael Jump, center, during a class on Feb. 10, 2026. Burnham's book "Emotional Intelligence Awareness: New Ways of Interacting after Trauma & Incarceration" is the foundation for the course and can be purchased on Amazon.

"It's geared towards men right now," he said. "We have a section on toxic masculinity. But I want to collaborate and create a model for women."

Burnham also said he expects slow progress. Getting approval to facilitate the course at EOCI took two years, he said.

According to participants, the importance of emotional intelligence cannot be understated. The class should be a requirement for other peer support programs at the facility.

"I don't understand how you can be peer support without having emotional intelligence," said Michael Jump. "If we missed emotional intelligence … it's a giant lack of awareness."

For Burnham, however, the path forward is about more than just cementing and expanding the class. It is about building a legacy of empathy.

"I want to show that empathy is not weakness. Empathy is humanness," said Burnham. "You can't be a better human unless you understand that other people are human too." ■

ALCOHOL TEARS

By James Gaas, Arizona State Prison

Inside you're cold and lonely, another drink will hide your pain.

But I see through your window and recognize your shame. You fall and stumble, picking up another bottle to feel whole. Inside a storm is raging, tearing at your soul.

Memories like lightning flash across your mind, I see you through your window begging to come inside. You turn away in shame and regret. You can't stand who

they made you to be – stuck in the past of painful memories. Broken dreams of a little girl all grown up now. Inside you're cold and lonely as you're laid out on the floor.

I see inside your window of who you really are. A full-grown princess – who you were made to be – but you can't see through the haze of alcohol memories.

You promise tomorrow will be better, you'll stop for sure but days turn into weeks and weeks into years. Now everyone has left you, all but your alcohol tears.

WHISKEY NEAT

By Alek Wright, EOCI

I'll take a whiskey neat
Swaying like a tree on my feet
Chase it down
To kill my frown
Soon the pain is gone
I can put my happy face on
So I fade to the black abyss
And enjoy my ignorant bliss
I wake up the next day
My head and emotions sway
Back to my show, I fake upbeat
Until my next, whiskey neat

Creative writing from incarcerated people

DEATH OF THE OLD WAYS, a haiku

Kurtis Thompson, EOCI

Crystal in concrete;
Old temptation resisted;
Behold, victory

CONCRETE BROTHERS

By Alex Dewhurst, EOCI

A punitive punctuation perhaps,
But pedantic patrolmen don't define our lapse.
May platonic pleasantry be our pillar,
Rather than using vice as a time filler.
My concrete brothers without conceit,
It is all but waves which wade our feet.

WASH IT ALL

AWAY

Written by **Kurtis Thompson** | *Photography by* **Phillip Luna**

"I saw my mom load the meth pipe, so I knew how to do it."

Stevon Weltch had seen his mom, Beckie Colble, prepare the drug, but not actually smoke it, so he didn't know the technique.

Methamphetamine can boil quickly. A user typically doesn't put the lighter directly to the glass bubble where the drug is. The pipe is held at an upward angle – not horizontal like a marijuana pipe.

Weltch held the pipe wrong and boiled the meth, causing some of it to splash back into his throat. The drug rapidly entered his system in a large dose.

"That's when my mother came through the door," Weltch said. "I managed to cram my hands between my legs and close them so she couldn't see what I had – there's a nasty burn from that pipe on my thigh."

When Colble found her 11-year-old son, it was already too late. He progressed into the psychosis-like state of a methamphetamine high. Delusional, Weltch argued with his mother and told her he was going to live in the woods – which he did, temporarily.

He was out in the woods surrounding his house's property for two days.

Nobody came looking for him.

Feature

There's an old chapel in Pendleton, Oregon which used to have hand-painted murals on the walls inside. Whales, bears, birds and many other creatures from across creation wrapped around the room where the faithful gather to pray and worship. It's a cozy space, small in square footage but with a tall ceiling like an old church in a little town. At night, the old lights way up above cast a softer light, almost like candles, down amongst the seats and people. Other than the earthy and watery tones of the paintings, the chapel is fairly plain. The bluish carpet is made of short fibers, pressed by foot-traffic into the kind of surface you could scoot a chair across. Nothing really stands out, except for one special object: a baptismal.

Attendees of the Christian service Full Gospel Businessmen were there to witness some of their members baptized on April 23, 2024.

Stevon Weltch was one of several men waiting to be baptized. At the head of the chapel, he sat wearing shorts, a t-shirt and sandals. Facing the crowd, he was looking at the back of pastor Lane Porter and a man named Mark Brunson who was giving his testimony.

Weltch, 30, had been a Christian for years, but had never been baptized. This day was special, though, even more than he would have thought. The man at the podium, Brunson, was from Weltch's distant past, a connection to his childhood and one of the few early memories he has of his mother when she was sober.

> "My dad wanted to get me away from **the violence and drugs** my mom was into"

Weltch said when he was 5, he and his mother had gone to visit Brunson at an old stone mill where he worked. The man was imposing, he said, and he had to crane his neck all the way back to see his face. They shook hands, and he remembers Brunson's massive paw engulfing his tiny hand.

