

Prisons Turning Green

Evergreen Graduates, Students and Faculty Put Their Stamp on Corrections Work

By John McLain

Marin Fox Hight '08 does not seem surprised by her current station in life, but others are. "I'm not what people expect when they think of someone running a jail," she says.



It may be her relative youth—she's 34, runs marathons, and has a four-year-old daughter. It may be that she's a woman in a field that, despite some broken glass ceilings, remains top heavy with men. For some people, it's clearly a matter of educational pedigree, as they don't expect to see an Evergreen graduate filling her position as director of the Cowlitz County Corrections Department.

Hight takes it all in stride. She supervises two detention facilities, 90 staff represented by four unions, the county's probation and offender services programs, and an average daily inmate population of 321. She operates in a very public and political arena where she reports to three elected county commissioners and can easily find herself on the front-page of the local paper.

"I have to behave myself," she volunteered, suppressing a grin. She is also part of a growing number of Evergreen graduates, faculty and students who are using their talents and passions to change correctional institutions and help inmates rebuild their lives.

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Strange Bedfellows?

For some, Evergreen and the corrections industry make for an odd couple. On one side there's the small, colorful, antiestablishment, heart on your sleeve, anything-goes liberal arts college, and on the other is the gargantuan,



gray, monolithic, unforgiving government fortress of social control and punishment. At the level of stereotype, it's like Maya Angelou going steady with Dick Cheney. What could the two possibly have to offer one another?

Quite a lot, as it turns out.

Career Development director Wendy Freeman reports at least 51 alumni working in corrections that responded to recent placement surveys, though the surveys were not representative and with more than 30,000 alumni the actual number is likely higher.

According to surveys conducted by the college's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment over the past several years, Washington's Department of Corrections (DOC) is tied with the Department of Ecology as the third largest employer of Evergreen graduates. Greeners hold leadership roles at the highest levels of DOC, including secretary Eldon Vail '73, deputy director Dan Pacholke '08, and Cedar Creek Corrections Center superintendent Hisami Yoshida '84. Last summer, Vail and Evergreen president Les Purce signed an agreement for the college to lead DOC-Evergreen sustainable prisons projects at four western Washington prisons.

Evening and Weekend Studies faculty and psychologist Mark Hurst and his students have been working with prisoners since 2004, studying the efficacy of treatment models emerging from a relatively new field in psychotherapy, Positive Psychology.

Before them all was Gateways, founded by faculty emerita Carol Minugh, which has turned college into a reality for incarcerated youth for the past 14 years. The full-time academic program brings Evergreen students and faculty to detention facilities as mentors, tutors and instructors to the young men held there.

"It seems like prisons and Evergreen are strange bedfellows, but actually we're not," says faculty member and forest ecologist Nalini Nadkarni. "If we're heading students toward careers that involve service and helping improve the world, then corrections is an extremely logical place to be."

Green is the New Gray

Nadkarni would know. She's been working in prisons for five years, most of that time collaborating directly with DOC's Dan Pacholke.

Back in 2004, as then-superintendent of the 400-inmate Cedar Creek Corrections Center, Pacholke wanted to add 100 more beds to help meet DOC's need for more space. The rural facility near Olympia is a minimum-security prison, mostly for men at the end of their sentences, and it's close to I-5—both factors that make it less expensive to operate. It's in the Capitol Forest, which offers considerable work and training opportunities for inmates



housed there. And expanding an existing facility was better than building a new one.

Then he ran into a big problem—water. Cedar Creek’s 400 offenders were already tapping out the facility’s available water rights, Pacholke says. “We had two choices: get more water rights—a ten-year prospect—or cut our consumption.” Then, even if he could get more clean water into the facility, he had to deal with the wastewater going out. Growing to 500 beds would also require a \$1.5 million upgrade to the center’s sewage treatment plant.

Enter Nadkarni, who met Pacholke at a DOC volunteer luncheon where she was recognized for a research project she conducted with help from Cedar Creek inmates. Pacholke told her about his interest in sustainable operations, and especially his need to cut water use. Nadkarni offered to organize some faculty lectures about the issues for inmates and staff to see if that could help crack the problem.

If you ask them individually why their partnership is so effective, they’ll immediately point to the other. Pacholke credits Nadkarni’s infectious optimism and her ardor for public science education. For Nadkarni it was Pacholke’s ability to implement ideas quickly and without fanfare. “After each of the lectures he said, ‘You know, we could do that here.’ So I’d go back and I’d see this organic garden they put in, and the next time I’d find this worm composting operation going on. And it was all done at a completely low level. They built a recycling shed out of recycled wood. They didn’t put in a fancy \$500,000 composter. They put in a low-tech worm operation that does the job a whole lot better.”

Pacholke kept pushing forward, with sustainability improvements that included low-flow toilets and showers, leak detection and repair, a rainwater catchment system, a system for washing cars using only five gallons per vehicle, and the decision to stop watering lawns. “We decided if we couldn’t eat it, we weren’t going to water it.”

