

BUGS BEHIND BARS

BY JAKE ABRAHAMSON



Elizabeth Louie, formerly a senior butterfly technician at Mission Creek Corrections Center for Women, with the Sustainability in Prisons Project. | Photo by Matthew Williams

"I've been a butterfly technician at *Mission Creek Corrections Center* since 2013. We breed and raise Taylor's checkerspot butterflies, which are currently on the federal endangered species list, at a greenhouse near the facility. The program started in 2011 because one of the Taylor's checkerspot's few habitats is the artillery range at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, about an hour from here. We're introducing this population to a different habitat.

"We need to work with the insects 365 days a year. I average five to six days a week, but I would go every day if they let me. I love it there. We call it our Zen place. It's refreshing after the noise and chaos of life inside.

"People assume we are releasing thousands of butterflies, but actually we release more caterpillars—we want them to go out and continue their next few life cycles in the wild. Last year, we retained 240 caterpillars out of 2,700 in order to breed them. Sometime in the fall, they go to sleep, and we wake them up in February. After we've fed them for a few weeks, they pupate, which means that they form a cocoon and become a butterfly. When that happens, it becomes really fun because we get to hold them and feed them honey water manually. We have to sort of coax their proboscis, which is like their tongue.

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"There are a lot of parallels between the butterfly life cycle and events here at Mission Creek. Sometimes, if caterpillars don't find enough food when they wake up, they will go back to sleep for an entire year. For me, they represent the offenders who haven't quite figured out what they need to do to be successful when they get out of prison. I'm one of the more mature women at the facility, and it's interesting to me that the butterfly part is the end of the life cycle. It symbolizes that the best is yet to come, that there will be good things for me when I get out there."

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This past summer, Louie left Mission Creek. She is currently in a Seattle work-release program. She hopes to attend a caterpillar release in the spring.*

A SIGN OF GROWTH

Since 2012, the inmates at Mission Creek Corrections Center for Women have raised and released more than 8,000 Taylor's checkerspot caterpillars.