

CCWF PAPER TRAIL

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Outside supporters pose with participants Photos Courtesy of CDCR

CCWF Walks to Support Breast Cancer Survivors

By Kristin Rossum

On Oct. 12, 2024 the dedicated Comfort Care volunteers hosted a Breast Cancer Walk on the Main Yard for the incarcerated individuals at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF).

The walk was planned by Erica Olson and Giselle Esteban, two veteran Comfort Care workers committed to providing support and resources on breast cancer detection, treatment and recovery.

For Esteban, this event has special meaning since she

lost her mother to invasive metastatic breast cancer. For her, promoting breast cancer awareness and serving others is a way to pay homage to the caregivers that took care of her mom as she battled cancer.

Erica Olson, a Comfort Care volunteer since 2015 said this year's Breast Cancer Walk has special meaning because she was diagnosed with cancer earlier this year. Olson wanted to remind people who face cancer that "you are not alone. The Comfort Care team is here for you to provide love

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ARC Debuts Live-streamed Graduation

By Coleen Torres

On Oct. 11, 2024, more than 100 graduates attended the Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) graduation held in the gym at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF).

ARC is an organization that empowers currently and formerly incarcerated people to thrive by providing a support network, services and opportunities to advocate for policy change, and to be of service in their communities.

Certificates were passed out to all the attendees who completed one or more of the three groups ARC provides. Space was held for the participants

to enjoy each other's company and listen to inspiration to keep putting in the work.

What made this ceremony particularly special is that, for the first time at CCWF, graduates' loved ones were able to log into a live stream of the ceremony. Many graduates got up to greet their people on the screen.

Lynne Acosta and husband Christopher Acosta led the event. Both former lifers, the Acostas work for ARC and facilitate groups at CCWF named Avatar/Board Preparation, Criminal and Gangs Anonymous (CGA), and Emotional

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Trick or Treat

Give me someone good to meet— CCWF visiting hosts family holiday fun

By Simaima Oluafi

On Oct. 26, 2024, Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) Warden Anissa de La Cruz and her administration team held its annual Halloween event in the visiting room. Incarcerated individuals who are part of the Community Resource Manager (CRM) volunteer decorating committee worked diligently with Gabriella Armendariz, the CRM, and her office staff members to decorate the visiting room for the arriving children and families. The visiting room was decked out with a few booths off to the side. There was a table filled with a variety of jumbo-sized cookies and mixed candies. A booth was set up with volunteer incarcerated individuals awaiting children and family members who wanted their faces painted or Halloween-themed water-based tattoos applied to their hands or faces. A spooky Beetlejuice prop and a humongous inflated witch head backdrop were set up for families to take pictures which showcased the Halloween theme. This set the tone for the children to arrive, ready for a day to spend time with their loved ones. The families had the opportunity to create memories with their children.

Upon arrival of both inside and outside visitors, all you could see was the shock of excitement and appreciation in their eyes for the colorful setting. Every single child that entered through the doors jumped with joy seeing the inflatable witch head with lit-up red eyes. Some kids even thought the witch head was a bouncy house.

For Halloween 2024, not many families participated in the event, unlike in years past. There were approximately five families in attendance. However, despite the low turnout, the excitement made up for it.



Above: Children meet Santa during 2023 Christmas party. Below: Sarina Mendoza and her son Jordan at 2024 Halloween event.

Sarina Mendoza is a wife and mother of three sons. Her husband and boys visit with her frequently and attended last year's Halloween event.

"My youngest son, Jordan, age 7, was looking forward to this because he had a blast at last year's event," she said.

During my interview with Sarina, Jordan stated with joy, "Mommy, come here so I can paint on your face!!!" He was able to dress up in his Halloween costume as Harry Potter and take a photo with his mom.

Damion Rodriguez was also visiting with his mother, Juanita Rodriguez, and his nephew Isaac. Damion is one of our many transmen peers residing in CCWF.

"Being able to color and create this Halloween memory with my nephew is so huge

for me and I'm very thankful for this moment," he said. His mother added, "This was a very nice gesture for CCWF to extend for us today. The love they put into making it look beautiful was felt as we entered the visiting room. The staff and volunteers made us feel welcomed and comfortable."

While Isaac was coloring, he chimed in shyly saying, "I really like the huge green witch and Beetlejuice is cool too."

Talking with one of my peers at the paint booth, I noticed something gigantic and unfamiliar outside. Oh my goodness gracious!!! In

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COMMENTARY

What are the consequences of circumventing the restitution process?

Our editor-in-chief explains some hard learned lessons at CCWF

By Amber Bray

Individuals appearing before the Board of Parole Hearings (BPH/Board) over the last two years have noticed a trend in some of their denials: circumvention of the restitution process.

Many people coming to prison have been assessed restitution as part of their sentence. Some people have \$200 to pay while others have \$2,000,000 with interest. Whatever the amount, it was a penalty assessed by the judge in order to punish the crime committed.

Pursuant to California Penal Code as well as Title 15, incarcerated individuals have to pay 50% of all money earned or sent to their accounts. It is a significant amount and many people try to think of ways to shop more - usually by asking a loved one in the community to send money to another incarcerated individual's account. Many people know it's against the rules but ignore that fact so they can shop the maximum amount, now \$300 per month.

Cathleen Quinn appeared before BPH on Mar. 30, 2022. During her hearing, she was asked if she had ever circumvented the restitution process since she still owed restitution at the time. Quinn admitted that she had and was found suitable for parole in that hearing.

In Nov. 2022, Quinn received a redacted investigative summary report from BPH. In the report, Quinn's account activity was summarized and dates money had been sent from her outside contacts to her inside acquaintances were noted. Quinn's parole date was rescinded in part because of her circumvention of the restitution process.

Tiffany Blanchard was found suitable for parole, on Oct. 4, 2023. After serving a total of more than 35 years, Blanchard was elated.

In Jan. 2024, Blanchard was visited by a BPH investigator. Unlike Quinn, Blanchard had not been asked about restitution during her hearing. The investigator shared that an investigation is triggered upon a suitability finding due to the high rates of Employment Development Department fraud that were uncovered during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The investigator shared that Blanchard's account activity revealed that she had received money from different people, some of whom were in contact with other incarcerated individuals. When asked if she had ever shopped for anyone, Blanchard was honest and said she had. "We're like a family in here," Blanchard shared. "I didn't profit from shopping for anyone. Some people would charge \$20 for every \$100 sent, but I did it as a favor for a couple of my friends over the years."

