



Oregon

Theodore R. Kulongoski, Governor

Oregon Youth Authority
Director's Office
530 Center Street NE, Suite 200
Salem, OR 97301-3765
PHONE: (503) 373-7212
FAX: (503) 373-7622

Dec. 23, 2010

NEWS RELEASE

Contact: Ann Snyder, Interim Communications Manager, 503-378-6023,
ann.snyder@oya.state.or.us

Local volunteers bringing Christmas joy to youth offenders – with fries

Given the choice of a traditional holiday dinner on Christmas eve or having volunteers bring in McDonald's hamburgers and fries, youth offenders at the Rogue Valley Youth Correctional Facility chose the burgers.

It's the choice youth at the 100-bed Grants Pass facility have made – freedom most people take for granted to use a McDonald's drive-through isn't an option – each Christmas eve since the facility opened in 1997.

“The support we get from our volunteers is just incredible,” says Rogue Valley YCF acting program director Noel Hoback. “There's a core group of people who have dedicated large portions of their lives to coming in and being here for the youth.”

To support Christmas activities, River Valley Community Church and Edgewater Christian Fellowship raise the money. McDonald's brings in extra staff to fill the big order and gives the volunteers a discount on the burgers and fries. The facility provides beverages and dessert. For Christmas celebrations earlier in the week Abby's donated pizzas and Albertson's donated holiday pies.

“We want to bless and encourage these guys, tell them they're not forgotten, give them something different that blesses and encourages them,” says volunteer Gary Russell of Grants Pass. “We want to show them the love of God in a tangible way.

“I've heard spontaneous applause when we walk onto the unit and bring them these burgers and fries.”

“A lot of these youth have never been given Christmas presents,” Hoback says. “Many of them don’t have families, a lot of them have grown up in foster care after being taken away from parents at early ages.” A quilting circle at one of the churches made quilts for the youth.

Hoback says the volunteers recognize most youth offenders eventually return to the community, “and it’s important they know there are people in the community who care about them.”

The volunteers don’t limit their support to Christmas, but are in the facility regularly to earn the youths’ trust and confidence, says Matt Sweeney of Rogue Valley Youth for Christ in Medford. “We’re not trying to push a big Christmas message,” he adds. “We’re trying to push the message, ‘you matter.’ The connections we make with the youth now help open them up to a broader message of transformation.”

Rogue Valley YCF is operated by the Oregon Youth Authority, whose mission is to protect public safety and reduce crime by holding offenders accountable and providing opportunities for reformation in safe environments. OYA has custody of approximately 900 offenders ages 12 to 24 in correctional and transitional facilities in Albany, Burns, Florence, Grants Pass, La Grande, Salem, Tillamook, Warrenton and Woodburn, and the agency supervises approximately 1,100 youth on parole and probation in communities throughout Oregon.

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