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"The Hard Climb Journal is committed to equality, innovation, and social justice, embracing the ideas and practices of others. "

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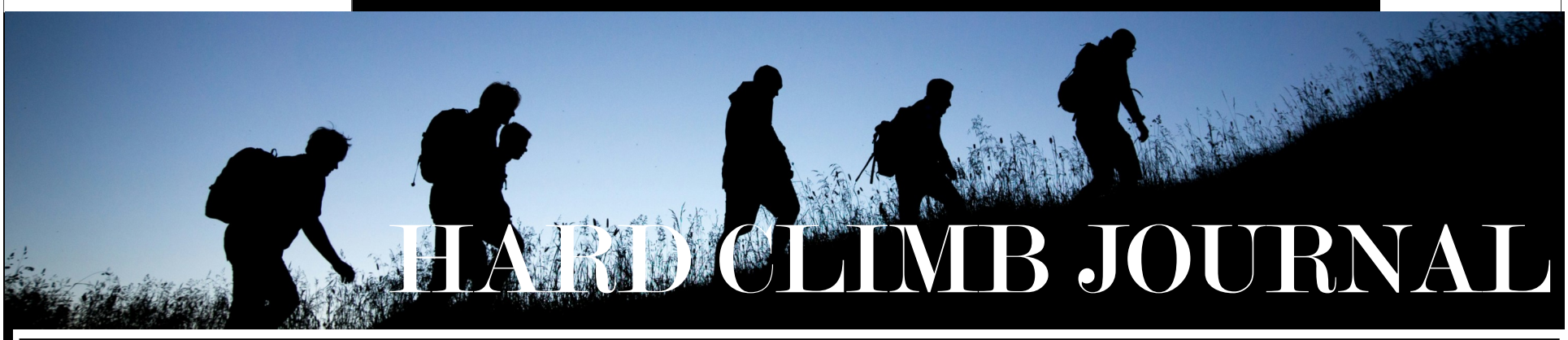

HARD CLIMB JOURNAL

MARLEY'S MUTTS: 14 WEEKS OF INSIGHT

BY: Rick Gutierrez
Managing Editor

A ground breaking initiative merges animal welfare with rehabilitation.

The Marley's Mutt's Rescue Program is making a significant impact by bringing rescue dogs into CCI's Facility A and C with the progressive approach brought by the Pawsitive Change Program. This innovative program not only provides a second chance for these dogs, but also offers the incarcerated the opportunity to learn valuable life skills that promote their successful reentry into society.

The MMRP facilitates the placement of rescue dogs in select institutions. They undergo a transformative 14 week training cycle. This is designed to enhance the dog's adoptability, helping them acquire essential training that prepares them for loving homes. By engaging in this process, the program significantly offers the dogs, and the participants, a chance at life and companionship.

The program's structure is designed to benefit both the dogs and the incarcerated. As participants, the men receive comprehensive training in dog behavior and techniques. This equips them with practical skills that can lead to meaningful employment opportunities in the pet care industry upon their release. These skills foster a sense of responsibility and accomplishment.

The program provides the incarcerated with essential tools that extend beyond the classroom. Through their chosen incarcerated mentors Ricardo Gutierrez, James Sandoval, and Gustavo Olmedo, the MMRP exemplifies positive change. These incarcerated mentors are chosen by the MMRP because of their demonstrated personal growth and positive transformation as well as their learned experience within the program. The mentors provide the program's participants with dog training and experience, workshops focusing on anger management,

Donald Bryson, Isaac Mena, and Fernando Martinez with "AJAX"

nonviolent communication, substance abuse, conflict resolution, and positive communication skills. These sessions cultivate emotional intelligence, cognitive thinking, and a sense of healthy communication, empowering the participants to develop a prosocial and progressive mindset.

The MMRP goes beyond teaching the incarcerated how to train dogs, it instills a sense of purpose and community . By nurturing the bond between the participants and their dogs, the program fosters empathy and connection that can significantly alter the participant's perspective on life and relationships. As they witness the transformation of the dogs under their care, the participants often find themselves on a path of personal growth and positive change.

The MMRP exemplifies how innovative approaches toward rehabilitation can create meaningful change. By providing rescue dogs with the training they need to find forever homes, and offering the participants meaningful skills to reintegrate successfully into society, this program serves as a model for others seeking to make a difference both in animal welfare and criminal justice. Through compassion and commitment, the MMRP is transforming lives. []

ROOTS OF INNOVATION

BY: Rudy Negrete
HCJ Staff Writer

In tune with their artistic side, Facility A community members are showcasing talents which display change.