With the Trust Restitution Accounting Canteen System (TRACS) now in place, CDCR staff are able to identify who sends money to whom and draw conclusions about who may be subverting the restitution process. It makes

sense: If I have no contact with John Smith but my roommate does, and John Smith is sending me money, it is easy to conclude that my roommate is sending me money through her loved one so I can shop for her. If my roommate and I are both going to Board, the panel would use this information against both of us since we have each subverted the restitution process.

BPH takes these allegations seriously. This behavior shows continued criminal thinking, violates the law, and demonstrates the character defects that brought us to prison in the first place. Losing 50% of your money is significant; no one disputes that. But restitution is assessed in order to make a victim or victim's family whole, insofar as such a thing is possible. It is seen as a form of direct amends for victims.

"I didn't think about it in those terms at first, but now I realize the harm I caused," Quinn said. "It's our responsibility to make amends to our victims." Notably, Quinn has now paid off her restitution in part because of this issue being raised during her parole hearings.

The investigator told Blanchard it was likely that her case would be sent before the en banc panel of the BPH to determine if her parole grant would stand. That is precisely what happened. Blanchard wrote a statement to be read during the en banc hearing and she was honest about how she had shopped for a few people over her more than three decades of incarceration. After the hearing, Blanchard's parole grant was rescinded.

Blanchard then appeared before a panel for a rescission hearing. She admitted what she had done and acknowledged the criminal thinking behind that decision. Nevertheless, Blanchard was denied parole for three years.

Since it generally takes at least two, if not three or more, people to circumvent the restitution process, BPH could prosecute people for these offenses. The offenses would be misdemeanors (a violation of Penal Code 155), but would be a conviction nonetheless.

Appearing before the BPH to determine one's parole suitability is a stressful thing. Every individual appearing before a panel strives to show how much they have changed in order to be found suitable to reenter society. If one has circumvented the restitution process and is asked about it in their hearing, be honest: Chances are the panel is already aware of the behavior.

For Blanchard, being able to parole when she was first eligible would have meant the world to her. "I would have been able to spend that time with my parents, who have since passed away," she said. Despite that, Blanchard looks forward to paroling so she can spend time with her two children and nine grandchildren. "My daughter was 18 months old and I was 6 months pregnant with my son when I was arrested. I can't wait to spend time with my family. If I had known shopping for someone could lead to my date being pulled, I never would have done it."



Photo by Nick Fewings on Unsplash

CCWF Paper Trail EST. 2024

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COVER STORY: TREAT OR TREAT

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the outdoor patio area, there stood a newly installed jungle gym. The adults sat chit-chatting amongst each other, watching their young ones explore the huge new structure.

The jungle gym consists of swings, a spiral slide, and a rock and rope climbing section. A little house at the very bottom contains double doors and open windows. And finally, at the very top, there is a small corridor with a telescope for the kids to scope out the scenery. The kids were lost in the moment of adventure. So was I. It was beautiful to hear the children's laughter as they played together.

Being able to see the joy on the families' faces and hear their humbled spirits in their voices let me know that

CCWF has been proactive in exhibiting the California Model, trying to implement normalization within these walls and strive towards the most important goals we model...reunification.

"It was amazing being able to participate in the Halloween Event," Crystal Mejia said. Mejia, a member of the decorating committee, also participated in the event in 2023.

"It's just disappointing that more families weren't able to come this year, but I hope that with the new jungle gym we have will increase families coming to visit in the future. I also hope we'll have music and more costumes for a costume contest next year, and that the upcoming Christmas event will be spectacular."



CCWF residents enjoying the newly installed jungle gym.

Photos Courtesy of CDCR

COVER STORY: BREAST CANCER WALK

...CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

and support because cancer can be very lonely."

About a dozen beautiful posters and banners created by Comfort Care worker Destanie Hinzo were hung around the outside walls of the Recreation Gym area by the track. They were painted in shades of pink and white and black reminding us to fight, have faith and keep searching for a cure. Some were whimsical and some were inspirational but they served to set the mood. Hinzo puts a piece of herself in every piece of art she creates. She got emotional recalling how she connects with the struggles the women are going through, especially when I was painting the poster with boxing gloves that said "Her fight is my fight!"

The walk opened at 9:00 a.m. Each Facility Yard was scheduled to have an hour and a half to come out to enjoy the event. As the participants arrived to the Main Yard they checked in and received a Breast Cancer Awareness rubber bracelet in shades of pink, white or black. They also were gifted special pens and pencils that commemorated the 2024 walk and pink ribbon stickers emblazoned with positive affirmations.

After checking in, participants received a few snacks to stay fueled up while walking laps on the track and made their way to the information tables.

Here they filled out their paper placard where they could choose to walk in honor of or in memory of someone fighting breast cancer. Once filled out the placard was worn around the neck. Participants were also given beautiful pink and yellow butterfly and flower wands that were handcrafted by Angelica Garcia-Morteo. Most were promptly placed into the hairstyles of the individual.

Another table was filled with assorted informational pamphlets and fact sheets from the American Cancer Society and Susan G. Komen Foundation regarding breast cancer. These flyers detailed statistics regarding the prevalence and rates of breast cancer in the U.S., as well as how to perform a proper self-breast exam every month. Peer Support Specialists were also on hand to answer questions and hand out

information.

Participants were grateful for the opportunity to be able to attend. Viancia Roberson said she's been participating in Breast Cancer Walks since 1990 in Sacramento, so it meant a lot to be able to continue the tradition at CCWF. She has lost five loved ones to breast cancer and has two more going through chemotherapy. She "will continue to help them fight."

Outside guests were also present to provide information, support and visit with the event participants. Several members of the Sisterhood of Survivors Group attended the walk and spoke with individuals sharing their stories of resilience. The Sisterhood of Survivors are committed to providing assistance to those newly diagnosed and provides "on-going support to those affected by

breast cancer through peer support and educational resources."

Yet another table was supervised by a dedicated staff sponsor who oversaw participants signing "trust account withdrawal orders," forms that allow incarcerated individuals to send money to individuals or entities in the community. Walk participants were given the opportunity to donate any amount to a local charity that helps women battling breast cancer. Participants did not get anything in return. The money donated was purely altruistic and allowed individuals at CCWF to help fight a disease that is so prevalent among women.

One participant was inspired to share her message of hope and resilience on the microphone. Jojo, a three-time breast cancer survivor with an extensive family history of the disease, told everybody, "don't give up. Don't ever give up. I value my life and I'm going to beat this."



