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## 5 Prisons Improving Life on the Inside

*From canine cellmates to computer training, prisons across the country are finding small ways to make life behind bars better for inmates.*



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*Marcus Harrison Green* posted Mar 14, 2016

For the roughly 2.2 million people incarcerated in U.S. prisons and jails, daily life is often violent, degrading, and hopeless. In a 2010 study of inmates released from 30 prisons, the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics found that more than three-quarters were arrested for a new crime within five years of being freed.

But what if our approach to those behind bars were constructive, rather than destructive? What if correctional facilities provided programs and resources to educate and encourage? What if communities partnered with prisons not only to improve life on the inside, but also to increase the prospect of success on the outside?

Today, programs at jails and prisons across the country are demonstrating that this is possible. In these programs, inmates are finding compassion for others and purpose for themselves.

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# Canine CellMates

## **Fulton County Jail**

### **Atlanta**

A dog's companionship can never be undervalued, at least not to Susan Jacobs-Meadows.

"Dogs have the ability to see the good inside a human being, even when people can't," she says.

A dog-lover "since I could crawl," Jacobs-Meadows possesses the same ability to see the good in others as the four-legged companions that share living quarters with Fulton County Jail inmates as part of the Canine CellMates program in Atlanta.

Believing all inmates have a capacity for good is what inspired the Army veteran to found the program at the jail 2 1/2 years ago. For 10 weeks, felons train dogs from local shelters to sit, stay, and fetch.

Serving mainly repeat offenders, Canine CellMates is designed to do more than provide obedience training to dogs before adoption by local families. The mostly volunteer-led endeavor puts a heavy focus on transforming lives through the unique bond developed between teacher and pupil, both of whom can be viewed as society's castaways. More than 100 inmates have participated, and Jacobs-Meadows says it is extremely rare for an inmate to reoffend after completing the program.

Prior to participating in the program, Leon Jennings had to strain just to make eye contact with another person. Out of jail for more than 15 months, Jennings has an outgoing demeanor and a vow to never return. He credits the program, and the German Shepherd with whom it partnered him, for his own change in disposition.

# Prairie Conservation

## **Stafford Creek Correction Center**

### **Aberdeen, Washington**

Since 2009, inmates at Washington's Stafford Creek Corrections Center have been reconnecting with nature.

These inmates have transformed prairies once overrun with noxious bitterweed to lush pastures and have planted more than 1.5 million flowers as environmental stewards in the Sustainability in Prisons Project's Prairie Conservation Nursery Program.

**“We know nature can affect human beings ... it provides them with a sense of well-being.”**

The program, also available at three other Washington state prisons, allows 45 Stafford Creek inmates per year to escape their cells for six hours a day, five days a week. For many of them, it also serves as their first connection to the environment.

One inmate said he used to love riding all-terrain vehicles, “tearing up” what he thought was simply wasteland. Since participating in the program, he said he’s “woken up” to the environment as a living thing deserving of care, helping to restore some of the very areas he once destroyed.

Researchers at The Evergreen State College, who help manage the nursery program, credit the program with a reduction in prisoners’ anxiety and aggressive behavior, and an increase in empathy.

The program also offers the potential for college credit, so inmates can apply skills learned “on the job” to a future career.



Inmates label trays and replant seedlings in a Conservation Nursery Program hoop house at the Washington Corrections Center for Women.

Photo by Benjamin Drummond/Sara Joy Steele

# The Blue Room

## **Snake River Correctional Institution**

### **Ontario, Oregon**

Solitary confinement at Oregon's Snake River Correctional Institution used to mean a concrete cell, no bigger than a parking stall.

Prisoners spent about 23 hours a day there, a prolonged isolation that often provoked aggressive behavior from prisoners, who sometimes tried to bite or hit the facility's guards. So guards tried an experiment: Send inmates back to nature or, more accurately, bring nature to them.

The Blue Room, implemented in April 2013, immerses inmates in nature for an hour by playing videos of arid deserts, lush forests, and open oceans as they sit in a chair alone, imagining roaming the wide open spaces before them.

The room, named for the glare from the images projected on its wall, has been credited with a reduction in reported incidents of violence against guards. Prison officials in Nebraska, Michigan, Hawai'i, and Australia have shown interest in having their own Blue Rooms as a way to improve inmate moods. The project cost the Oregon prison about \$1,500.

"Prisoners in solitary confinement are nature-deprived like no other human beings," says Nalini Nadkarni, a forest ecologist at the University of Utah who came up with the Blue Room concept. "We know nature can affect human beings ... it provides them with a sense of well-being."

# Creative Writing

## **San Quentin State Prison**

### **California**

Stories can change lives. Just ask the inmates in San Quentin's Brothers in Pen writing class. Every Wednesday night, some of the most hardened criminals in California's notoriously tough prison meet to write, read, and critique their own fiction and memoirs.

## **The class provides living proof that stories possess the power of transformation.**

A writer walks to the center of the room, nervous to read a story mined directly from his life. His fellow inmates eagerly form a circle of support around him, waiting for what was painstakingly put on paper to be

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read aloud. “I love so much that moment of suspense, and you have no idea what kind of creation he has made,” says Zoe Mullery, who has been teaching the class since 1999.

Whatever the writer’s skills, Mullery says her class responds with encouragement and thoughtful, specific critiques. This support becomes a powerful outlet of emotion and creativity.

“Writing is where the human spirit truly and purely soars. Lack of self-expression, in the form of writing, kills the spirit,” says Brothers in Pen student J.B. Wells.

For him, and others, the class provides living proof that stories possess the power of transformation—but only when they’re allowed to be told.

## Computer Training

### **Folsom State Prison**

### **Repres, California**

Improving landscapes and designing striking skyscrapers are high priorities for the women sitting in Folsom Prison’s computer lab, but there’s a greater goal on their minds. These inmates are using the skills learned from the state’s Autodesk Authorized Training Center Program to craft something more important than buildings and computer code: a better life.

Instituted just over a year ago, this program is the only one in the nation to teach female inmates computer design skills used in architecture and engineering. The six-month class is taught by engineers with the California Prison Industry Authority, a state agency that provides productive work for inmates.

The goal is to provide participants with skills that can help them get jobs once they’re released. Many have found jobs in fields that would have been closed to them, including a recent graduate who landed a job in New York and has completed more than 100 design projects since her sentence ended.

With nearly 70 women graduating last June, the program’s 90 percent completion rate exceeds that of similar computer design programs available to vocational students on the outside, where the completion rate is about 50 percent.