It's a strong memory because since he was a toddler, Weltch had been in Norway with his adoptive father, Scott Williams. Brunson is one of the few people Weltch met during rare trips to the United States.

As he waited to be baptized, Weltch thought how strange it was to run into this man again, more than two decades later. What a coincidence that they would find themselves in the same faith and the same chapel in the same town. Odder still, considering they're both incarcerated at one of only four medium security prisons in Oregon – Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution.

Before Weltch went to prison, and all the events leading up to it, Williams had taken custody of Weltch and moved with him to Norway in 1996. Norway was Williams' homeland. Weltch was given citizenship and they lived there for six years.

"My dad wanted to get me away from the violence and drugs my mom was tied into," Weltch said.

Norway was a safer place for him.

It was cold, but pretty. Nature seemed almost untouched where they lived. Sparrows and hawks swooped through crystal blue skies. Snow foxes regularly visited their back yard, occasionally leaving little paw prints in the white powder blanketing grass. One of Weltch's first memories in Norway are of him, in nothing but a diaper, escaping outside and playing in the snow until he was practically frozen in place. His adoptive father came to the rescue, scooping him up off the icy lawn.

Weltch was the center of attention. He was part of a two-piece family in his small bubble of awareness, like a holiday snow globe.

But circumstance would sweep away this safe place. Williams was called to military service, and he could either place his son in foster care or with relatives.

Weltch only had one other family member that could take him.

Weltch believed he was Norwegian up until Williams said he'd be going back to the

United States. He only had vague memories of his mother from a couple visits to her country.

"I panicked," Weltch said. "I didn't know what America was like … it was foreign. I was Norwegian."

The 7-year-old's world was turned upside down in an instant.

"Norway needed more men-at-arms ready to go. I don't remember why," Weltch said. "So, he brought me back to the U.S. hoping my mom was in better condition."

Weltch went to live with his mother in 2002. There, he would get to know not only his mother, but also his siblings. There was his younger brother Brandon, his older sister Natalie and two older brothers named Shaun and Jeremy. It was a completely different life from Norway, and he was no longer the center of attention.

When he was returned to his mother, Beckie Colble, she appeared sober. Eventually, though, she slipped back into her addiction.

"It was a month or two after my eighth birthday when I tried pot for the first time," Weltch said. "I had seen most of my family doing it. I took it upon myself to see what the hype was."

Weltch and his brother, Brandon, began smoking marijuana together. Colble found out, but instead of punishment, she told the boys to smoke at home so they wouldn't get caught.

They would all use marijuana together in what Weltch called the "smoke room" as a regular family ritual. He said his mother's lifestyle continued to decline into disorder as her substance use increased.

"She just self-destructed," he said.

In 2004, Weltch's mother moved the family from Eugene to a house in Veneta, Oregon. He said it was owned by the Hell's Angels, and it wouldn't come rent-free. But, Colble was prepared for that – she had skill sets they needed.

Colble was a U.S. Army medic veteran, sometimes referred to as a candy striper because of the red bands worn around the biceps of her uniform. She also knew a little bit about metal working, which she had learned from her father.

> "It was a month or two after **my eighth birthday** when **I tried pot** for the first time"

Her rent: medical services, drug handling and firearm component manufacturing – barrels, specifically. She could be a pawn, or she and her kids could be homeless.

By the time Weltch was 11 years old, his family had switched from drinking and marijuana to methamphetamine.

Weltch said his mother and siblings were excluding him from using meth with them. He felt left out.

He broke into his brother's lockbox and stole a baggie of meth, then a pipe from his mother's belongings. After he used meth for the first time and disappeared into the woods for two days, Weltch got what he wanted – the family started including him.

By 13, he was a dealer.

"Compared to my life in Norway," Weltch said, "I never would've expected life to end up like this."

He was emancipated shortly after becoming a dealer.

"I was already on disability checks and could afford to live in a community home for about $200 or so a month," he said."I decided to do that rather than be in an environment that was very violent and drug-filled."

Weltch realized he wanted to leave that lifestyle.

Incredibly, he signed a rental contract through Willamette Family Youth Program provided by Looking Glass Youth Authority at age 13. The state program is specifically for kids needing to be relocated because being independent, even at age 13,

In the fall of 2025, Stevon Weltch poses against a fence at Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution in Pendleton, Oregon. In the background on the right is the building that houses EOCI's chapel, where Weltch was baptized in 2024.

is better than being at home.

A year after getting his own place, he met a girl named Tamara Terry. When Weltch was 16, they had twins.

"I quit dealing and using the day I heard she was going into labor," he said.

Detoxing from methamphetamine without slowly weaning off can be risky – life-threatening in some cases. He was absolutely miserable, he said. But it was either drugs or family.

"I chose them," he said.

He would find out that sobriety was hard to maintain by force of will, and his brain had been trained for addiction. He didn't know it, but what he needed was real treatment.

"I got back into drugs when I turned 19," he said. "We'd lost custody of our kids, and life just became miserable. I went back to the one thing that kept misery numb … I went back to drugs

and started drinking."

"I did a lot of couch-hopping, living on the streets sometimes," he said.

It was not the life he wanted, but it was what he knew. It was a life of isolation. Weltch said he knew it didn't have to be that way. He wanted to be sober.

