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(Photo by PIO Monique Williams)

Participants gather at the CCWF chapel awaiting Grandma's Hands presentation.

Grandma's Hands

New programming gives senior citizens a chance to connect and build community

By Nora Igova

On Wednesday, Nov. 6, 2024, Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) invited more than 160 residents to the chapel to introduce a new program called Grandma's Hands, designed to address activity needs for the population over 60 years of age.

The program will open in January of 2025 for all three facility yards and create an opportunity for senior citizens to meet quarterly and bond in a community setting.

The program coordinator, retired Chief Deputy Warden Velda Dobson Davis, told the attendees that they hoped to include activities like crocheting, sewing and quilting to donate 100-plus crocheted stuffed animals to the Valley Children's Hospital in Madera.

In addition to the announcement and the opportunity to socialize, the attendees also received a "love package" containing hygiene products donated by Compassion Prison Project's chief executive officer Fritzi Horstman and delivered to CCWF by Pollen Initiative's Jesse Vasquez.

The message Dobson Davis hoped

to deliver was: "Grow old gracefully. You are not alone. You are not in this by yourself and we are excited to be alive."

Participant Renee Robinson shared how surprised she was and considered it a great opportunity for all to keep busy together.

Resident Catherine Ann Reed added that she does projects now, but looks forward to doing them with others as a community. Resident Melissa Ann Sheppard thought it was "awesome" that people outside want to teach them crafting skills.

"It will make us feel good inside," she said. "I will be able to create something very personal to me and give back to others out there in need."

Participant and a peer support specialist Cleo Martinez-Costa agreed. "The older population has their own sufferings. To push through every day and continue to be strong represents true resilience," she said. "This will build our community and give us strength to continue to fight for our freedom."

CCWF's First Surrogate Restorative Dialogue Opens up Space for Healing

By Coleen Torres

Editor's note: last names have been withheld from this story for privacy.

Elle was on vacation when she received a phone call on Feb. 8, 2009, at 12:10 a.m. She was told that her daughter, Emily, had been struck by a truck and was on life support. Emily was 24 years old.

She then heard a terrible sound best described as "deep anguish," Elle said. "Later I realized the sound was coming from me."

A drunk driver hit Emily in a crosswalk after a long day of drinking.

She flew 15 feet in the air and suffered blunt force trauma. She was declared brain dead. The driver had seven prior DUI's and had done little time for them before.

According to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, driving under the influence of alcohol causes 32% of all traffic fatalities, 13,524 deaths in 2022, the latest year on record. It's a choice people make when they are only thinking of themselves. People get a first DUI and still reoffend, break-

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Pickleball Debut A Smash



Pickleball participants getting instructions from pickleball O.G. Roger Bel Air. (Photos Courtesy of CDCR)

By Diana Lovejoy

On a sunny Wednesday in November, the Central California Women Facility Main Gym came alive with enthusiastic shouts and the squeaking of sneakers on the polished floor, as residents practiced the skills freshly taught by Roger Bel Air, pickleball O.G. extraordinaire.

Coach G. Martinelli was ahead of the curve, readying the gym upon its post-Covid reopening: refinishing floors, taping court boundaries, and testing the pickleball equipment provided by Heidi Wipple of the California Department of Recreational Programming.



Warden Anissa De La Cruz preparing to serve with Lt. Monique Williams

Warden Anissa De La Cruz, Chief Deputy Warden Cynthia Rojas, and Peer Literacy Mentor Program (PLMP) Supervisor Speir jumped into the rotation, practicing along with residents and pickleball coaches. De La Cruz and Rojas revealed their athletic and slightly competitive edge, as their returns gained speed.

Warden De La Cruz made history on this action-packed day by sharing the court with residents and staff alike. Though this was their first pickleball experience,

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CCWF celebrated in visiting and in the day rooms.

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CCWF has plans for a better 2025

COMMENTARY

How I Became a Mother in Prison



Illustration by MINIMALARTIST on Shutterstock

By Nora Igova

When I was physically free and thirsty to experience life to its full capacity, becoming a mother was the last thing that came to mind. I saw it as the biggest responsibility a woman can have. I could not imagine carrying a living being inside of me and giving life to that child. I could not imagine being responsible for creating a place of loving and belonging, providing information and playing an instrumental role in shaping a child's belief system.

A little girl will look at her mother to understand "Who am I in this world?" and a little boy will look at his mother for guidance on "What is a woman?" Of course, when they grow up they may end up doing the opposite behavior. However, it does not lighten the responsibility of being an influencer to that extent. I did not look forward to taking on that responsibility.

Now that I am a resident of the largest women's facility in the world, I am surrounded with women that yearn to be mothers, mostly to their own biological children. However, if that is not possible, their motherly instincts gravitate towards someone who represents their children. It's a way to fill the void.

Women in general have nurturing natures and that trait definitely shows up within the walls. Over the years, I have watched incarcerated women create family units as a sense of normalcy. They care for each other, cook together, take care of each other when they are sick, grieve together, cry together, celebrate holidays, celebrate birthdays, give each other presents, and support each other through the struggles life has to offer. It makes us feel good. It makes us feel normal.

When we feel good in our minds, bodies, and spirits, it is much easier to feel positive about ourselves and the capacity to achieve our goals in life. That is why it is so important to take good care of ourselves and each other. This means getting enough sleep so you have the mental sharpness to make good decisions and the energy to get stuff done. It also means eating right and getting enough physical activity to keep your body healthy and strong—and doing what we need to do to feel spiritually connected to our chosen

family and the world around us.

I see youngsters coming to prison and some remind me of little me. All they need is some guidance, love, and support. I see they are seeking change but do not have a positive influence to support that change and, therefore, seek love and belonging in all the wrong places. I want to model the way and live by example, with the hopes of changing the generational destructive patterns so many of us adopted as part of our core belief system.