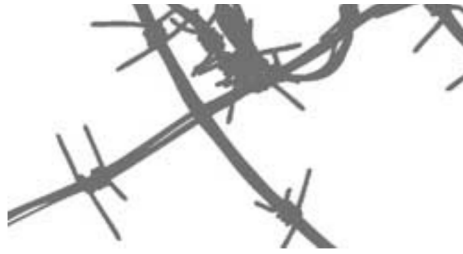
The results were dramatic. They dropped per capita water uses from 132 to 100 gallons a day and saved 250,000 gallons in the hot season alone. And because they were pumping less water to the sewage plant, and had taken the seemingly trivial step of scraping dinner plates for the compost operation, the sewage treatment plant was running well below capacity and the need for an expensive fix disappeared.

“It was all done on a handshake and a shoestring,” Pacholke says.

Now Evergreen and DOC have entered a formal agreement to bring staff and students together under Nadkarni’s and Pacholke’s leadership to keep the work progressing at Cedar Creek and build out the sustainability



capacities of three additional prisons: Stafford Creek, McNeil Island, and the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Gig Harbor.



The cost of the two-year project for DOC is \$300,000. For Vail, the benefits could not be clearer. "It reduces cost, reduces our damaging impact on the environment, [and] engages inmates as students," he told the Associated Press when announcing the project. "It's good security."

Nurture and Nature

Saving money may be the thing that pleases lawmakers and taxpayers, but for corrections professionals, working in prisons is also very much a labor of the heart.

As a practicing psychologist for more than two decades, faculty member Mark Hurst and a number of his colleagues around the world have become convinced that the field puts too much emphasis on pathology and mental illness and not nearly enough on the factors that lead to mental health. Building from the work of Positive Psychology pioneer Martin Seligman, Hurst and some of his students are working with inmates at three Washington prisons.

Think of Positive Psychology as the psychotherapeutic equivalent of preventive medicine: instead of only fixing something when it's sick or broken, positive psychologists advocate identifying, taking care of and enhancing those assets that contribute to mental wellbeing. Among other things, Hurst encourages inmates to identify their supportive relationships and their own personal characteristics of goodness, such as personal integrity and the ability to express love, kindness, and gratitude.

About 50 percent of state and federal prison inmates have diagnosable mental disorders, Hurst says. "These are the new mental institutions in our society, and if you talk to prison administrators, judges, and prosecutors, they all know the system isn't working. We're trying a different approach. We can help someone address an anger problem, for example, while he is identifying his strengths and while he is serving his time. In the process we're giving him some tools for when he reenters society."

In many ways, the approach Gateways takes with incarcerated teenagers is similar. What makes the program successful is that the students come to value the knowledge they possess, and to trust their own curiosity. "We have a standard," Carol Minugh says of Gateways staff and Evergreen students in the program. "Respond. Don't bring something in. The things of value are going to be the things that come out of them, not the things we bring in." The incarcerated students decide what they want to learn about, and they collaborate with faculty, program staff and Evergreen students to figure how they want to pursue it.

For the DOC-Evergreen sustainable prisons projects, part of the goal is to bring inmates into the core of the various initiatives, to inspire their own emotional investment in the work. "They want to be engaged," says Jeff Muse, program manager of the project. "They want to feel like their time is worth something. They know they're being punished for a reason, but at

least the ones I'm working with feel like they need to do something."



Hisami Yoshida

**"A few years ago we started growing flowers, and it changed things. Now you go around to the prisons, and most of them have flowers growing."
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Like her colleague Dan Pacholke, Hisami Yoshida, the current superintendent at Cedar Creek, makes things happen. As an undergraduate in the 1980s, she was instrumental in creating a peer counseling program at Evergreen for students of color that continues to this day. At DOC, where she's worked for more than 20 years, she has initiated a number of offender programs, including a youth program at a time when the state was incarcerating minors in adult prisons and a residential parenting program to allow infants to stay with their mothers in prison.

Yoshida believes that allowing inmates to become nurturers and creating beauty and sustenance within prison environments can be the seeds of transformation. "Prisons are primarily dirt, and concrete, and gravel, and metal fencing," she says. "A few years ago we started growing flowers, and it changed things. Now you go around to the prisons, and most of them have flowers growing. Whenever you start to do things like that, it changes the atmosphere of the place. As more and more prisons begin to grow food that will happen more as well."

Food... and native plants... and frogs. For the sustainable prisons project, inmates will also be working with The Nature Conservancy to grow native plants for prairie restoration, and the state Department of Fish and Wildlife to raise endangered Oregon spotted frogs for release in the wild.

As Marin Fox Hight struggles with budget cuts at her county facility, she worries that the short-term savings from reducing services will come with a hefty long-term price tag. "We have people at their worst, and we have an opportunity to give them some tools to help them not come back. I think we have to provide those opportunities. That may sound liberal or hug-a-thug, but it's a sound investment that can save the taxpayers in the

long run.

"I take people's lives seriously," Hight says, "the people who work here and the people we house here."

She's not alone.

Related Links:

KCTS Public Television Story (<http://www.kcts9.org/video/green-prison-reform>)

Sustainable Prisons Project (<http://acdrupal.evergreen.edu/greenprisons/>)

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