Aside from the "no warning shots will be fired" signs, walls are either a depressing cream color or bare concrete. Two of the participants of the beautification project, Angel Ruelas and Nicholas Novelo both have learned that there is a stigma that separates the incarcerated from correctional officers. Officers, as well as the incarcerated often have to confront old mindsets which label or paint all with one brush.

Today, the men working on the Beautification Project have no agendas, nor selfish intentions. It is quite the opposite. "The intention is to do something as a demonstration that represents the incarcerated individual in a different light than what officers are used to," said Novelo.

The message is that administration is taking a leap of

Nicolas "Wolf" Novelo

faith with innovative ideas that are paving the way for further projects. This is a drastic change from the chaos which once consumed this yard regularly. From echoes of negativity to echoes of support for positive actions leading to a ripple effect that carries momentum.

The Beautification Project, which was started on C yard is now growing roots on A yard. The A yard coordinators are Joe Miller and Ricky Gutierrez. Lieutenant Robinson is spearheading the project with support from the institutional painter and the supervision of Captain Bonffil.

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The Hard Climb Journal Invites the Incarcerated, Custody and Free Staff, Volunteers, and members of the community to submit articles, art, and poetry. Contributors retain their intellectual property rights but all submissions become property of The Hard Climb Journal.

The Ideal Life

By: Roland C. Cardiel
HCJ Editor-in-Chief

Life inside the justice system is not easy for anyone, but it isn't easy for those living on the outside either. Wars, natural disasters, and crimes of all types are saturating our society and changing the face of our nation. There are people starving in Gaza and innocent people suffering in Ukraine and Russia. Children are dying in flood waters and families are mourning the loss of their children at the hands of another. Reading the news as an incarcerated person makes me sorrowful for the loss of life outside of these prison walls.

Everyone has a concept of what their ideal life would look like, and what it takes to get there varies from person to person. Humanity as a whole can improve if we took the time to work on ourselves. When we work to heal ourselves, we begin to desire to reach out and heal those around us. Inside the Criminal Justice System we have the benefit of programs that help us to improve, and although there are programs that are similar outside of these walls, people have to pay.

Programs such as the Occupational Mentorship Certification Program, Peer Support Specialist Program, Marley's Mutts Rescue Program, are just a few of the programs that offer the chance to truly gain insight and make significant changes to one's life. This also includes the gambit of self-help groups that are offered to the incarcerated community. So I pose this to you dear reader, why is recidivism still so high? I guess it really depends on the individual.

Studies have shown that it takes two incomes or more for a family to maintain livability. This means that if there are two parents in the home, both must work to support the family. This leaves the children to be raised by Tik Tok, YouTube, Facebook, and god only knows what other media. The influx of incarcerated under the age of 25 is a marquee to this. I see children committing life crimes so vicious that they have no chance of ever seeing life outside of these walls ever again. What makes it worse, is that in talking to some of these young individuals they see it as a badge of honor. I know that when I was 25 I saw it that way, I had arrived.

The recidivism rates of those that have to go through the process of the Board of Parole Hearings are among the lowest. This can be attributed to the work that must be done by the individual to have the necessary elements of change to satisfy the BPH, and that they will not reoffend or no longer pose a threat to society. The standards that are laid out for the individual are designed to have an effect. How can they not? I think if everyone had to complete a board packet and see a panel of administration, custody, and their peers to get out of prison, justice would be served and recidivism would reduce. []

"LIGHT OF A DIAMOND"

A Poem
By: Marcos Gutiérrez

It's been 19 years,
And despite I am light,
I choose to be motivation,
To be love,
Despite the everyday Adversities,
This life is but a dream,
Here and then, not just as
quick as the eye blinks.
And once I greet the pure
Conscious energy,
I hope I gave far more
Then I took, far more
Then I received.
I won't even front or act
Like it's easy.
Can you for a split second try and envision the pain...
And ache this love and
Motivation has driven?
The suppressed tears that
My heart , mind, and my
soul is harnessing?
And then trickles down my face under
the disguise of anger?
Internal turmoil,
Warfare,
But the choice is motivate,
And through my lens of perception
The truth is,
The sun is out where
The shade is.
And there is light
even in the places glistening, shining,
And blinding to mere eyes
Intricate pure soul
4eva eternal
Light of a diamond.