It is a new longing for me to be a mother. To give to someone what I know is important, to make others feel supported and protected. The particular brand of mothering I apply is not overly soft, stressing on staying on the right path and being responsible. I show disappointment

versus punishment as a tactic. I am always respectful. I provide information and play an instrumental role in helping that child within us change their belief system, so they make positive decisions in the future. I never had

guidance as a child, so I give that. I never heard the words I love you, so I say that. Everything I wanted as a child and did not have, I can give to others.

This is a responsibility I actually look forward to taking on.

One of my kids I'd like to mention is Olivia Culbreath. When I met her as a young lifer, I felt a strong instinct to protect, nurture, and help her grow. Her gentleness and kind demeanor woke up my motherly instinct. All I wanted was to put her in my pocket and keep her safe. She deserved a chance and safe place where she could live up to her potential. All the kids are special and authentic in their own way. I am proud to say that Olivia transferred to CIW and has become a respected leader in her community and part of their Inmate Advisory Council executive body.

Today, I can proudly say I am a mother of at least a dozen kids. Some of them have paroled, some of them have transferred, and some of them are still hovering around the nest trying to find their way and fly away.

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CCWF Paper Trail Staff

Amber Bray

Editor-in-Chief

Kanoa Harris-Pendang

Managing Editor

Delina Williams

News Editor

Sagal Sadiq

Features Editor

Nora Igova

Art and Layout Designer

Diana Lovejoy

Journalism Guild Chairperson

Administrative Review

Anissa De La Cruz

Warden

Cynthia Rojas

Chief Deputy Warden

Monique Williams

Public Information Officer

Todd Javernick

Information Officer I

Kate McQueen

Editorial Advisor

Jesse Vasquez

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CCWF Residents Transform Daily-Use Items into Contest-Ready Christmas Masterpieces

By Amber Bray

The afternoon of Thursday, Dec. 26, 2024, was a bright but chilly afternoon. However, the cool temps didn't stop the administration of Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) from observing one of CCWF's unique traditions: judging the housing units' Christmas decorations.

Two groups of administrators toured the Reception Center and the three General Population facilities to evaluate how each unit had decorated for the holidays.

A tradition dating back more than a quarter century, incarcerated individuals in each housing unit at CCWF come together to decorate the dayrooms to help promote morale and lend a festive atmosphere for the holiday season.

Each housing unit is given paper, paint, tape and markers donated from various departments at CCWF



Building 510's Coca Cola Christmas.



Building 511's Grinch-themed decorations.

(Photos Courtesy of CDCR)

in order to craft decorations that are displayed from mid-December until early January. Units are also given freshly cut trees that can likewise be decorated, lending a sense of home to each dayroom with a burst of bright green and a fresh pine scent.

While there are no criteria to determine a winner, there are guidelines to qualify. For example, residents are advised: do not use sanitary products (toilet paper, tampons, pads) for decorations; do not hang decorations within 18 inches of the ceiling; do not cover entire walls with paper; and do not decorate the

hallways.

Decorations in the housing unit vary greatly. Residents construct items such as an officer's station made into a gas station, a large snow globe filled with a Santa Claus and snowflakes, a Grinch, and M&M characters, to name a few. Units generally decide on a theme for the building and create their decorations accordingly.

Walking into housing unit 512, Facility Captain Brian Castelle said, "I like the pride the population takes with the decorations. It's refreshing to see positivity where circumstances can

be so negative."

Correctional Business Manager Perla Ponce took in the decorations with a smile on her face, taking pictures of various aspects from each housing unit to use when deciding the winner from each facility.

A winner from each facility yard is determined by administration and was announced over the institutional PA early the next morning. The winners were: Facility A: 503; Facility B: 505; Facility C: 512; and Facility D: 516. Each winning unit receives cake and punch provided by Central Kitchen.

"It's always great to see the population come together and to see them work with staff in bringing the holidays into all the units," said Facility Captain Steven Rodriguez.

Although CCWF residents cannot be with their loved ones during the holidays, they can enjoy a sense of the holiday season with the colorful, handcrafted decorations on display in their housing units.

Residents used craft paper and water-based markers to create competition-worthy holiday decorations

Christmas Celebration with Families in an Unlikely Place

By Chappinette Martin

On December 21, 2024, the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) turned the visiting room into a winter wonderland. Resident students of Prison Industry Authority Carpentry and the Community Resource Manager's (CRM) decorating committee put together several stations with props that made Christmas come to life.

Nutcrackers stood by the doors, along with a huge Christmas tree with all the trimmings, snowmen, a gingerbread woman and man, and a gingerbread house that the kids could walk through.

There was a table with all the

cookies and cupcakes you could imagine. There was even a picture booth for the families. Last, but not least, was a face painting station where the incarcerated women got to paint their children's faces. One could see the residents' family getting in on the action of painting faces as well.

Everyone was having a blast enjoying the company of their loved ones. A young lady walked away from the table with a painted butterfly wing on her face while a young man walked away with his whole face painted like a tiger. Crystal Mejia, chairperson of the CRM's decorating committee, had her face painted as well, a painted gift box adorned the side of her face.



Inflatable Santas jamming for families in visiting at last year's Christmas party

Photo Courtesy of CDCR

There were families from different walks of life interacting with each other outside, on the jungle gym, swinging, laughing, and having a great time. Every now and then you'd hear the hushed tones of "It's cold," yet, the winter weather hadn't stopped the families from enjoying one another's time.

After a while of everyone chatting and checking out the stations, Santa and his "little helpers" walked through the door to light up the room. His helpers came from the PUPS, Uplifting Prisoners Spirits Program, on B yard. As the dogs walked behind him in their little Christmas outfits donated by staff, each friendly puppy had its own swagger. One named Astrid was dressed up with a little Santa.

Then there was Jordan who had a Bambi outfit on while the others Annabelle, James, Scotty, Forrest, Caleb, Koda, Jason, and Billie had on their "ugly" Christmas sweaters. As they paraded around, the families gathered and surrounded them with love.