Photos Courtesy of CDCR

Left, Participants pose in solidarity with survivors at the Breast Cancer Awareness Walk; **Right**, Comfort Care workers and cancer survivors

**COVER STORY: ARC GRADUATION**

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Intelligence (EI).

Lynne Acosta began the ceremony with energetic words, "WHO'S NEXT!?" then passed the mic around to other former lifers in attendance. Johnny Diaz, who works for ARC, asked the graduates, "How many in here feel worthy?" He followed the affirmation by saying, "Apply what you learn. Be limitless, fearless, and believe in yourself. I am extremely proud."

Another guest in attendance was Jennifer Shaffer, CEO of the Board Parole Hearings, who gave advice for the individual who may not be eligible for a hearing right now, but encouraged individuals to "live as you are." She spoke on how people who did prepare for the BPH are now out.

"What Board is looking for is how you

are contributing to your community today," Shaffer said. Shaffer shared that how individuals contribute is a reflection of who they are.

After graduates listened to the uplifting messages, gears shifted to a performance by Mesha Dean who is a triple ARC graduate. Dean started out by leading the audience in an invigorating chant of, "Who are we?" - "ARC!" Music then filled the entire gym and the whole crowd cheered while Dean rapped his original lyrics accompanied to Kendrick Lamar's "Not Like Us."

Next, three graduates, who were hand-picked to give their message of inspiration, spoke to the group. Kianna Morris, who graduated from the EI group, spoke first on where she once was, earlier in her prison term. One of the things she highlighted is that once you change, it's not possible to keep up with the same lifestyle.

"I'll try to drag you along with me," Mor-

ris said, "but if you don't want to come, I have to leave you behind."

Taking these groups brings a shift within your life that entails making life choices that are not easy.

Keri Cache graduated from the Avatar/Board Prep group. She was sentenced to 15 to life and struggled with the thought of what life even meant.

"Am I going to be here forever?" Cache shared with the crowd. "Changes a word that we often take for granted and is something we should strive for." She spoke about how no one here is perfect, but she left the audience by saying, "I challenge you today: if you are not yet walking in your change, this is the perfect day to start."

The last graduate speaker was Christina Francis, who took the CGA group. As a 17-year-old convicted felon, she mentioned how defeating prison was for her when she first arrived at CCWF more

than 25 years ago. Francis reflected on a defining moment when an officer asked her, "How do you feel this is it for you?" That question set the tone for her life in prison.

"Fighting for respect and being involved in the prison politics stagnated my growth and smudged my reputation," Francis said. She felt hopeless and stuck in the victim mentality of 'why me?'. But witnessing incarcerated individuals paroling and coming back in as volunteers, Francis mentioned how that was pivotal for her. "It took for our people to get out for me to see the change," she said. Seeing people come back in and showing their success brings hope back inside the prison. No matter what, today Francis said, "I don't stay down, I get back up."

As the graduation came to a close, pizza and refreshments were passed out to each of the graduates. Happy faces and full stomachs were definitely hard-earned with self-redemption.

COMMENTARY

By Heather Miller

People under the age of 17 are deemed by the law too young to smoke, drive, buy alcohol, or go to an R-rated movie. They are too young to vote, serve on juries, or get married under the name of God, without parental consent. Yet, they are not too young to die in prison. The fact about certain serious crimes in the U.S. is this: it doesn't matter how old you were at the time of the crime. If found guilty, even a very young person can land a life or even a life without parole sentence. According to the Equal Justice Initiative, 11 states have no minimum age for being tried as an adult: Alaska, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Maine, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia. Other states allow prosecution as adults to start as young as 10, 12, or 13 years old. And for that reason, juveniles who are sent to prison for life terms are aging and even dying in U.S. prisons with little hope of ever being released.



Not too Young to Die in Prison

Photo generated by Imagine Art

I know all this because I am one of those juveniles. I committed my crime at the age of 16 and entered a maximum-security adult prison in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, at the age of 17. I am forty-nine now and I would give anything to prove myself worthy of a second chance.

I am sure you are asking yourself, "If she committed her crime in Oklahoma, how did she end up in a California prison?" I am here on interstate compact, a system that allows prisoners from one state to be housed in another. I am still under Oklahoma laws but I share the pains of juvenile imprisonment with many people, no matter what state they are in. We do not have data on the total numbers of people currently in U.S. prisons on life terms who were sentenced as juveniles. But here at CCWF we have approximately 17 juvenile offenders who were seventeen and under at the time of their crime.

It's a painful realization for a youthful offender to mature into adulthood and realize that the only life they will ever experience is behind bars. The majority of us were not old enough to graduate from high school. Most have never been on a real date, or gone to an amusement park. We've forgotten what it is like to go see a movie in the theater. Many

of us came from poor or low-income families who could not afford many things, including an attorney. We ache inside for all the things we have never experienced. We did not know what the world was truly about or who we could or would eventually want to become.

In addition to this heartache, juveniles in adult prison often face frightening treatment. They are exposed to extreme levels of physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and social control abuse. These juvenile offenders are immature, young, and easier to victimize, manipulate and control. In my home state of Oklahoma, there are children as young as thirteen sitting in the maximum-security prison for women called Mabel Bassett Correctional Center. I have witnessed these children (including myself) humiliated, used and taken advantage of by professional career predators.

Even though some long-standing federal legislation intended to protect juveniles does exist, there is only so much it can do. The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, originally passed

in 1974 and amended regularly (as recently as 2020), is supposed to keep children as much as possible from long-term confinement in adult facilities and when they are placed there, it should be under "sight and sound separation." In other words, away from psychological abuse, physical assault from adults, and from isolation. What is lacking is a moral obligation to care for the mental, emotional and physical safety of these children, rigorous protection and a long-term solution for possible release for these teenagers sentenced to life imprisonment.

The U.S. is unique in this way. It's not a secret that ours is one of two countries (with Israel) that sentences adolescents to spend their lives in prison. In December 2006, the United Nations took up a resolution calling for the abolition of life imprisonment for juvenile offenders. The vote was 185 to 1, with the United States being the lone dissenter.