Carpentry @ CCI

By Joe Rodriguez
Facility C Resident

Welcome to carpentry, a vocational training class on facility C that teaches job skills. The class is directed by Mr. Thorpe, an instructor with decades of knowledge and experience in construction and wood-working. This is a three month training course, which provides N.C.C.E.R. Long Version certification. Students earning a certification will have the fallowing skill-sets:

- Safety orientation for tools and job-sites
- Measurements and other math skills
- Proper use of power and hand tools
- Knowledge of materials and their handling
- Basic on the job communication skills
- Employability and resume skills

We just finished our first project, an 8x8 kids playhouse. The project was directed by Mr. Thorpe and assisted by his 3 experienced clerks, Mr. Campos, Spencer, and Perales.

"Mr. Campos was our foreman who organized the steps of the project. We all took turns to measure and cut material. Installing and leveling the house as we built it. After framing, we put in all of the trimmings and details, including the electricity," said one of the programs participants.

This Carpentry Program teaches students how to receive instructions, work as a team, and problem solve as we go along. Sometimes it is hard for Incarcerated Persons to take instruction and criticism but it is important to be able to do this in a job setting. Carpentry is a good trade which could help you find employment, build your own house, make furniture, and help you to save money.

The skills learned in this class will help you re-enter into society and demonstrate that you are a rehabilitated, positive member of society.

Mr. Thorpe welcomes all Incarcerated Persons who are willing, positive minded, and who work hard. So hurry up and send your application through your counselors now. []

Transformation @ CCI

By C. Chambers
Senior Editor

The California Correctional Institution at Tehachapi is currently undergoing a transformation. Recently CCI'S level four, 180 design A yard, has been repurposed to a level three non-designated program facility. Although this yard is in its infant stages with much to be put in place to achieve the level of programming that the incarcerated need to be successful, CCI's A yard is proof positive that dynamic changes can be made. "When Administrative Staff and the incarcerated are both willing to put in the work, there is no facility in CDCR that can't be turned into something better," said resident Ivan Morales.

Historically, CCI is known for being a problematic prison with a high rate of incidents which involve violence amongst the population combined with a heavy handed correctional approach. Tehachapi's A and B facilities were both Level four 180's, which housed some of the most dangerous gang members the state of California had in its system. CCI also was home to the Secure Housing Unit, which was designed to administer the highest level of security protocols in the attempt to maintain order.

As CDCR continues its progression towards a more rehabilitative model, numerous facilities are being "flipped" into positive programming facilities. The question becomes: What does a prison yard need to successfully make this change? What programming options help to facilitate this change so that these yards can flourish?

One of the approaches often utilized in transforming these yards is the belief that before staff can provide positive programming to the incarcerated, they must first eliminate or remove all of the "problem" residents from the facility. Critics to this approach say that it is just kicking the can down the road. Secondly, those who have reached a status of a "positive programmer", did so by partaking in groups which are built on belief systems that rely on empathy, service, giving back, the 12th step of AA, which states: we should be reaching those that still suffer. "Some find it a little hypocritical to create a safe little silo of rehabilitation for only a select few and leave everyone else behind or send everyone else away

Facility A at dusk

who isn't good enough or who hasn't been giving the opportunity to progress as far as others." said resident Kevin Pounds.

On the other hand, those who are not truly up for the challenge of self-transformation will inevitably remove themselves with Rule Violations which will increase their custody level. This will send those seen as problematic to those maximum security prisons that those who are unwilling can go, as tragic as that is. There will be those instances when the best option is to adopt the old adage "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink".

Facility A's Lieutenant Robinson, has proven to be supportive of the change that CDCR has been trying to implement throughout its prisons and had these words: "I can't speak for any other prison or for any other Lieutenants, but as for Facility A Tehachapi, where I am Lt. this is the reality: You have those who may be messing up, but want to change. They are being influenced by those leaders who prohibit everyone else from positively programming…If I have to get rid of those leaders who are unwilling, so that everyone else can participate and benefit from programs, which insures a safer working environment for my staff…I'm going to do just that. The majority is my priority".

For the majority, transformation is a combined effort of services which include community partnership, volunteers, administrative staff, lifers and incarcerated residents who know what it takes to make a real impact. 100 men were polled here at CCI and gave the following categories that they believe make a good facility and would encourage them to stay out of trouble:

First, therapeutic groups (the volunteers to supervise them and the residents to facilitate them) which focus on criminal thinking, childhood trauma, victim's impact and addiction, a pro-social community minded environment. Secondly, educational opportunities with the support that students need to achieve their goals. And third, the incarcerated need an awesome mental health services community who can enlist the help of interns to provide one on one counseling for those who need extra help. Other areas of concern included quality medical care, clean housing units, great canteen items, awesome religious services, good laundry services so that the incarcerated can look the best and feel the best about themselves.

CDCR already has most of these programs, but too often, strain on the system combined with other factors prohibit these departments from functioning at their optimal capacity. The underlying factor which makes all this possible is the belief that it is possible. When no one really believes change is possible we do business as usual.