From young to old, everyone's face lit up with glee as Santa and his helpers filled the room with joy. At that point, it crossed my mind how important it is to stay connected. We are incarcerated, true, but we are still mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, and friends.

I noticed a young lady off to the side, Sarah Montoya, a lifer from C-yard, who was delighted to be there.

"It gets hard to not have family

around," she told me. "I mean, I talk to them on the phone but it still makes me sad. This is the first time in five years I've seen my children."

Gynna Williams, a young lady who is here serving a life sentence, was there with her grandparents and a younger brother. Her family stated that they enjoyed the experience especially after going through the whole visitors' entrance procedure: parking, waiting, and standing in lines; but worst of all was the walking. Despite that, they were still happy to spend time with Williams.

Resident Kimberly Guzman and her family felt the same way about the waiting and walking but once they got to B-side visiting to meet up with their loved ones, they said it was worth it. Everyone looked very happy and upbeat.

Everyone appreciated all the donations from staff, the incarcerated population's family, and the sponsors. Roxanne Nichols, who has been a sponsor for about a year, was wearing a Christmas "Baby Yoda" sweater that was so cute. She wished everyone a very merry Christmas.

As our time neared its end, the families enjoyed the last moments of their visits. For most it seemed a bittersweet feeling having to say to the goodbyes and see you later. It seemed that the joy they had made waiting for the next visit felt the way a child does waiting to open his or her gifts on Christmas morning.

I could hear "Until we meet again" echoing in the distance as families made their exits.

NEWS

COVER STORY: SURROGATE DIALOGUE
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Victim Offender Dialogues

What is a Victim Offender Dialogue?

A VOD is a process in which the victim of a crime, or the surviving family members, and the offender who committed the offense meet face-to-face in a safe and secure setting. The objective is for the survivor to feel heard, and for the offender to fully understand the effects of what they have done.

Is VOD appropriate for every kind of crime and every kind of victim?

VOD can be appropriate for many violent crimes when the approach is rigorously victim-centered. Cases of intentional and unintentional murder, attempted murder, sexual assault, kidnapping, armed robbery, and other such crimes are among the many that have been successfully facilitated. Cases in which the offender acted in psychopathic or sadistic ways require facilitators with special training, and may not be good candidates.

What is CDCR's VOD process?



Survivors request a VOD with the CDCR Office of Victim and Survivor Rights and Services.

Request is reviewed to determine offender eligibility.



Facilitators meet separately with survivor and offender to prepare for dialogue.

Once both parties are ready, a VOD is held at the facility or another safe space.



NOTE: The VOD is voluntary and either party has the right to pause or end the process at any time, and for any reason.

Surrogate Restorative Dialogues

How does a surrogate restorative dialogue differ?

SRDs are ideal for cases in which offenders are unknown or unable/unwilling to participate in a VOD. Instead, survivors can have a conversation with individuals who are incarcerated for a similar crime.

“ The goal is to create space for healing, understanding and learning. It's not about shame, it's not an adversarial conversation. It's hopefully an opportunity for everybody that's gonna get something out of it that's going allow them to continue their growth inside and for the survivors to be able to continue finding healing.”

– Miguel Quezada,
Mend Collaborative Co-director

Information courtesy of the CDCR's Office of Victim and Survivor Right and Services.

(Infographics by V. Roseborough)

ing the law with the belief the rules do not apply to them. How can we make a change?

One way to is to step into a room where the problem is. Elle now has more than five years experience participating in an intentional coming-together of offenders and a victim of a similar crime, in a process called Surrogate Restorative Dialogue (SRD). On Sept. 27, 2024, Elle opened up about her loss with a group of women at the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF).

The purpose of surrogate dialogue is for a perpetrator and a representative of their victim to share a space where mutual understanding,

“ Elle shared a picture of Emily on life support and explained how she cut off locks of her hair to have something tangible of her daughter...

empathy for the impact on the victim, and forgiveness for the perpetrator can grow. It is a safe circle to listen to the victim's story and not to be afraid to ask the uncomfortable questions. It is a time for accountability and expressing remorse. It is a chance to move forward.

This SRD, a first at CCWF, was facilitated by the Mend Collaborative, a non-profit organization dedicated to creating opportunities for healing and transformation for all survivors of violence.

Elle opened up the group's session with two profound questions that set the tone of no judgment and vulnerability. “How many were raised with alcohol in the home?” she asked, “How many were raised with abuse in the home?” She delicately nodded her head to indicate that she already knew the whole room would lift their hand up. She spoke softly, saying how she could have easily been in one of their shoes.

Then she took the circle on a journey from pain to redemption. She poured love into the people who had committed the same crime that took her beloved daughter away. She gave her story and lifted every-

one in the circle up with words like, “You are more than the worst thing you have done. You are worthy,” even though the purpose of this circle is to put themselves in their victim's shoes.

The point of hearing from the victim's standpoint is to prevent further repeat-offenders. Thanks to Elle's grace and strength, the individuals present had a chance to embrace the pain and grow. Listening to Elle and the lifelong challenges she endures every day was not easy.

Still, one participant, Kendra, said, “I believe a lot of change could come from this.”

Cash, another participant, agreed; “I did not know how much I needed this until I saw you (Elle) walking up the path.”

Elle said she never imagined this being an outcome of Emily's death.

Emily was an organ donor, so after the crash, she was put on a machine to keep her organs viable. She donated seven of her organs. Elle spent that night and the following morning with her, surrounded by friends and family. Elle shared a picture of Emily on life support and explained how she cut off locks of her hair to have something tangible of her daughter.

Emily was warm to touch; Elle described it as a very surreal feeling. When it was time to disconnect Emily, Elle felt unprepared. She was holding her daughter's hand and what seemed like a long haul was only across the way. The nurses rolled her out to the other room and Elle heard in the distance, “You have to let go.”

“Grief is vicious,” Elle said. She went through stages of wanting to end her life. When she thought about Emily being so thoroughly gone, it became overwhelming. Elle's

mother once told her, “You have changed.” When Elle sarcastically replied, “Oh really?” her mom said she felt like she had lost two people.