What the rest of the world acknowledges is this: Teenagers are different from adults and should not be treated as equals. Experts in psychology who

“The teenage brain is like a car with a good accelerator but a weak brake. With fast powerful impulses under poor control, the likely result is a crash.”

have done research on young people say that when compared to adults, juveniles are impulsive, aggressive, and emotionally volatile. They are more likely to take risks, more reactive to stress, and more prone to focus on and overestimate short-term payoffs. Due to their lack of maturity, teenagers underplay the long-term consequences of their actions. They're likely to overlook alternative courses of action. In most serious cases, these teenagers were vulnerable to peer pressure, not just from their peers but by adults who manipulated and used them for their own gain, to do things that were illegal and life-costing.

Temple University Psychology Professor Laurence Steinkey is often cited for saying, "The teenage brain is like a car with a good accelerator but a weak brake. With fast powerful impulses under poor control, the likely result is a crash." Steinkey contributed to an American Psychological Association brief for the 2005 case that ultimately brought an end to the death penalty for crimes committed before age 18.

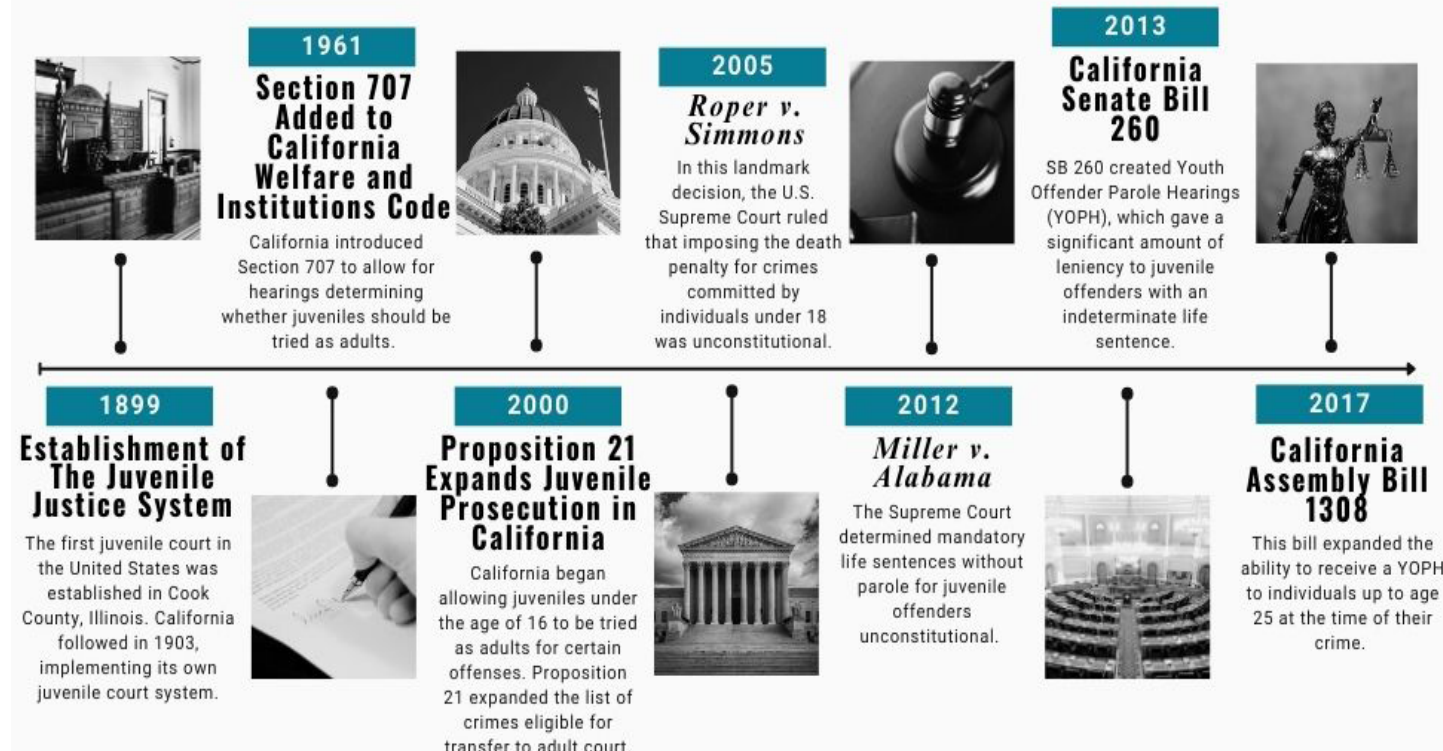
The extension of their argument is that a young person's vulnerability and comparative lack of control over their immediate environment means they have a greater claim to forgiveness than adults, for failing to escape from destruction.

Many organizations have been fighting this battle for years: Initiate Justice, Children's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, Sister Warrior's, Restorative Media, etc. I hope that one day they will triumph and save our youthful offenders from a fate of confinement for the rest of their lives.

There has to be a more humane way to approach juveniles who commit serious crimes other than locking them up and throwing away the key. House of Representatives (H.R.) Bill 3305: Juvenile Justice Accountability and Improvement Act of 2011, was one of the first of many, submitted by the House, introduced by

A HISTORY OF

JUVENILE INCARCERATION



Infographic by Alyssa Torres

How the Juvenile Offenders Committee Came to Be

A Brief History by a Founding Member

By Elizabeth Lozano

The Juvenile Offenders Committee (JOC) at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) is an Inmate Leisure Time Activity Group (ILTAG) that strives to promote good citizenship amongst its members. JOC provides support for the unique group of women who were juveniles (under 18 years of age) at the time of their crime and were tried as adults.

JOC works for the benefit of the juvenile offender, providing them the tools for rehabilitation, education, and preparation for the eventual, successful re-entry into society. JOC focuses on breaking barriers through intense workshops and restorative justice for a better future. It helps members develop good communication and rapport with the outside community and with the population inside CCWF, through institutional events, charitable projects, outreach, and donations of all kinds.

The idea for a juvenile offender group started when those of us with that sentence first compiled residents' stories, in 2007. We wanted to have our voices heard in Sacramento. We saw how Elizabeth Calvin, Senior Advocate in the Children's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, was supporting juveniles and gathering loved ones to rally at the California capitol.

It was two years after the US Supreme Court had abolished the death penalty for juveniles and the Justices were moving toward greater protection for minors. Historical changes would come that would affect the way juveniles are sentenced to Juvenile Life Without Parole (JLWOP). The court relied on neuroscientific evidence that stated a minor's brain is not fully developed until their mid-twenties. The movement for juvenile sentencing was strong and it was what would eventually turn the wheels for many other laws to pass that would assist many.