"I went back and did a 16-month session in rehab," he said.

While Weltch worked on his sobriety, Terry had continued her education. She became a nurse, was working towards a Ph.D and found a home for her family. Terry's success allowed her to petition to get her children back. Her parents, who the children had been placed with, supported the reunification.

"It took right around a year just to give child welfare enough evidence to prove we could take our kids back," he said.

Several months after winning custody, Weltch ran into some old friends.

"It was either be part of the group or don't be part of the group," he said. "I wanted to be part of the group. I started drinking, somebody pulled out the pipe and I was one of the first to say, 'Yep.'"

In an instant, everything he had fought for went by the wayside. The lapse would be the beginning of his last backslide, one he would regret most.

"Tamara found me with a needle in my arm while I was passed out," he said. "She blew up."

Terry had found Weltch in their basement, incoherent in a chair, with a needle hanging out of his arm. Thinking he overdosed, she pulled out the needle, put a blanket on him, and turned the air-conditioning up, hoping it would be enough. She didn't want to watch him die, so she went upstairs.

Ten minutes later, he woke up, but the drugs still held of his mind, and he made a terrible mistake.

On Feb. 8, 2019, his drug use led to a domestic disturbance, ending his freedom.

Weltch started his prison sentence at Snake River Correctional Institution in Ontario, Oregon. At first, he was still getting high on smuggled in meth and drinking contraband alcohol made by other incarcerated people.

"I was constantly looking for drugs," he recalled.

In April 2023, he was transferred to Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem.

"That was when things started to change, I started to change," he said. "I started going to NA, self-motivation classes, I started going to church to find myself spiritually, to find out who I am and not who others say I am."

Weltch said attending Shifting Gears for Change, a cognitive behavior therapy group, changed his outlook on life.

"It started me on the awakening path," he said. "I was making excuses for everything."

Weltch said the curriculum acknowledges the trauma and environments of a person's past, but drives home the point that an individual makes the choice to use drugs or act out. He said he had to be responsible for his choices and crimes, regardless of his addiction.

Weltch has been sober ever since.

In January 2024, Weltch was transferred to Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution in Pendleton. A year afterward, he signed up for an April baptism.

It was particularly special because it's the month Christians celebrate the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, he said.

One by one, those waiting to be baptized rose and climbed into the tub as their names were called. The pastor asked each person to speak about their motivation to get baptized. Finally, it was Weltch's turn.

Pastor Porter stood on the side of the baptismal and helped Weltch prepare to be submerged.

At the last moment, Porter invited Brunson to help with the baptism. Brunson was surprised, but not opposed. Reconnecting with Weltch seemed like a miraculous coincidence, after all.

Months earlier, Weltch learned that Brunson, the man he met 24 years before, was also incarcerated at his facility. They coordinated a meeting.

On a sunny day, warm for spring with a wide-open blue sky, Weltch met with Brunson. The regular sounds of grunts from the weight pile and the scuff of sneakers mixed with bouncing basketballs peppered the air on the prison's recreation yard.

Weltch recognized Brunson almost immediately.

He shook Brunson's hand. Weltch said his hand still felt small in the older man's bear-paw.

"My name's Stevon. I've heard a lot about you," Weltch's body and voice shook as he introduced his now adult-self to Brunson. "I'm pretty sure you're my father."

> "I've heard a lot about you …
>
> I'm pretty sure you're my father."

Around 2018, Weltch learned Brunson was his biological father. At that time, Brunson had already been incarcerated for about 10 years. They had not seen or spoken to each other until they met in prison in 2024.

They embraced: bewildered, elated and crying.

"It's nice to finally meet you, all grown up," Brunson said. "Sorry it had to be here out of all the places in the world."

Weltch remembered the reconnection in the prison yard, as the pastor and his father gently laid him back in the baptismal water.

Afterwards, Weltch went back to the changing room to dry off, and to weep.

"I cried with real emotion," he said. "It was a feeling I haven't felt in my whole life. Ever."

Weltch said he blamed his mother for much of his pain, and his mistakes. But after hitting rock bottom, after going to prison, after returning to his faith and after reconnecting with his biological father, Weltch's heart and mind had changed.

He said the forgiveness he felt from Christ began spilling over. It was time to contact his mother.

It had been years since they'd spoken. He found out she was in rehab. Weltch said the phone call would stay vivid in his mind forever.

He said she took accountability for not parenting him, and he took responsibility for his decision to use drugs.

"We finished the phone call with her telling me that everything that happened might affect me, but it doesn't define me as a person," Weltch said.

Stevon Weltch sits on a stairwell at the prison where he reconnected and was baptized by his biological father, who is also incarcerated. Weltch said, "I started going to church to find myself spiritually, to find out who I am and not who others say I am." He has been sober since 2023.

Colble still struggles with addiction and has checked into rehabilitative services several times.

"My mom wanted me to know that no matter where she's at, she'll always be with me," Weltch said. "Just because of everything happening the way it did, doesn't mean I won't love her."

He said his mother's willingness to try and change has helped guide his own progress.

"Most of my drive comes from her," he said. "Her drive to be the best she could at the time, drives me to be the best I can."