Elle felt upset, but she knew she needed to change. One day she saw a sticker that read, “Love wins.” She questioned the sticker, thinking how love could make this better. That is when she made the decision to say “Yes” to life.

“Grief has not left but [I] learned how to carry it,” Elle told the group.

After Elle shared Emily's story, the room was silent except for sniffles echoing off the walls. Tissue boxes passed around multiple times during the two hours. Last but not least, Elle opened up the circle for questions as people passed popcorn around.

Kaylee asked, “How long did it take for you to meet the offender?”

“Ten years to the day,” Elle said. “It took a journey of increments of forgiveness.”

In January 2019, Elle went to San Quentin State Prison and met the man who she once called, “the man who killed Emily.” She thought if he said yes to speaking with her, she might be able to see him in a differ-

...Grief has not left but [I] learned how to carry it, Elle told the group.

ent light.

All Elle could think while she was waiting for him to show up was, “I have a hug for him if he wanted it,” and “That was love.” She explained he looked weighed down.

After they hugged, he said, “Don't you want to hit me?” Elle emphasized how she did not excuse his behavior, but understood it. For him to get to where he was on that day of her visit, he had to get help and face the reckless choices he made. He had to get through the shame and guilt to be able to take accountability and talk with Elle.

She said the biggest thing offenders could do is face the truth and take accountability for their choices.

Maggie, another participant, asked, “Is there anything that reminds you of Emily?”

One of the stories she told that really influenced the room was something that happened on Victim Impact Day during the sentencing of the man who killed Emily. Elle was at the back of the plane hoping to be alone, when she saw this cute Asian man walk towards her. She repeated to herself: “Please do not sit next to me, please do not.” Still, he did.

It was a gift, as it turned out. His partner had been killed by a drunk driver. They commiserated as the man expressed his grief; he wasn't even able to make it back home before the family cleared his partner's belongings out the apartment. He never even got to have a sweater of his beloved.

This man had many tattoos, eventually he got something for his partner. It was a tattoo of the first line of his favorite poem on his ribs. When he showed it to Elle, she was shocked. It was Emily's favorite poem as well.

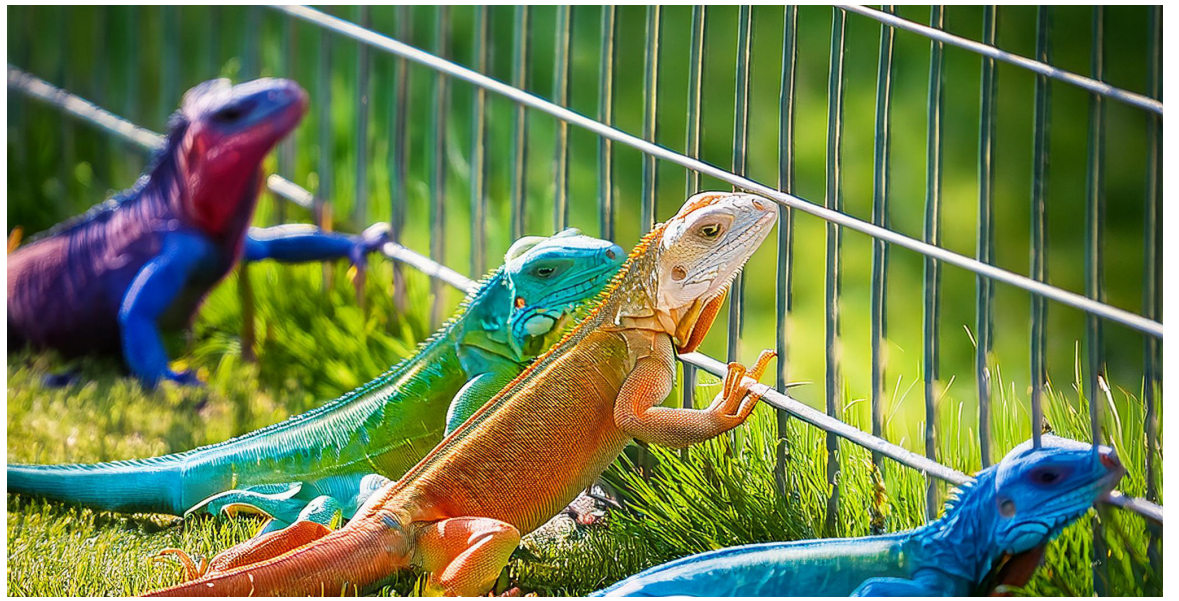
Giselle asked, “How could we honor Emily moving forward?”

The answer: forgive yourself, heal yourself, and know your triggers.

“I am not your victim,” Elle said, “but I am human and I want you to know I forgive each and every one of you guys.”

Special thanks to Velda Dobson-Davis for being supportive in the DUI community. Dobson Davis helped create Felons Against Drunk Driving and Distracted (FADDD) with a group of ladies with DUI's who wanted to be proactive in preventing reoffenders in CCWF in 2019.

CCWF Residents Get Their Hands Dirty For the Latest “It” Item



(Adobe AI Generated by K. McQueen)

By Megan Hogg

“I had no idea how freaking serious it was. Like, lizards are the new Fendi bags”, said Diamond Vargas, a long-term resident of Charlie yard.

I had also noticed that many people on B-yard were also keepers of lizards. Walking towards my unit one day, I did a double-take at a woman because I didn’t recognize the logo on her t-shirt. Then it moved. It was a small, live lizard, and not a logo at all.

Interestingly, this and other lizards seem quite content to travel around with their adoptive parent, usually on the front of their shirts, in their hair, or on their arms. Vargas’ comparison to high fashion accessories was perfect.

All living things need food. Therefore, the hunt for food – in this case various insects and or bugs– is a serious endeavor. I have seen people on B-yard with small over-the-counter pill bottles, paper cups, plastic bags, basically anything that will hold the hunted bugs.