“At the time the ‘R’ on CDCR was three years new, in 2004. Lifers were not going home and for anyone with an indeterminate sentence, hope was something from the twilight zone.”

I remember having a conversation with my peer Niki Martinez. I had been 16 at the time of my offense sentenced to JLWOP, and Nikki had been 17 sentenced to 45 to L (now paroled). We had both been incarcerated for more than 15 years. I mentioned I was thinking of starting a group for juveniles and had a lifer Jasmine Brandl in mind, who had



JOC members gathered for a photo outside of the CCWF media center.

Photo by B. Bowers

been 16 at the time and sentenced to 15 to life (now paroled). Niki shared with me that she had been thinking of starting something as well, and that she had met a new JLWOP, Amy Preasmyer. She had been 16 years old at time of offense and sentenced to JLWOP (resentenced to 16 to L). I was surprised to hear about her since I had been the only one on my yard for several years.

We became the four JOC founders. We did not know what we were doing, but we had passion in our hearts to get the JOC going, knowing it was much bigger than what we could envision.

At the time the ‘R’ on CDCR was three

years new, in 2004. Lifers were not going home and for anyone with an indeterminate sentence, hope was something from the twilight zone. Rehabilitative programs consisted of curriculum put together by a lifer; N.A., A.A., Battered Women, and any resources that the Long Term Organization (LTO) put together. LTO was the only Inmate Leisure Time Activity Group

(ILTAG) CCWF had at the time.

We encountered many obstacles. First, the the community resource manager at the time told us that we would not be an ILTAG and that we had to go under the umbrella of LTO. The second was that our past at CCWF was terrible. We entered the system very young and ignorant. We believed what we were told by an officer working in Receiving & Releasing (R&R), “The only way you will be paroling is in a pine box.” The abnormal became the normal and the normal abnormal, so we acted as such for many years.

But we did not let the naysayers or our own insecurities discourage us. We continued with our vision, meeting in 100-plus degree weather on the main yard. We spread the word of the changes being fought for JLWOP and the importance of all of us rallying together even if at the time certain congressional bills did not affect us. We believed that eventually it would trickle down to more changes, and boy did it.

Eventually we met with psychologist Dr. Edward Oleksy, with whom we shared our life stories leading up to our offense. Lt. Kenneth Foster had offered to be our coordinator and who advocated with the CCWF administration to accept JOC as an ILTAG. However, because the CRM did not want us as an ILTAG, we

had no sponsor. Dr. Oleksy said that our offenses were the “icing on the cake” being that our brains were not fully developed and supported us by becoming our sponsor.

The last touch was writing letters to outside entities explaining our mission and asking for their support by writing letters to the warden about the necessity of our group. We wrote everyone we noticed had supported the JLWOP movement, and the Director of Female Offender Programs.

A breakthrough finally came in 2009, when warden Mary Lattimore sent me a memo addressing the letter I wrote to the Director of Female Offender Programs. It stated “Youth offenders at CCWF require unique assistance to facilitate their rehabilitation process...” She approved JOC on a 90-day pilot program. This was the beginning of hope for many.

For the past 15 years JOC has been active in rallying for restorative justice, the importance of accountability, healing, and hope. JOC is currently 130 strong in membership. We firmly accept our rehabilitation efforts as a link to the society in which we yearn to return to. In determination to see that happen, we embrace Healing Circles to have heart to heart conversations with survivors and District Attorneys.

TOO YOUNG TO DIE IN PRISON

...CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

Senator Scott of Virginia.

This H.R. Bill and the ones that have followed, would establish a meaningful opportunity for parole (or a similar type of release) for child offenders sentenced to life in prison. It would become available to youths who committed their crime(s) under the age of eighteen and who are sentenced to life in prison. For juvenile offenders like me who belong

to a states whose legislation does not yet account for the teenage neurological development into account with their legislation, the way the California has with Senate Bills 260, 261, and 263, it would be a dream come true for so many juvenile offenders who has spent many years, praying for a “second chance” at life.

I know that many people, especially victim's rights groups, feel there are crimes so terrible that only life sentences are a fit moral response for these youthful offenders' behavior.

However, when it comes to children, who likely established their behavior from the adult role models in their life, a life sentence is just as effectively a death sentence carried out by the state slowly over a period of years.

The good news is that the total number of people under the age of 17 languishing in prisons and jails has been decreasing for a long time. The most up-to-date numbers from the Bureau of Justices Statistics report that the total prison population who were juveniles

declined from 0.2% in 2002 to 0.02% in 2021.

I hope that one day society will find it in their hearts again to also give us juvenile lifers a second chance. Please do not let life in prison become the only life we ever know or live. Prison is a horrible, rotten place full of darkness. Nevertheless, in the depth of this darkness, there are little spots of light. We call these little spots of light: faith, hope, forgiveness, and the dream of a better tomorrow.

FEATURES

After 4 1/2 Decades

Elaine Wong is Ready to Walk Free

By Amber Bray

If anyone has survival advice for the women serving unthinkable long prison sentences, it's Elaine Wong. After four and a half decades inside CA prisons, Wong is finally walking free.

One anchor for her resilience has been, and continues to be, her strong ties to her family and culture. This would provide a lifeline in the decades to come.

Reflecting on her life, Wong characterized her childhood as loving and happy. She was born Sep. 29, 1950, and lived in Taiwan in her formative years. She began school at age four and a love of learning followed. In 1974, in her early 20s, Wong came to the United States in order to further her education. Two years later, she married Norman Wong, a guest speaker she met at college, and gave birth to their son, Glen, not long after.

But Wong had a gambling addiction. She fell into a pattern where she would borrow money from a loan shark she knew through her husband. Her husband had warned her not to deal with him.

"I did anyway," she said, "for the quick money. We got into a relationship of me borrowing money from him and paying him back a few times. The third time I couldn't pay it back and I wanted more time. He told me I had three days or he would sell my jewelry."



Elaine poses with her family at CCWF visiting. Photos Courtesy of Elaine Wong

to die in prison. She arrived at the California Institute for Women (CIW) on Feb. 26, 1981.