Weltch maintains ties with his family. He keeps in contact with his mother, although their conversations are infrequent. He lives on the same housing unit as Brunson. They see each other every day. He also calls Terry and their kids multiple times a day.

Weltch continues to participate in church services and attends peer-led groups where he encourages others to stand up to their addictions.

"I've helped people see the broad picture of being sober," he said. "I love that about myself now – I can help people see that addiction isn't something you want in your life."

Weltch would rather help people than be bitter and stuck in the past.

"I feel at peace. The weight on my shoulders is gone – the sadness that loomed over me for many years," he said, and paused as if to gather his words. "It all just, washed away." ■

Corona Borealis Studio/Shutterstock

FROM THE READERS

The "From the Readers" section of 1664 includes writing from incarcerated people on addiction. 1664 accepts submissions from any incarcerated or justice-impacted person in Oregon. To submit writing, send a first-person narrative about the upcoming theme, 500 words or less.

UPCOMING THEMES

Family - Due by May 30

Change - Due by July 30

Incarcerated people outside of EOCI can submit writing by mailing their submission to the address listed below.

For those outside of EOCI, mail submissions to:

Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution C/O IWP
2500 Westgate
Pendleton, OR
97801

ADDICTION DEFINED

***By* Jacob Sopher**

Oregon State Penitentiary

I remember the day I carpooled into downtown Portland, arriving just before my friend had to start work at 8 a.m.

I was scheduled to start my second day at a PC repair shop at 10 a.m. It was a significant position for me, even though it was starting at the bottom. I hadn't worked in IT for about five years at this point, due to legal issues and being unable to pass a background checks.

So, this job was a Godsend.

Despite all this, as I was enjoying a cigarette and a cup of gas station coffee, I checked my banking app and noticed some funds had hit my account at about 8:45 a.m.

It occurred to me that it would be nice to withdraw a few 20s, score some meth and show up to work high, where I was sure to be "extra-focused."

I hadn't gotten high on meth for about a month and now — the minute I had the money to do so — it seemed like the perfect time to use.

Long story short, I got high, showed up to work 75 minutes late and got fired for being late my second day on the job.

Another opportunity sacrificed on the altar of addiction.

I've dealt with addiction since I was about 19. Fortunately, my family helped me get into rehab then, and my 20s were productive and relatively free of addiction. I went for about eight years without using meth.

Surprisingly, it was alcohol that initially caused me the most problems. At the time — some years before the PC repair job — I was working in an office as an IT administrator, but my friends were making over double what I was on a North Dakota oil field and I was eager to get out there.

I had been promised a job if I got my commercial drivers license. Well, I got my CDL permit, made the call and accepted the job. My friend was drunk, rude and belligerent over the phone.

I just wanted a job and all I got was an angry earful. I should have declined. There would have been other opportunities.

Instead, I took part. I drank to excess — and I do mean excess. In one month, I got my first criminal record and completely wrecked my life. Two DUIs and one account of simple assault on a peace officer.

I couldn't drive, and no one in the IT world would hire me because of the assault charge.

So, I ended up working in restaurants. The blow to my ego was huge and going from corporate jobs to restaurants seemed too much. I participated in 12-step programs, but my sobriety proved tenuous.

Then, with the untimely death of my younger brother, who was only 26 at the time, all bets were off.

Meth crept back into my life.

I could barely hold down any employment at all. I sought treatment, but I was not sincere enough to give 100% to recovery.

I ended up on the streets of Portland, Oregon — just one more homeless meth head.

Eventually, I ended up trying to steal an F-250 pickup truck, but the owner jumped from some scaffolding into the bed of the truck as I pulled away. As a result, I was sentenced to five years in prison, charged with second degree kidnapping and attempted robbery.

Thanks to the structure of prison life and finally hitting bottom, I now have three and a half years sober.

I'll be released soon and will continue to go to 12-step meetings and work the steps. My sobriety and clean time are one of the most important things in my life.

I know I can accomplish almost anything as long as I stay clean and sober. | **JS**

UNPLUGGED

By Logan Gimbel

Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution

From the grizzled guardian plunging the depths of the Vault of Glass to destroy Atheon, to that badass wizard wielding the arcane, video games helped me escape reality and become someone I wasn't.

I had an addiction for years and years, but it wasn't until I became incarcerated that I realized it.

As ridiculous as it sounds, I was addicted to playing video games.

Even though my addiction did not involve any substances, it was just as impactful on my life as any other addiction.

Merriam-Webster defines addiction as "compulsive need for and use of habit-forming substance characterized by well-defined physiological symptoms upon withdraw."

(continued on next page…)

Like most individuals, I thought something had to have some form of withdrawal effects to be considered addictive.

It took being incarcerated and forcefully "unplugged" for me to realize addictions come in many different forms. Like the dictionary definition states, my excessive playing was extremely habit forming. I was literally planning my day and at times my week around playing video games.

I made my life revolve around video games.

When I wasn't at work I was at home, sitting at my desk playing video games either with friends or alone. There were even multiple instances were I either took time off or called in sick just to increase my play time or to get a jump start on brand new releases. Sometimes I would even watch others play games via YouTube or Twitch. Other times, I would play games on my phone while at work.