Places to hunt include around the base of the porta-potty, under concrete drain-pavers, and the base of the metal containment cages for ice water coolers, among others. Until

I figured out the reason for this digging under the porta-potty madness, I thought, “What the Is this happening? Why Aw, hell naw, what is going on?”

People do not normally spend much time on the ground unless there is an active alarm. Suddenly seeing so many people crouched down, kneeling and digging in dirt and not-so-sanitary areas did give me and others pause. I would compare it to something going viral on social media from the way I understand it to work. This is the result of having to have the newest, latest “it” item, right?

Once I understood the entire situation, I was impressed by the commitment people had made to the well-being and survival of their lizards. Most lizards had a comfortable “house” made for them out of everyday items found or repurposed. Picture a plastic non-dairy creamer bottle cut down to create a small “pond” with pebbles, set inside a square five-quart Snapware container with soil, grass, rocks, and a small branch with leaves. The top is covered with a white kitchen hair net that allows air to circulate. The entire container is regularly brought outside to ensure the lizard are

given ample access to sun while feeling it was in its natural environment. This was just one that I happened to see myself.

Having these lizards is fun and beneficial to people in a number of ways. Some find purpose in having the reptiles to care for, while others use theirs as a comfort animal. Being responsible for the lizard turned the focus away from negativity and overwhelming circumstances residents may have or are facing. Some people like the challenge of not only catching the lizard, but hunting the food it needs too. And some just think it’s cute to wear on their chest sometimes.

Several years ago, railroad ties were placed around the garden area on C-yard as a way to delineate and define specific planting beds and areas, as well as creating a border for the entire garden space. During our conversation, Vargas described how the search for bugs was causing damage to those borders, due to the sudden onslaught of lizard-keepers on their hunt.

Plants have been accidentally damaged when the railroad ties were uprooted or moved, and plant roots were disturbed in the soil.

The damage began to upset some of the people who tend the garden. As is the need to feed the lizards. The ties were an ideal place to find bugs because the wood had been in the soil for so long and is a safe barrier from danger above ground.

To resolve any issues, a new area was designed specifically to attract bugs that would not interfere with nor harm any of the plants in the garden area. Yard clippings and leaves were set out, becoming a mulch-like piled spot that ended up attracting more bugs than were found under the ties. This allowed the lizard-keepers to easily hunt for the food to sustain their lizards and soothed the areas and the people who tend to the garden.

It’s an example of the ways that so many of us strive to find positive ways to resolve issues and strengthen the bonds within our community.

Some people want nothing to do with lizards, whether from a genuine fear or dislike of crawly critters. Some are dog people; some are cat people. Again, this makes me think of the way some people live for Fendi, while others will only wear Gucci. Lizards are the new Fendi bags, at least for this season.

COVER STORY: PICKLEBALL
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De La Cruz and Rojas elevated their game so quickly that observers thought they’d had practice. De La Cruz commented, “I really enjoyed myself, watching all of you play. It’s a great stress relief. We were laughing, really enjoying it; I’d come out and play again.”

Representing CCWF with impressive skills were Martinelli and Speir. Their game was on another level. While just about anyone can learn basic play, Martinelli and Speir showed their pickleball prowess, driving the ball low and fast, or volleying at breakneck pace.

Wipple saw rehabilitative opportunity, as well as a fun and accessible way to exercise. “Pickleball is a catalyst for change...it’s a universal language for the population to break down barriers and learn lessons,” she said. Citing the growing popularity of pickleball organizations in the free world, she continued, “It’s something you guys can also take back to the community, which helps normalize reentry.”

Coach Bel Air brought his game, plus a media entourage filming for a documentary featuring nine institutions, which is slated for the



Coach Bel Air leading participants towards the competition court.

(Photo courtesy of CDCR)

2025 Sundance Film Festival. Bel Air has been teaching pickleball for 14 years. In 2016, “60 Minutes” featured his introduction of pickleball to a Chicago jail. He subsequently started bringing the sport to prisons in 10 states, starting with San Quentin in California and Riker’s Island in New York.

Bel Air said, “I’m a lifelong learner. I’m passionate about promoting activities that create better health and wellness by getting people moving. It’s conducive to growth, when you have things that motivate you to learn new knowledge.” Bel Air is working with Martinelli to create a short, introductory video for GRP-TV

or for in-room viewing at CCWF.

Pickleball is roughly a cross between traditional tennis and table tennis (ping pong). Players use a court slightly smaller than a tennis court, with a lower net. They hit a bright orange, lightweight ball with paddles which have evolved from wood to the contemporary carbon fiber.

The sport’s inception came in the 1960s, when Barney McCollum and a group of neighborhood friends on Washington’s Bainbridge Island started playing with a standard wiffle ball. According to Bel Air, one guy’s dog, Pickles, kept grabbing

the ball and running with it. After chasing Pickles down enough times, the group named the sport after “Pickles’ ball.”

Speir was originally inspired by a fellow teacher, a woman in her 70s who had a pickleball court in her yard. After she and her husband initially defeated the super-athletic Speir and his friend, he joined a pickleball club and started honing his skills. Speir sees pickleball as a great fit for CCWF because, “it’s an easy enough game where anyone can play and experience the idea of ‘I can do this.’ Later, (players) can discover the advanced levels and the variability of play.”

Martinelli was instrumental in hosting this special event for residents with Bel Air and has put some sweat and heart into providing free play opportunities for residents on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at the Main Gym. Martinelli envisions an eventual pickleball tournament to provide a healthy challenge with some positive competition.

(Priority ducats are required for the Main Gym; send a Form-22 to Coach Martinelli.)

FEATURES

Fry's Girls

Highlighting the Youth Diversion Program at CCWF

By Sadiq Sagal

The Youth Diversion Program (YDP) at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) provides impressionable young minds with a glimpse of the underbelly of the prison industrial system by exposing them to a day in the life of an incarcerated individual. Through a combination of tough love and illustrative skits, this curriculum embraces, empowers, and enriches the minors involved.