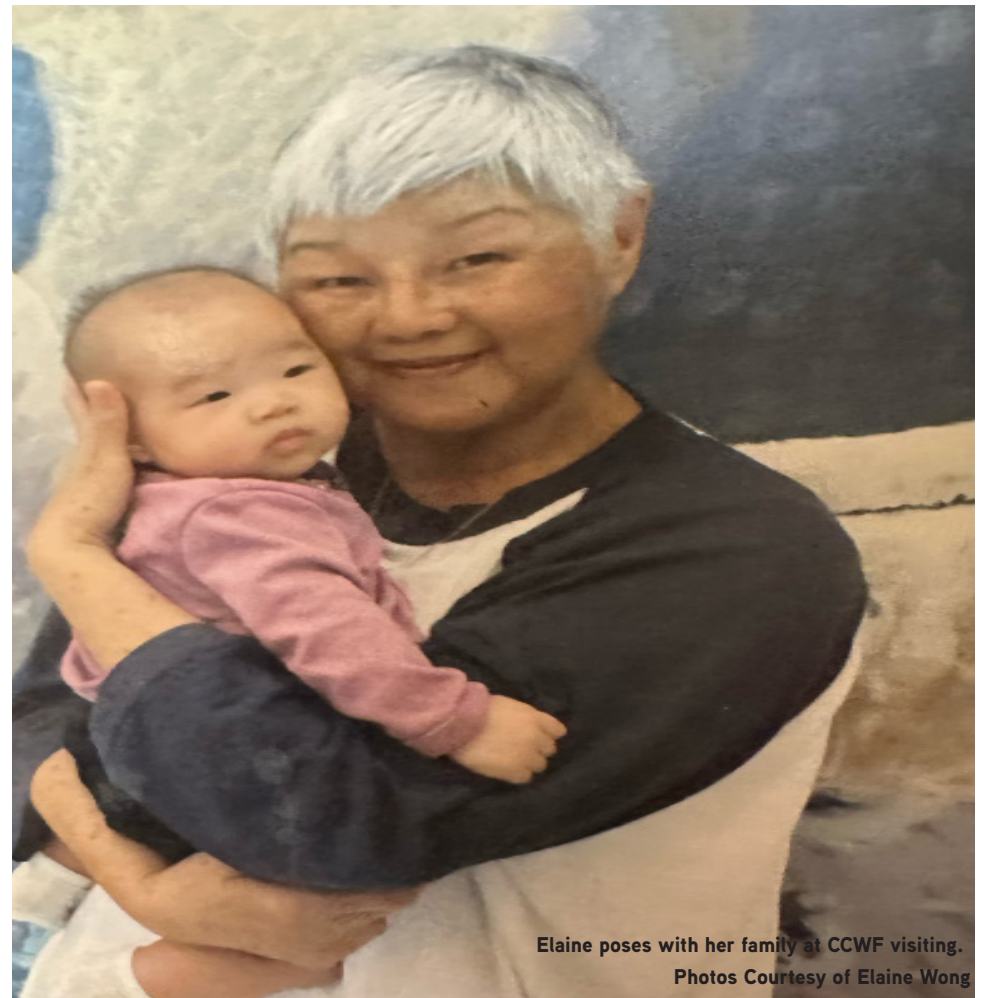
Wong sought to make the best of her new life. Her husband visited her weekly, bringing their young son with him. "I have a very loving husband. Norman made sure I had closeness with Glen," Wong said. The frequent visits allowed Wong to maintain her place in the family as both a wife and mother.

On Oct. 23, 1987, Wong made another fateful decision: she attempted to escape from CIW. Her last appeal had been denied and she felt hopeless. "There was nothing to lose, so why not?" Wong said. Wong was not successful in her escape, but the attempt led to a second felony charge to which she pled guilty in February, 1988.

Following CCWF's activation, Wong was transferred, in part because of her escape attempt. At CCWF, Wong strove to find her niche in the institution and to not let her heart become hardened, the ways she saw some other long termers and lifers do over the years.

"When you become bitter, you let the system win," Wong explained.

As the years passed, laws began to change. Incarcerated individuals began to see those sentenced to life terms be released through the Board of Prison



denied her request. She was one of ten incarcerated individuals across California whose commutations were denied.

Wong was devastated, likening the feeling to being "sentenced to LWOP all over again." After grieving, Wong chose to metaphorically dust herself off. And now she had a new reason to persevere - the upcoming birth of her first and only granddaughter, Iris. "There are no words I can use to describe being a grandma. The only word that comes close is 'wow,'" said Wong.

After Wong's commutation was denied, Colby Lenz, an organizer and legal advocate for California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP) reached out to Wong about filing another commutation or seeking to challenge the denial. "Colby helped me tremendously," Wong said. "She wouldn't give up and she wouldn't let me give up."

That perseverance paid off. On Mar. 29, 2024, Wong's sentence was commuted to 44 years-life by Governor Gavin Newsom, one of two women commuted that day. With her new sentence, Wong would need to appear before the Board of Parole Hearings (BPH) within six months. The board still needed to find her suitable to parole.

When she was told she was no longer an LWOP, "my heart exploded. I knew I would be home soon, that I would reunite with my family and physically be with them," Wong said.

But before Wong went before the BPH, a Los Angeles defense attorney filed a petition on Wong's behalf under Assembly Bill 600, a law that gives Superior Court judges discretion to resentencing incarcerated individuals. Wong appeared in court on Aug. 8, 2024. Supporters filled the room and many more submitted letters on Wong's behalf. The judge, however, citing Wong's sentence already having been commuted, declined to resentence her further.

One reason that Wong and her supporters were hoping for a resentence is that Wong has an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) hold mandating she be deported to Taiwan upon release. Individuals released from county jails are not necessarily deported whereas individuals released from prison are.

But, despite the disappointment of not being resentenced and released from court, the trip reinforced Wong's belief in miracles.

"I was reminded of the miracle of how much a human spirit can endure and how much a human heart can hold. Once you think you're broken, you're not," she said. "You can put yourself back together."

On Sep. 11, 2024, Wong appeared before the BPH and was found suitable for parole, with a projected release date in mid-February. But she is still in a state of limbo because of the ICE hold which, she said, puts "a damper on my family, especially my son." Wong expressed that there is uncertainty about her deportation based on the age of her case. She will not know for certain until she is scheduled to be released.

As a result, Wong is making parole plans for both countries. Her parents still live in Taiwan and she is very close with them. But given that her immediate family is in the US, she is hoping to remain here.

Should she be allowed to remain, she wants to volunteer with CCWP as well as Sister Warriors Freedom Coalition. Her granddaughter has told her to "hurry up and come home" so Wong can teach her to read and write in Chinese.

Wong also looks forward to the simple joys of life: grocery shopping, cooking with loved ones, and traveling. As a Buddhist, Wong wants to visit Tibet, which was forbidden when she lived in Taiwan.