While there aren't definite withdrawal symptoms like other addictions, video game addiction does have a physiological element to it. At one point, because of my excessive playing, I became extremely unhealthy, both mentally and physically. I was angry because I was fat and fat because I was always sitting at my desk barely moving, except to eat or use the bathroom.

I weighed almost 300 pounds.

At one point, my old friends stopped being around me because I was so toxic.

I spent about all my money on either buying the newest or most popular game at the time, or purchasing accessories to make my character in the game look cool. Because of this, I fell behind on my bills and began to drown in debt.

Like any other addiction, playing games gave me a "high." Whether it was from defeating a particularly hard boss or level or winning in a multiplayer match, it made me feel good and I started chasing that feeling more and more. Before I realized it, my whole day was gone.

I have been "unplugged" for almost four years and had time to reflect on my inordinate amount of screen time. I will no longer let my life be controlled by my need and want to be someone else.

I have many fond memories playing games, but I have learned that I can have as much fun outside the virtual world, being myself, as I did inside it. | **LG**

CONTROLLING ADDICTION

By Keegan Stringer

Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution

Addiction is often described as some form of possession and obsession. It liberates us from our constraints causing us to succumb and engage with our impulses and senses. This leads us to loss of control and shedding of our societal roles.

Addiction is not a choice, but an outcome of our choices.

Society frowns upon addiction. Society views those with addiction as bad, suffering and weak.

Societal constructs surround and create these views based upon the consequences of addiction. Addiction stems from our internal need and obsessions.

Addiction is purely seen as a negative attribute. When we break it down we begin to see positive attributes that are being abused.

Addiction brings out drive, a tenacity to access that which we are addicted to — as well as creativity. I personally have seen these attributes used for good and for bad.

My family has shown me examples of addiction.

My mother is addicted to meth and alcohol. I have seen both sides of her addiction at play. When she succumbs to addiction, she shows both obsession and drive to access that which she is addicted to.

On the flipside, she can use that same drive to do good. She used her drive and determination in everyday activities such as parenting, work and college.

She was able to turn her addiction back on itself. She showed me that her obsession didn't have control over her, but rather she had control over her addiction.

I have learned much from an outside perspective about the effects and make up of addiction, and the positive and negative attributes associated in addiction. It doesn't have to rule your life.

Turn those positive aspects towards something else. Something to further yourself and your life. | **KS**

FROM CHAINS TO FREEDOM: HOW GOD SAVED MY LIFE

By Jose A. Caraballo

Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution

Not long ago, my life was headed in only on direction – down. My choices, fueled by addiction and darkness, led me to a place I never thought I'd be.

Convicted of murder and sentenced to 25-years-to-life.

I was broken, hopeless, and convinced that my story was over.

But God had a different plan.

While incarcerated, I was introduced to Celebrate Recovery. At first, I wasn't sure it was for me. But step by step, meeting by meeting, God began to work on my heart. Through CR's Christ-centered approach I confronted my addiction, faced the pain I had been running from, and learned that real freedom isn't about where you are – it's about who you belong to.

My turning point came when I truly surrendered my life to Jesus Christ. The guilt, shame and anger I had carried for years began to leave. I found peace I had never known before – peace that no cell bars could take away.

I began to understand that my past didn't have to define me. My future could be defined by God's grace. My transformation didn't just affect me – it reached beyond these prison walls. My girlfriend, Lori, saw the change in me and began attending CR on the outside.

She too gave her life to Christ and now even though we are apart physically, we are walking this new path together, stronger than ever. God is restoring not just my life, but our relationship and using both of us to share hope with others.

I know without a doubt that God has called me to spend the rest of my life leading others to Christ, sharing the hope I've found and helping people break free from chains of addiction.

I'm living proof that no one is too far gone for God's redemption. What the enemy meant for harm, God is using for good. My prayer is that anyone reading this – whether you're inside or outside – knows that you are not beyond saving. If he could change me, He can change you, too.

"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"
2 Corinthians 5:17. | **JAC**

HEALING THE BLOODLINE

By J.L. Sandoval

Oregon State Penitentiary

People who don't have a family wish they had one, and those who do complain about their family. In fact, we've all heard a friend or sibling criticize their family. The reality is that all human beings tend to criticize based on our experiences or points of view.

Luckily, life allowed me to know both sides of the coin, on one side was a united family full of love and mutual support. On the other side was a family in which heartbreak and disunity reigned.

One afternoon in July, while analyzing the emotions and feelings I felt during these two stages of my life, I realized how important it is to have a family that understands you.

When you grow up in a healthy and united family environment that promotes love and mutual understanding, life becomes easier. For example, when you are a child and you have a father or a mother who teaches you and guides you, it is much easier to be a good student.

When you have family warmth, you feel secure and capable of achieving any goal. This principle of cause and effect applies to all members of the family: parents, siblings, children and spouses.

On the opposite side of the coin, when you grow up in a family without mutual empathy or without love and care, life becomes complicated on a mental and physical level. The nights become longer, and life becomes sad and insecure.