THE YDP TEAM

Lt. B. Warren and our very own Warden Anissa De La Cruz, who was Captain at the time conceptualized and created YDP in 2017.

Program Coordinator G. Fry, a former third grade teacher, has spent six years working at CCWF as college coordinator for Merced College. Her dedication towards aiding the rehabilitative endeavors of incarcerated individuals is legendary here in CCWF. Fry and her team were the California Model before the concept caught fire in the carceral zeitgeist.

The heart of the YDP are Fry's girls, as they are often referred to, who one can see on "tour" day, dressed in creased state blue jeans and gray t-shirts emblazoned with the YDP logo, their outward appearance echoing their inner message: uniformity and unity of mind and mission.

These volunteers are culled from the general population after undergoing a strict vetting process and submitting to intense multi-paneled interviews. Their participation is voluntary and the work is emotionally taxing yet rewarding in monumental, far-reaching ways. All of these young women are gainfully employed and attend, or facilitate self-help groups, so time is a premium for them.

At any given time, there are between 20 or 25 mentors on the YDP roster, and member selection is conducted every couple of years or as needed.

Kaylee Weisenberg, serving a life sentence for a DUI offense, has been a member since 2021. She believes her work with YDP can hopefully deter minors from making the same bad choices she did.

"This is my living amends at work," she said.

Latoya Jenkins, a lifer and puppy trainer, has been a member of YDP since its inception. Hers is the booming voice the minors encounter during the gauntlet. She believes YDP provides a realistic picture

of prison, and the chance to hear and learn from the stories of their mentors.

STARTING WITH TOUGH LOVE

On Oct. 10, 2024, the fateful day when the minors are bussed in, from Phoenix Secondary Academy in Fresno, the energy crackles with anticipatory tension. As anyone involved with raising a teenager can attest to, they are nothing if not unpredictable.

The tour begins with the line-up, a gauntlet sandwiching the minors, effectively corralling them in while simultaneously ensconcing them with their very own protective detail.

Immediately the "yellers," YDPs' in-house drill sergeants, take over and establish control, delineating the parameters of what will and will not be tolerated. The message to be driven home is simple; prison is not a place you want to be. It's a place where you cedes all aspects of autonomy, identity and privacy while sequestered from everyone and everything you hold dear.

The gauntlet proves its effectiveness as right away, beneath the smirking attitudinal faces, the vestiges of lost children begin to appear, in the form of furiously blinking eyes brimming with tears.

Marching in tandem to the booming voices of the yellers, the minors are introduced to squalid claustrophobic living quarters, the communal bathrooms, and the showers alive with rust where flimsy partitions pretending to afford potential users with a modicum of privacy.

The march continues back to the prison visiting rooms. By this time, one could definitely hear the occasional snuffle followed by the furious wiping of tears that had and continue to fall.

Back in the visiting rooms, CCWF staff as well as chaperones from Phoenix Academy are present at all times, for obvious security reasons.

LEARNING THROUGH EMPATHY

Having gotten past the false bravado and sullen defiance, it was time for phase two - life lessons delivered with empathy through a series of interactive exercises and skits.

During one poignant skit the pitfalls of succumbing to peer pressure and drug use are driven home by a chilling visual, at first obscured by a hospital privacy screen, and then revealed to show a gruesome montage replete with an "occupied" cardboard coffin, candles and funeral flowers.

Another perennial problem plaguing disaffected youth is misdirected anger, and that is tackled by using an 'anger blanket' as a metaphor. In this way the YDP members are able to clearly illustrate the pain that often lies beneath the anger and how to address those hurt feelings instead of erupting and lashing out in violence.

Midday arrives and it's lunchtime. Over a meager state issue peanut butter and jelly lunch, mentors and mentees spend crucial time getting acquainted and discussing any issues the minors may be experiencing. These pivotal moments provide the minors space to ventilate their

feelings in a safe non-judgmental environment; they serve as a catalyst to jumpstart the bonds that are beginning to form.

As the day wraps up, a YDP favorite, the "I am worthy" exercise engages all those present - staff and volunteers included - as each group takes turns loudly proclaiming 'I am worthy' in a competition to see who is the loudest.

Clearly impressed by the event so far, Pedro Vasquez, Phoenix Academy school counselor, said, "They are so resilient, they just have to be willing to learn and the protective factors of positive influences will help them succeed."

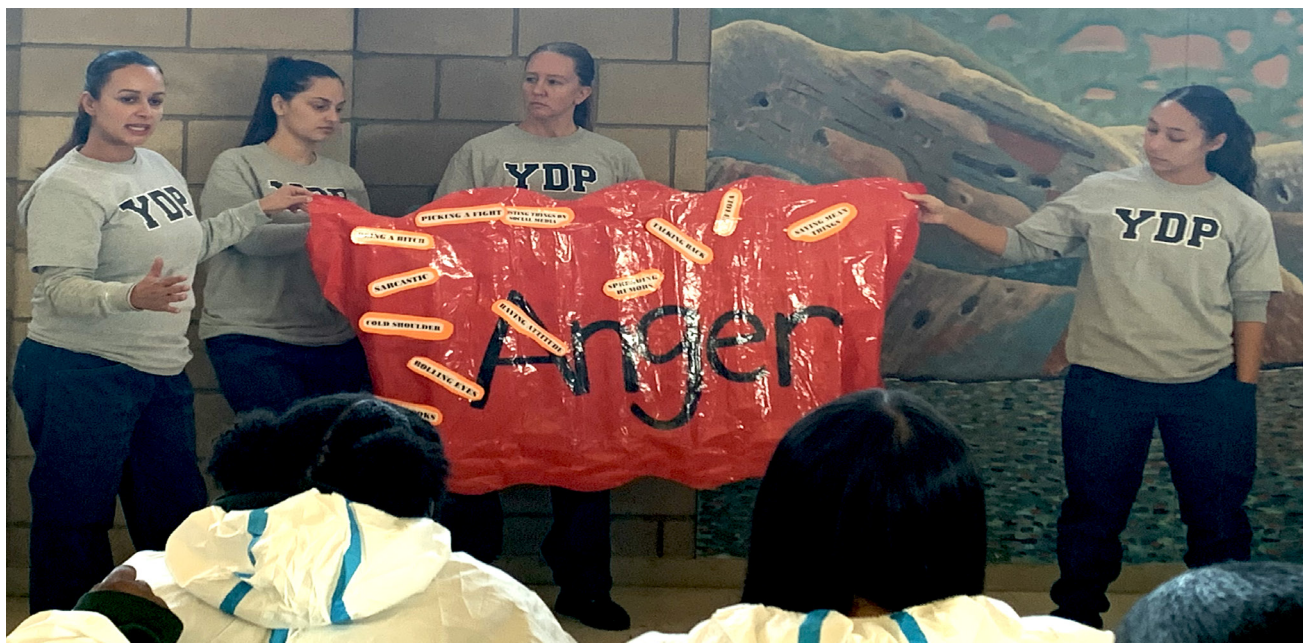
Correctional Counselor III Flavilla Singleton said, "My involvement with YDP is one of the highlights of my career, because it gives me an opportunity to work with the youth in our community to prevent the cycles of violence from happening. It also assists me in better understanding the youth from the standpoint of a coach.