Another important component to CCI's transformation has nothing to do with funding or departmental organization, but with attitude. The way we treat one another, and that goes for staff and the incarcerated. How we communicate to each other. What we believe about one another is vital to this working. For some, that is a bit much. This is just a job. We must understand that this goes beyond a job. 95% of those currently incarcerated will be paroling, no matter how some may feel about them moving to their community. Do we want to make necessary investment so that when they do, we can give them the best chance at success which will ultimately promote public safety, or run the risk of someone who is not rehabilitated living next door?

Transformation is happening at CCI…Let it.[]

ROOTS… Continued

Angel Ruelas Local Artist

Continued from Page 1

When old beliefs are at the forefront concerning inmate vs. staff, this is what blocks doors of opportunity from opening. I put myself out there as an example, hoping to display real change is possible. "Actions always speak louder than words," said Angel Ruelas.

The mission of the project is to gain back the trust and continue to build on its value. To paint all the walls on the yard with multiple murals that are not offensive nor divisive. To create beautiful spaces as the expression of freedom and continue to open doors of opportunity, to enhance the view of the environment we reside in. One shovel of dirt at a time, one drop of paint, one stroke of the brush , one conversation at a time, to process and envision new scenes displaying each artist' talent and gifts to the community.

Artist are welcome who can work the paint brush and generate art with latex paint. Skill workers are needed that know about landscaping and gardening. The projects invite anybody who wants to contribute to the clean up or labor by submitting a proposal of a possible idea. The only criteria is a willingness to abide to the guide lines. Applicants can contact any of the coordinators to help guide you through the application and approval process.

Joe Miller is currently working on the visiting patio. Once the makeover is done, the visiting patio will have multiple murals, planter boxes, garden arches, Tehachapi native flowers, California Poppies, a French draining system, family friendly wall paintings and realistic ocean scene.

Other participants are making the most of their time by making themselves available to work and help where its needed. The beginning stages of change are on full display for all to see, feel, participate in.

The project's vision is to offer spaces for creativity. Giving each participant a chance at demonstrating the changes in their life even while living behind chain link fences with barb-wired. The ability to expand their mind and widen the vision by promoting redemption and rehabilitation geared toward the California Model.

As residents walk past they are able to see a mural, an 8 foot American eagle with the words: " trust the process" reminding each one of us to be patient while doing the work. []

OMCP ON THE MOVE

BY: Roland C. Cardiel
Hard Climb Journal Editor-in-Chief

CCI's Occupational Mentorship Certification Program has been in operation since 2021. Every cohort has had its set of challenges to overcome, and every one of them has found a way to succeed.

Cohort four is no exception. As CCI moved its level three from Facility C to Facility A, OMCP had to move as well. Because OMCP is designated to a level three facility, it was transferred to A yard while Facility C is now designated as a level two program.

"It has been difficult leaving an established program and spacing to a new space, new living conditions, and new challenges," said Andy Ngyuen, OMCP Trainee.

OMCP has its participants dive deep into themselves as part of the parallel processes. This can leave them mentally and emotionally exhausted at the end of each day. Moving to a new facility and trying to adjust to its program can be a monumental task for these men. For example, just getting into canteen each month is challenging. Without canteen being open on the weekend the trainees have to attempt to go during their breaks while being called names like "entitled" or even worse. (The canteen has now gone to “bag-n-drag”)

Other challenges which are often experienced are being locked down on breaks, being misunderstood by some members of the community, and having to compact all of their affairs into the evenings and weekends.

"I really wish I could go out and spend some more time with the rest of the community... but I'm exhausted at the end of the day... and I still have to make time for my family, school, and self-care," said Andrew Salas, OMCP Trainee.

One thing that can be said about this cohort is the positivity each individual displays. They go out when they can to help other members of the community. Each individual has expressed how they are eager to get out and share their newfound skills with the residents of CCI. Through the harsh criticism and negativity, the OMCP trainees radiate compassion and empathy towards their fellow residents.

One trainee said that he understands why there are misunderstandings. He said he was “that guy” at one point in his life, the person who thought that he wasn’t enough and was not able to do better. But a mentor took a chance on him and helped him succeed, now he wants to do the same for others.

The decision to make an entire life change takes courage and strength. There are residents across this institution making that choice for themselves every day. They choose to leave the cell and join a group. They chose to enroll in school. They chose to become OMCP Mentors. What matters most is that they made a choice for change. You have a choice. []

CDCR | Division of **Rehabilitative** Programs

OMCP Cohort 4 California Correctional Institution 2024-2025