For example, when you grow up with parents who abused you physically or emotionally it is easier to develop feelings of resentment and anger. Anger and the lack of love have severe consequences.

(continued on next page...)

From the Readers

According to psychologist Byran Tracy, when family members hurt other members emotionally or physically it is often because in the past they were hurt or abused.

They are victims of victims. In other words, your great-grandfather abused your grandfather, your grandfather abused your father and your father abused you, creating this toxic cycle of upbringing, or a family curse as I like to call it.

The reality is that the first step towards a happy family is learning to let go of negative emotions and forgive. When I did this my eyes opened to a new world. I was finally able to realize all the traumas and grief that my family carries.

When my mother was an adult, she still had a little girl who has been abused, confused and hurt inside her.

The same girl still remained inside my grandmother's tired body, and her mother and her mother's mother.

The second step I discovered to counteract this problem that directly attacks the family nucleus, is to develop high levels of compassion and understanding.

Compassion is feeling empathy for the victims, and understanding is being wiling to try to understand the feelings and point of view of other family members.

The conclusion is this: perfect families do not exist. All families are affected at some point by immaturity, lack of experience or trauma.

It is our responsibility to break family curses or toxic parenting cycles. It is up to us to improve, as parents, siblings, children and spouses.

Remember that the best antidote to heal the wounds of a broken soul are love, compassion and understanding.

Today is your time to take action and become the best version of yourself, for your family, when and where to start is up to you.
| **JLS**

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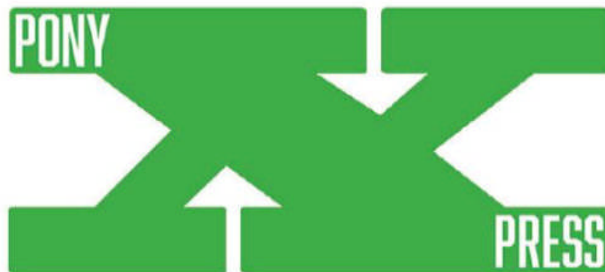

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ONE MORE PILL

By Jamil Chavis

Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution

Questions and answers rapidly invade his mind.

The question seems to be simple, "Are you an addict?"

Instantaneously, he answers, "NO!"

How can he be, when choices are made to feed the whim of a head change? It's his way to escape the world's adversities and the pain life brings. During the few hours of escape, he finds solace. He feels stress free.

He believes his creativity derives from being high. The effects of this head change evoke courage, belief and artistry.

Words he would not say, he says.

Things he could not do, he does.

The mirror he was once afraid to stare into tells him, "A man should have no fears."

Choices and actions taken are because of a round pill.

"I can stop taking those pills any time I want to," he claims, staring into that mirror, blurry eyed.

He feels there is a sense of control in using. He knows the drug has drawn him away from some friends and caused him to push away some family.

The pit of darkness seems lit because he finds light. That dim light is fading and loneliness is creeping at a rapid pace when he is sober.

"Do I really need to stop?" he asks. "I tend to function better when I am high."

He can feel the last meal settling in his stomach — rice, salsa and ground beef.

"YUCK."

Regurgitating his food has become a normal thing and this he accepts. Weight loss, no appetite and a craving for more pills.

He asks more questions of himself, which are met with quick justifying answers.

"Should I slow down a little?" he thinks.

Resting with both eyes closed and music flooding his ears, there are no worries. His plate is full of things needing to be done, but he cares too little then.

"I'll take care of it later, maybe. Okay, I should take just one more pill and then I'll be able to clear my plate," he says.

So, he caters to the urging call of a pill.

"I'm an addict," he mumbles.

The world feels as if it stood still for a moment. He thinks of people he kept company with. Their names all read the same to him. Addict.

They were not his friends, just others who used drugs. The only thing in common they had was a need to use.

"I have to quit! But right after I do the last of these pills!"

Where did it start for me and when does it end? | **JC**

HOW TO CONTACT 1664 AND THE ECHO

For incarcerated people in Oregon: Send a communication form (a kyte) to Journalism Department, IWP at EOCI.

For non-incarcerated people or those outside of Oregon:
EOCI, C/O Journalism Department, IWP
2500 Westgate
Pendleton, OR 97801

For non-incarcerated people: 1664 and The Echo are available at www.pollenpress.org.

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Interview with

MICHELLE EHLERS

Photos provided by Michelle Ehlers
Interview by Phillip Luna

Michelle Ehlers

Michelle Ehlers was incarcerated in 2020 after a years-long struggle with addiction. Ehlers became the first woman in Oregon to earn a bachelor's degree while incarcerated. After her release in 2024, she was hired by Opportunity Oregon, a non-profit that helps people exiting prison find employment.

She sat down with 1664 for an interview.

Michelle Ehlers, the first woman in Oregon to earn a bachelor's degree while incarcerated, shakes hands with Oregon Department of Corrections Director Mike Reese after graduating.

Michelle Ehlers poses for photos with her family members.

1664: Thanks for meeting with us. How did you end up working for Opportunity Oregon?

Ehlers: I worked in the Transition Department at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility for four years. I set up Nancy's (Nancy Pance, Opportunity Oregon co-founder) first employment workshop within Coffee Creek in 2021. I was inspired by her story and her passion. I then made it a point to speak with her at every workshop.