The final "whisper exercise," has the minors seated in a circle with their eyes closed as YDP members walk around and whisper statements in their ears - statements the minors had expressed needing to hear from the loved ones in their lives. The statements ranging from "I love you," to "I will never leave you again," are simple, yet clearly moving, as evidenced by the tears, from both minors and YDP members.

By utilizing a holistic approach, YDP targets emotions, substance use, peer pressure, and even familial dysfunction. And unlike other scared straight programs, YDP allows the minors, should they choose to remain in contact with their mentor, so that they can form the healthy, positive bonds that many of them lack and desperately need.

At the end, there were tears, hugs, and bonds where before there were none. They were now family when before they were strangers. Today they walk away internally richer, a far cry from the paucity of their pasts. Today they have experienced a journey into the transformative power of community in action.

Today and every day, it is our collective hope that this journey positively impacts their tomorrows, improves their outlooks, and allows their dreams to become realities.



YDP team members address participants regarding the components of anger

(Photos Courtesy of CDCR)



YDP team members whisper into youth's ears positive affirmations

(Photos Courtesy of CDCR)

Ice Behind the Bars

CCWF's hottest commodity is not what you'd expect

By Brenda Bowers

On any given 110°F day at Central California Women's Facility (of which there are many), you'll hear spoken amongst the population:

"Hey, let me get some of that, let me buy a bag, what you want for it?"

The sun is beaming. The air is hot. Sweat is dripping from the brows of those encountering the blazing heat. Shirts cling to the bodies enduring the summer's glare, as onlookers watch from their windows, glad not to be a part of yet another one of Chowchilla's heat waves.

Some of "that" is ice – as in frozen water. It's a hot commodity here at CCWF. It's so hot because it's not something that the population can easily attain, unless you're a kitchen or yard crew worker. It's so cold that on the black market, it ranges anywhere from a dollar a cup to ten dollars a bag, depending on the size.

Frozen water is expensive. But to the majority of the population, it's like drugs to a fiend. And to those that are addicted, buying ice is an everyday occurrence. That means giving up hygiene items, bags of chips, candy, etc. just to suppress their cravings for the day.

You may wonder if this is only during the hot summers' heat. Not quite so. Even during the dead of winter, the craving for ice is ever so prevalent. While the rest of the population is wrapped up in scarves, gloves, and beanies trying to stay warm, drinking hot cocoa, tea or coffee, the ice fiends are crunching away at their ever-so-cold ice.

While some speculate that they crave ice due to a vitamin deficiency, others just downright enjoy the cold feel of an ice cube in their



“Because ice is not allowed, the population will often have to sneak it through, sometimes putting a bag of ice in their pants, even when it's 50°F cold on top of cold.”

mouth, the hard crunch of that ice between their teeth, and the cold sensation of that frozen water going down their throat.

"I've loved ice since I was a little kid," CCWF resident Destiny Trotter, one of the many ice fiends within the institution, said. "I used to be scared to crush the ice between my teeth, but now I crave the crunch of ice. It's like I have an ice fetish. The sound of the ice crushing between my teeth just does it for me."

"Work change" is a very small but busy section of the prison, one located on each facility yard, wherein people are processed through for work, medical or other miscellaneous appointments, and school. A corrections officer (CO) works

inside this security check, making sure people are being processed in a timely manner to and fro.

That officer ensures that a person clears the metal detector. They search every bag, and if an incarcerated person doesn't clear the detector they are often patted down or stripped searched. These searches are to make sure that the population is not bringing contraband through work change.

Sounds serious, right? There are signs on the doors of work change that read: "Do not bring ice through." If ice is caught, whether it's in a bag or cup, the officer will give you a direct order to throw it out.

Because ice is not allowed, the population will often have to sneak it through, sometimes putting a bag of ice in their pants, even when it's 50°F cold on top of cold. That bag of ice is deemed an essential need to that incarcerated person. It's against the rules to bring liquids though work change too.

Having ice in your possession is not the thing that actually leads to trouble. It's not following a direct order from a corrections officer. Being told to throw the ice out of your cup, or throw away the bag of ice and not complying is where the trouble comes in.

When asking the population, no one seems to know why ice is taboo, especially on a 110°F day. Corrections officers seem perplexed too as to why ice has never been allowed through work change. Several of them speculate that while ice isn't technically contraband, they don't allow it because it's being taken from one place to the other and possibly being sold. Another CO stated that she never knew why ice wasn't allowed through work change, but it had been like that since she's been working here.

Why is ice such a big deal—it's just frozen water right? Well, here in CCWF it is a big deal to both the population and the COs, of course for very different reasons. On one hand, it's a must-have for the population. But on the other, it may be an opportunity to exercise some form of control.

