



Ruralite magazine: Picturing a New Path

Ruralite magazine, based in Hillsboro and published by the rural electric cooperative industry, has a favorable feature in this month's issue about youth Nathan Smith at Tillamook.

By Denise Porter, Ruralite magazine
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Once headed the wrong direction, Nathan Smith now has goals and tools to succeed

Like many college students, Nathan Smith is looking at his future. A talented amateur photographer with a paralegal degree from Blackstone Career Institute, Nathan is enrolled at Portland Community College and will transfer to Portland State University. He is working toward a degree in marketing.

First, though, he needs to finish his time in jail.

Nathan, 23, is six years into his 97-month sentence for committing a crime as a juvenile. The past four years his home has been the Camp Tillamook Youth Transitional Facility.

No one wants to grow up behind bars, Nathan says, but he believes jail has given him, "a safe environment to grow up away from the criminal problems I was getting myself into, especially in the sense of drugs and alcohol.

"If I was the same person before I was locked up, this interview would be nothing," he muses. "I feel that as hard as it is to say, it's made my life (different). I wouldn't have gone to college, I'm sure of that."



Nathan Smith enjoys photographing the changing season from within the Tillamook Youth Transitional Facility, where he is serving a 97-month sentence.

Nathan acknowledges regret and remorse toward his victim.

"I can't take back what I did, and every day I wish I could," he says.

Nathan says he has a strong family and great support; despite ample warnings as a teen who, "made mistakes (beginning) at 14 years old," he says of his choices that ultimately landed him in jail.

Mandatory counseling has given Nathan tools to help make correct choices upon release. He also mentors other inmates.

"I've learned how to be a leader and handle stressful situations," he says. "I know some of that is growing up.

I'm not a 16-year-old kid anymore."

Nathan is quick to say that the facility has helped him mature, too.

"There's not a lot of room for growth, being incarcerated," he says. "You have to take initiative, of course." He shakes his head. "But don't you think that's maybe true wherever you are?"

As hard as it is to be locked up, I've learned so much. Tillamook's a working model for something different. It's more than just the facility itself—it's the people here and the programs."

Camp Tillamook is one of 10 Oregon correctional facilities that houses juvenile offenders under the care of the **Oregon Youth Authority**.

OYA's website says it strives to rehabilitate inmates by teaching vocational training. Each correctional facility is different in the vocations emphasized. In Tillamook, the projects are wide: growing saplings for reforestation, a greenhouse and growing garden, wood shop, computer classes and more.

Oregon's juvenile inmates are required to have public schooling and work toward either a high school diploma or GED. After age 18, inmates can take online college classes by either paying for them, applying for grant money or by finding free classes, according to the OYA.

Nathan says his teachers are top-notch, and the curriculum is augmented with a steady group of community volunteers who lend their talents as instructors and mentors. Community members in the area can buy goods made by Nathan and others through their school website: www.traskriverproductions.com.

Nathan is responsible for the website design and maintenance—something he learned to do in school, but has always been interested in. Nathan's time at a computer is limited and strictly monitored.

He also works at the small canteen available for visiting family members. The walls of the canteen are covered in photos taken by Nathan. One of the greatest tools for self-analysis, he believes, is a camera.

Nathan served two years at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility in Woodburn before he was transferred to Tillamook. While at MacLaren, he took a photography class—something he was interested in while a student at Lebanon High School.

Nathan notes with pride the patience he has learned in slowly edging closer to the small animals that visit the grounds. Seeing the changing seasons through the lens has taught him to cherish and anticipate the small things in life, too—and helps him cope with the monotony of waiting for the end of his sentence.



One of Nathan's photos he made while incarcerated. Finding photos within the confines of the correctional facility has taught him patience.

"I think being here and in the same area—that's less than a square mile—it got a little depressing in a way," he says. "But then things would change, you know, the season, and there would be whole new stuff on the grounds (to photograph)."

It had long been a dream of Nathan's to instruct his peers through a photography class. Last year, in an effort to glean more camera equipment for his school, he orchestrated a silent auction for the facility's annual Family Day.

"It's a big event, and it's one of the best things they do here," he says. "It gets families involved."

He and some classmates worked hard to frame some of Nathan's printed photos and find other items to donate for the silent auction. He carefully picked out a Nikon D3200 camera body and several lenses he thought would be a great addition to the school's camera collection.

Nathan recalls the satisfaction he felt watching families browse through his matted images and buy them.

"At that point, it was a double (pride) thing," he says. "I thought, 'People really do like my work,' and also that we'd gotten this project done successfully."

The following Monday at school, Nathan handed over the fundraiser proceeds to school staff. The total, he says, was in the

Now Nathan spends as much time as possible outside on the compound grounds taking photos. The camera he uses has a fixed lens, which means he cannot zoom in on a subject. Neighborhood of \$600. The school staff had their own surprise for Nathan—they had already bought a camera and lens.

“I asked them, ‘Why? Why did you buy this?’ They said that we worked so hard, and they were worried I wouldn’t make enough money to purchase the camera. That they did this—they cared—it’s something I’ll never forget.”

Kindnesses such as those shown by the personnel and community members who donate time at Camp Tillamook are the things Nathan says he always will value. The greatest message he says he has learned during incarceration is, “There are people with terrible pasts and terrible things they’ve done, but I can still see that person as a person.”