In December 2024, during my last workshop with her as an incarcerated person, she offered me the position. I accepted. I paroled Jan. 6, 2025 and began working at Opportunity Oregon on Jan. 12.

1664: What does it mean to work for Opportunity Oregon? What does it feel like to help people coming out of incarceration?

Ehlers: As Opportunity Oregon's first internal hire, it is rewarding to be an example. How you do your time reflects how you will be in the community. Being able to assist people coming out of prison is rewarding and makes my time a valuable asset. I have done all of the things needed to be compliant with parole, while rebuilding a family. My lived experience makes me the most effective. The role allows me to utilize my past for something positive.

1664: What did you do before incarceration?

Ehlers: I had previously been employed at White Bird Crisis Center and lost that job due to relapse in March 2018. I was incarcerated in 2020.

Working with this population and then going to prison allowed me to have an entirely new perspective. I found my purpose through my lived experience and found empathy, leading to a passion for helping people, while changing the narrative of those with criminal backgrounds or mental health challenges.

1664: Can you tell me about a time in your life, maybe in your childhood, where you felt truly happy?

Ehlers: The happiest times of my childhood were on

the back of a horse, riding quads or on a jet ski. My family and I used to go camping at Iron Gate Lake in Hornbrook, California. All life's stressors seemed to be gone when we were there. I learned how to ride jet skis at 6 years old and have had the need for speed ever since.

1664: Can you give us an idea of what led to your incarceration? How did you get from the truly happy moments to prison?

Ehlers: The short version is survivors' guilt. After my brother died, I had no coping skills and turned to drugs and alcohol at a very early age.

I was born to parents who were not ready for children. It was not part of their plan and my mother smoked and drank while she was pregnant. I was born a month early, with jaundice, underdeveloped lungs and a staph infection. The first month of my life was on an incubator.

When I was 17 months old, my brother was born. He weighed 4 lbs and 9 oz and had to have emergency heart surgery. He had a second heart surgery by the time he was 2 years old.

My mother left when I was 5. She moved to Alaska. A few years after that, I had some traumatic experiences. When I was 7, I fractured my skull and had to have brain surgery. Shortly after, my brother had the last surgery he would have, the one that was supposed to give him a healthy and normal life.

He got a staph infection during the surgery. After five weeks, my father made the decision to turn off my brother's life support machine.

My brother died on July 29, 1987. He was 7.

1664: You must have been 8 or 9 when he passed. Do you think your experiences, these tragedies, led you to using drugs?

Ehlers: The overall disbelief of what was happening consumed me. I struggled with emotions and self destructive behaviors.

The first time I tried meth I was 12 years old. I was a full-blown addict by 14.

Above: Michelle Ehlers posing with administrators and then with family members after earning her bachelor's degree.

After leaving prison, Michelle Ehlers began working for Opportunity Oregon. Above: Ehlers speaks at a Second Chance Career Fair. Left: Ehlers poses with Opportunity Oregon co-founder Nancy Pance.

1664: Do you feel like you had to grow up at a really young age?

Ehlers: My dad had been leaving me home alone since I was 10. From taking care of my brother to my dad trusting I'd figure out life, I never felt like a child. I do not have a memory as a child of not being a caregiver for my brother.

1664: Did you grow up in Oregon?

Ehlers: I was born in Brookings, [Oregon] and lived there until I was 18. I left home and moved to California. I then went to my first treatment facility in Santa Cruz, California.

1664: So, addiction continued to play a role in your life, even as an adult?

Ehlers: Yes. I learned to manipulate at extremely unhealthy levels and continued down the road of addiction. After years of ups and downs with spurts of sobriety, I moved back to Oregon in 2012.

1664: When you were incarcerated in 2020, this was a period of relapse? How did that start?

Ehlers: It started in 2017. I had put my coping skills on the back burner. My son was diagnosed with diabetes, my dad got an extremely rare form of cancer, and my current boyfriend began using pills.

Then my mom came to visit when my oldest daughter graduated high school. We had an estranged relationship and this was stressful.

At the highest levels of stress, I received a phone call from Lane county jail. My son's father had been charged with murder and was calling to tell me he had just accepted a deal. Life.

The thought of telling my son was overwhelming. I felt more defeated than ever before. I relapsed on methamphetamines the day my son's dad was sentenced.

1664: I'm sorry you went through that. I assume your situation led to your incarceration?

Ehlers: I got lost in my addiction and made the worst choices of my entire life. The absolute worst pain I have ever felt was the day my kids were removed from my home. From that point on, nothing mattered. I just tried to numb the pain, which led to my incarceration in 2020.

1664: What did it feel like to be incarcerated? I've known some people say they felt devastated, but I've heard others say they felt relief.

Ehlers: I fought my case for a long time. I was in so much denial about my life and what I had become. I was in complete disbelief. I could no longer manipulate my way out of going to prison and I was leaving behind my kids, who had been in foster care a year by the time I was sentenced.

However, while in Lane county jail I had a spiritual awakening, which changed the trajectory of my life.