Part of the reason may be that ice machines aren't available to the population, they never have been. Though every officers' station in the facility housing units has a mini-ice machine, the incarcerated population aren't afforded those same opportunities.

Felon's Alphabet

By Sadiq Sagal

If criminals walked around with thought bubbles the way cartoon characters do, their thoughts would often read: "I do what I want, when I want, to whomever I want, to get what I want, because I want to." Because let's face it, the criminal mind is selfish, self-absorbed and narrow minded.

"C" is for criminal thinking. Let us establish first, that there can be no criminal behavior without criminal thinking. From petty theft to mass murder, behind every criminal act there was a criminal thought. That means if you don't think it, you won't do it. Are you beginning to see just how powerful your thoughts are?

So, having thought it, and thought about it, just how is it that one is able to "make it OK" in their mind to behave criminally?

While thinking criminally, an individuals' focus remains only on themselves – they don't care about how their behavior affects others. That is the lack of empathy. On the opposite end of the criminal thinking spectrum, the criminal mind will simply deny doing the deed. "It wasn't even me." How many times have we heard that? That is the lack of accountability.

Let us explore together the anatomy of a crime.

The crime in question is: shoplifting baby formula from Walmart. "I stole the baby formula because I want to feed my hungry baby, who needs it, and so what? It's not like Walmart will even miss it. It's only one container, and besides everyone else steals too, why should I be labelled a criminal because my baby is hungry. I mean I can't even get a job, no one will hire me because I'm an ex-felon. This whole probation thing is just another set up, what do they expect, I'm doing my best, and besides I didn't even really do anything".

Clearly, we pump ourselves up into behaving criminally, when we could choose to talk ourselves out of it. We know, if nothing else, that our thoughts have immense powers and if harnessed appropriately and effectively – even healing powers.

With this knowledge comes the responsibility to use that knowledge for the betterment of, if not humankind, then at least, for those of us incarcerated here. Let us begin our journey out of criminal thinking together.



Photo by Nikhil Mitra on Unsplash

FEATURES



Photo by Jordan Wozniak on Unsplash

A New Year, a New You at CCWF

By Heather Miller

Every year, on the first day of the new calendar year, people all around the world bring in the new year by committing themselves to a “New Year’s resolution” to either break a bad habit or to start good ones. Even here in Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF), the residents excitedly chatted away about their upcoming New Year’s resolutions and the possibility of positive self-change.

Observing this phenomenon, I had to wonder: where did this tradition of a New Year’s resolution originate from? And why have so many generations of people believed and practiced this ritual every year. What does it signify for them?

It is amazing how far the tradition of New Year’s resolutions dates back. According to the New World Encyclopedia, it originated approximately 4,000 years ago, with the ancient Babylonians. Babylon was the capital of Babylonia, a powerful empire located in southwestern Asia, known for its wealth and wickedness. They held a festival called Akitu to mark the spring harvest, which later changed to the new year under different rulers. During Akitu, the Babylonians made promises to their gods to return borrowed items and pay off debts, believing this would bring good

fortune for the new year ahead.

The Romans later adapted this custom, centering resolutions around Janus, the two-faced god of beginnings after whom the month January is named. They believed Janus symbolically looked backward into the past year and forward into the future, encouraging people to reflect and set intentions. What we call the Alpha and the Omega (the beginning and the end).

Today, New Year’s resolutions are typically personal goals or career aspirations. The average person won’t have to consult the latest report from the Pew Research Center on resolutions to know that most common trends are weight loss, eating better, vowing to stop smoking, and so on.

So many people pursue these resolutions as a way to start fresh, motivated by the symbolism of a new year as an opportunity for change and growth. I believe this traditional practice persists because it aligns with human desires for self-betterment and provides a structured way to create new habits.

People bring in the new year in so many different ways. Some people hold private gatherings. Others travel across the country to watch

the ball drop in New York. Friends, family, and sweethearts believe in a tradition that if you kiss the ones you love at exactly midnight, it will bring in the new year with prosperity, love, and good health.

“In my culture, we pack a suitcase with some personal belongings and sit it outside the door of the house, signifying we are going to travel and go to new places,” stated Elizabeth Lozano, a contributing writer who is from Mexico. “I did it

“So many people pursue these resolutions as a way to start fresh, motivated by the symbolism of a new year as an opportunity for change and growth.”

Many of the people I talked to at CCWF learned to practice New Year’s resolutions close to home. Some people grew up believing that the new year was meant for a new start. Compton native Shante Harrell, though, explained that even though she grew up believing in New Year’s resolutions, she has come to realize that she doesn’t need a certain day of the year to commit to a positive change.

Resident Porché Wright also learned the practice from family.

“Both my mother and fathers’ side of the family have always brought in the New Year with New Year’s resolutions,” Wright said. “My family always sets short- and long-term goals. Collectively, we would sit around and write down our resolutions, place them onto the refrigerator door as a reminder to ourselves and other family members of the goals we set for ourselves.”

Residents with ties to other countries shared their cultures’ unique ways.

last year and I am doing it again this year and I truly believe I am next,” she said, referring to her hopeful release.

Resident Janalisa Estrada, who is Phillipino said, “Every new year, my family gathers around a fruit bowl with 12 different fruits inside from our island representing the next 12 months to signify abundance and prosperity. The adults would throw money into the air for the kids to jump up and catch it for prosperity and growth.”

Here is some food for thought: If you are prone to setting goals or have never had a new year’s resolution, maybe it is time to give some thought to starting the new year off with new goals in mind, self-improvement, better eating habits, or creating the best version of yourself. Some people cannot quite remember the traditions they celebrated practiced in their family/culture or maybe they never had any. Could it be that it is time to create your own traditions, beginning with this new year?

CCWF Paper Trail conducted a survey of approximately 100 CCWF residents regarding their New Year’s resolutions. Left depicts the types of resolutions CCWF residents make. Below depicts the duration of the resolutions.