She hopes to maintain some of the relationships she has cultivated in CCWF and CIW once she is paroled. She noted that people kept in touch with her over the years, so wants to do the same. For new LWOPs, lifers and long termers, Wong's advice is to "never lose hope. My Dad told me that no matter how dark the situation is, if you look hard enough there is always light. You just have to look for it and don't close your eyes."

After four and a half decades incarcerated, Wong's sentiment resonates: If anyone can serve as a bastion of hope, it is she.

“I was reminded of the miracle of how much a human spirit can endure and how much a human heart can hold. Once you think you're broken, you're not,” she said. “You can put yourself back together.”

Wong panicked. And she made a fateful decision: she brought a gun with her to see the man who had loaned her money. "I felt so desperate and didn't know how to get out of it. I see now, I could have just left and lost the jewelry, so what. But at that time I didn't understand enough. I shot him."

Wong was arrested on January 14, 1980, for murder with special circumstances. And around a year later, she was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole (LWOP), a sentence that had only recently been passed into law following the reinstatement of capital punishment in California.

That was it. Wong had been sentenced

Terms (later Board of Parole Hearings (BPH)), as well as a few LWOPs receive commutations. In 2017 and 2018, commutations rose under Governor Jerry Brown, who granted more than 150 commutations for individuals convicted of one felony. For anyone convicted of two or more felonies, a commutation of sentence has to be approved by the California Supreme Court (CSC).

Wong had submitted her commutation application and her case was sent to the CSC due to her escape conviction. Wong waited for a decision while she saw several LWOPs at CCWF commuted. It gave her hope. But on December 26, 2018, just one day after Christmas, Wong was informed that the CSC had

Sierra Vista's Principal Wendy Olono takes education at CCWF to a new level



Wendy Olono celebrates with graduates at the 2023 Sierra Vista's graduation

By Delina Williams

It all began in the second grade. There was never a doubt. She would be a teacher. Just like Mrs. Courtney, who showed her how fantastic it is to learn. And learn Wendy Olono—now principal of the Central California Women's Facility's (CCWF) Sierra Vista Adult School—did.

Looking back, Olono remembers that all the students looked forward to Friday math, of all things, because Mrs. Courtney taught them in the context of a cooking lesson. She provided incentives for the faster-learning students to stay focused while the rest of the class caught up—by giving them craft projects “like latch kits where we used a hook, yarn and a plastic pattern to move the time and make designs.”

“This was a lot of fun. She sang to us all the time,” Olono said. “It didn't feel like learning because she always made everything F-U-N.”

It was in her desire to learn that she knew she could teach. And after spending over 20 years in public schools, Olono—known as Mrs. “O” to most—has been the principal at Sierra Vista Adult School since May 2018. Of course, at first it was challenging to juggle different people from different spaces. Everyone from the people in blue to the people in green with a smattering of vibrancy from the educational staff make up the community she oversees. But Olono has never looked back with regret from that moment of decision to

be a facilitator of knowledge. It means long days and some nights where there is still much to be done, yet she's doing her all to make sure the Sierra Vista “Bobcats” under her charge do not lag behind.

Olono is a stylish lady, from her slight frame and hazel eyes to how she strikes those heels to get where she needs to be. She takes it all in stride as she walks the campus spreading smiles and lending an ear to those in need. She believes once the students see that the staff are there for their benefit, they'll eventually come that to understanding they matter and that the school is there to help them achieve their best lives while at CCWF.

“We're here to support the efforts of all who want what we have to offer,” Olono said.

Olono oversees several areas of CCWF's educational umbrella including: construction technical education (CTE), college programming (Merced Community, Fresno State, Lassen, Coastline and Feather River), the CCWF library, the athletic department, and media specialist department. So, to say that she is a woman with many hats is not an understatement.

The daily grind for Olono brings innumerable perks. Watching students who were failed by the school system as children succeed in education here at CCWF is at the top of her list, alongside being an advocate for the women in the Office Correctional Education (OCE)



Photos Courtesy of CDCR

to bring programming to fit the needs for the population. The drive to make a difference in the lives of incarcerated women brought her to CCWF.

Changing up the atmosphere for students has increased GED skills and leveled up CASAS testing. Developing “strong relationships within these walls” matters to her, and while she notes “our staff chooses to work here” makes it easy to find solutions, she credits to the cooperative work being done through the initiative and creative stylings of all involved.

When asked about the California Model (CM) and the implementation of new rules for greater reach, Olono said, “For the most part the staff already embodies the core values aligned with its mission. It is doable and we will be there to inspire our students.” She thinks the CM is a “great initiative - treating people like people.”

Many here are still unfamiliar with using educational tools like self-directed learning and motivational techniques to adapt to the rigors of justice-impacted residents. There can be struggles within a person that need to be addressed. And that is the goal of educators: To meet the need and press towards success. CCWF students are keeping her busy with their growth.

Understanding that knowledge is power keeps Olono pushing the envelope for her students. It is key to helping those who need someone to advocate for them. This is her mission, “to make the changes here so that the impact affects so many” once a student leaves CCWF.

However it adds up, Olono has shown the students and staff of Sierra Vista Adult School that she is here for the long haul. She cares enough to talk things out and make a difference.

Felon's Alphabet

By Sagal Sadiq

We, the incarcerated individuals housed here in Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) have been bad. Bad to the bone. We've been bad, not because we are bad people, but because we've engaged in bad behaviors. Behaviors bad enough to lock us away from the world at. Behaviors that require significant modification.

“B” is for behavioral change.

Now let's keep it real. Not everyone who needs to change wants to change. That's fine. This is not for them anyway. This is for you. You know who you are. You are sick and tired of being sick and tired, in trouble, in and out of jail, and always involved in some drama.

I have a potential solution. Begin by being bold; begin by admitting that if you go around talking to more than four people about the same issue, you're not looking for a solution, you're looking for attention.

But if it's behavioral change you're after, then begin by identifying the behavior you wish to change - and then choose. That's your super power right there, no tights

or cape needed here. You can simply choose.

Remember, and I know some of you know this: What you think you will feel, and what you feel you will act upon. So, for all our sakes, think positive thoughts.

If it sounds like I drank the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) Kool-Aid, it's because I have, by the grape flavored bucketful. This is great stuff.