I had been employed at a crisis center. That job allowed me to work with people with mental illness and addiction. But after I was incarcerated, I found that working with this population and then going to prison allowed me to have a new perspective.

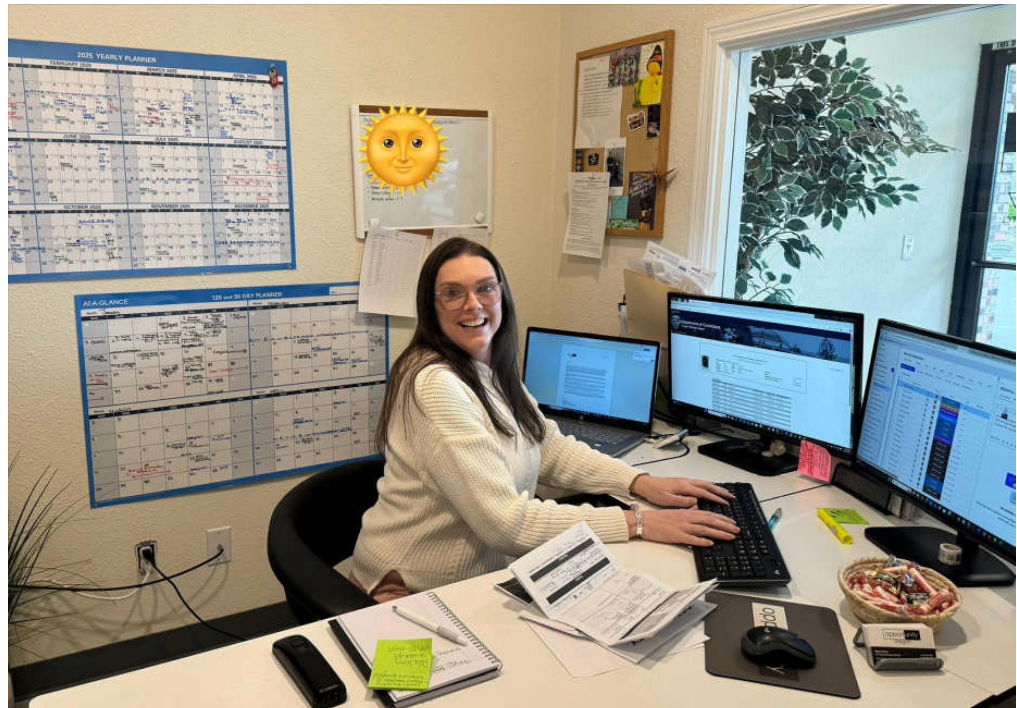
I found my purpose through my lived experience and found empathy, leading to a passion for helping people while changing the narrative.

1664: My understanding is that you were the first woman in Oregon to earn a bachelor's degree while you were incarcerated?

Ehlers: This is an honor and a privilege that I do not take lightly. I was actually proud of myself, which was a feeling I previously had not experienced often and never would have admitted to.

A huge motivator was my son. He was in foster care and trying to navigate high school and I decided I needed to work as hard as I could as a way to lead by example for him as a parent.

Education is priceless and to be able to achieve this before coming home is something I am grateful for. I cannot wait to see how many more women are able to achieve their degrees in the future.



Michelle Ehlers sits at her desk where she works for Opportunity Oregon. Ehlers was the first internal hire for the organization. She connected with Opportunity Oregon while she was incarcerated and was employed shortly after her release.

1664: What is your degree in? Was it through Portland State University?

Ehlers: I have a Liberal Studies Bachelor of Science through Portland State University.

That team is amazing, and they always made me feel valued and appreciated. I cannot say enough about the professors and faculty that make up the higher education prison program. It offers the ability to feel normal while building a successful future. It instills hope and changes the narrative about incarceration.

1664: What did it feel like to earn your degree?

Ehlers: It was surreal, Coffee Creek had a graduation for me and five of my family and friends were able to come. PSU provided a cap and gown; it was truly special. It was the first time I had worn a cap and gown, and my kids were there to see it.

1664: What advice do you have for other people just starting out their sentence?

Ehlers: Immediately start planning. How can you make each day mimic what you would like your future life in the community to look like? Do not get caught up in the drama. Get uncomfortable and work on yourself. Prison may be the only opportunity to be completely removed from everything, so take the opportunity to figure out who you strive to be.

1664: What are your hopes for the future?

Ehlers: I am currently developing a curriculum with the hopes of one day being able to go back in to facilitate training for incarcerated people. I want to continue to participate in the Governor Advocacy Panel and weigh in on ways to shift culture within the DOC. I believe everything I am doing now is shaping my future and I am excited to see what the next five years brings.

1664: How do you plan to stay successful?

Ehlers: Recovery is a huge part of my journey. I celebrated five years sober on Sept. 4, 2025.

I continue to go to meetings and work with a sponsor, who did video visits with me weekly for more than three years.

Recovery, family life and work are the main components to my life right now. But, doing things outside of the day-to-day routine is what reminds me I'm free and I am worthy of love. Concerts with my son, and one-on-one time has allowed for healing. Daily tasks such as making school lunches and driving my daughter to school have made her feel valued.

Being present for those who matter most and not trying to chase money brings peace and contentment I've never known. ■