Your thoughts belong to you, that means you, that means you are in charge. You are the boss. That voice in your head has zero business telling you what to do, getting you in deep legal doo-doo and making your life miserable. You're already in a prison. Do not allow your thoughts to further hold you hostage. Take back control of your life. I won't tell you it will be easy to do. I won't tell you; that you won't have setbacks. But I promise you, if you give it a go, one good time, you'll see that this works.

After all, what do you have to lose? I leave you with this mantra: Think good, feel good, do good.



Photo by Maximalfocus on Unsplash

FEATURES

Amp Up Your Workout

Eight motivation tips from a former NASM-certified personal trainer, triathlete and coach

By Diana Lovejoy



I'm a life-long athlete, but I've spent decades battling a genetic kidney defect. The chronic fatigue, pain, and systemic imbalances often zap my energy and motivation. Without my medical treatment in prison, I'm toughing it out against the odds. But the payoffs of exercise are huge and greatly reduce my symptoms. No-one here has it "easy"... but exercise makes it so much easier to deal with the hardships of life!

After swimming, water polo and volleyball in my youth, I competed in triathlons for 11 years. Triathlon is a swim-bike-run event with high-speed races ranging from one to 10 hours (no breaks!). I also coached athletes and clients. Strength and endurance are my specialties—we need these to face life!

Here are my eight go-to's for getting going even when it's the last thing you want to do.

IT'S NOT ALL OR NOTHING

What's the number one reason for losing workout momentum? It's also a top exercise myth: "It's gotta be all or nothing."

Have you found yourself having these self-defeating thoughts?

"I missed two workouts, so I might as well quit."
 "Oh no, I ate two pastries yesterday; might as well skip the workout and eat this one too."
 "I only have 25 minutes - not enough time, so I'll skip it."
 "Even if I lose 10 pounds, I'm still not going to look good."

Coach Lovejoy is here to clear the record: Never say all or nothing! Every 10 minutes counts. If you can only fit in a few minutes, DO IT. All of these minutes add up over a week or a month. Just 10 minutes of strength moves or slow jogging burns 100 calories on average. Sure, it's possible to "crash-train" your way to dramatic weight loss. But the success is temporary because we can't keep up that level of training. The key is to find a routine that you can maintain.

EASE INTO IT

This one's BIG. Start slowly, and you'll be grateful later when you're injury-free, full of energy and looking curvy in a good way. Your body and your mind need time to adapt. Even elite athletes do an "easy adaptation" phase after a break, to get ready to work out hard. Your joints, tendons, ligaments

and muscles need to get strong enough to bear your weight. Skipping this can be a short road to injury.

If you plan to exercise five to six days per week, start with three days the first week and four days the second and third weeks. Do movements slowly and with proper form. For running, start with slow two-minute jog intervals with one-minute walks in between. Give yourself this chance to fit exercise into your lifestyle realistically—and get set up to avoid burnout and meet your goals.

WARM UP

What feels worse than dragging yourself off the bunk in a Chowchilla January? The moment you hit the wall and can't breathe because you started out too hard. Instead, ease into each workout with five to 10 minutes of movement that's slower than the main workout. Your joints actually need about seven minutes to loosen up. It takes several minutes to boot up the cardiovascular system. And...don't judge how you feel in the first five minutes. It's just the warm-up!

FUEL UP

Would you drive your car on empty? Are you dragging your tail after work, or feeling sluggish in the morning? It's true that you can't digest a taco bowl immediately before working out. But half a protein bar, a spoonful of peanut butter, or a banana can make the difference between fueled-up and failed. A small snack is an incredible brain trick too: When you're under-fueled, your "survival brain" says "conserve energy... just lie down." With a few calories in your tank, the workout suddenly feels fun.

HYDRATE, HYDRATE

Did I say hydrate? All muscles require water plus electrolytes (sodium and potassium) to work. Your heart is one big muscle. Potassium shortage makes you tired and can cause the heart to over-exert or even fail. And, it causes those annoying muscle cramps. An extreme electrolyte shortage is called hyponatremia. Even an elite marathoner can suffer a heart attack by drinking water but not enough electrolytes. Add at least one state cool-aid to

your water bottle per day, two in a Chowchilla summer.

JUST GET DRESSED

It's another brain trick: Once your body is dressed for action, the mind-set follows. We develop conditioned responses to what we're wearing. Simply putting on shorts, sports bra and shoes can raise your heart rate and the "good stress" level to make you feel ready to exercise.

KNOW THE BENEFITS

Finding your reasons to exercise is the best motivator. Some of these benefits may surprise you:

Anti-aging: Exercise speeds up metabolism, balances hormones, and strengthens cellular mitochondria (the "engines" of cells), which allows the body to repair tissue and fight illness more easily—like a younger body! And, muscles maintain bone density. Stronger bones = youthful body.

Weight maintenance: Not only do you burn more calories by exercising, but carrying more muscle mass uses more calories even while you're at rest.

Clearer thinking, better memory: Suddenly math is less frustrating, and you're making better daily decisions. Increased blood and oxygen to the brain actually helps prevent and slow dementia too.

Way better mood: Any type of exercise balances the brain chemicals responsible for calm, happier feelings. It's like having an all-day buffer against negative vibes. According to a 2019 article in Runner's World, running and high intensity intervals can generate the same kind of neurochemical response that cannabis does. Exercise stimulates the release of endorphines. Yes, there is a "natural high!"

CHANGE IT UP

Doing the same workout video or aerobics 'n' abs every time? This can be a motivation drain all by itself. The body and the mind like variety and new challenges; that's how we progress. Try out Shawn T's Hip-Hop dance routine, some step aerobics, or even the same exercises in a different order. This also reduces repetitive stress and the risk of injury.

What if you can't get to the gym, or the equipment in the dayroom? Check out these short but effective workouts available in Edovo, on our tablets:

The Pheonix: Recovery-based strength and mixed-intensity workout videos, by real people who found mental and physical fitness. Search "The Pheonix" in Edovo.

Sean Vigue Fitness: Short core, strength and power videos, plus yoga- and Pilates-based workouts for strength, power, and flexibility. Short but challenging and entertaining! Search "Sean Vigue" or "strength workout" in Edovo.

Darabee Fitness: High-intensity Interval Training (HIIT), strength, and cardio endurance workouts, no equipment required. (These are instruction sheets, not videos.) Search "strength workout" in Edovo.

When to hit the Main Gym:

Mon-Wed-Fri 9:00 AM - 2:00 PM
 Tues-Thurs 9:00 AM - 11:00 AM
 To get a priority ducat for gym time, send a Form-22 to Coach Martinelli.