

# Between a mother and her child

## The Wilsonville Rotary Club's Through a Child's Eyes reunites inmates with their children



Wendy Gates is serving out a lengthy prison term for a 2000 robbery and homicide. She values TACE for the access it gives her to her children. It only took a few minutes for 19-year-old Wendy Gates' life to change completely.

But during that time two men were shot during a robbery at a Eugene duplex that turned violent. 25-year-old Joshua Copp was killed with a single shot while a second man was gravely wounded after being hit with at least four .45 caliber slugs.

"It was a robbery gone bad," Gates concedes.

Although she remained in the getaway car during the crime, Gates still was charged with and convicted of manslaughter, attempted murder, assault, robbery and burglary charges for her role in identifying the location as a possible target.

Still barely out of high school, she received statewide publicity and a 12-and-a-half year prison sentence that began in March 2001. Her two children, Anthony and his younger sister Diya, were left with her parents in Eugene.

Now over a decade older, Gates has had plenty of time to reflect on the decisions that will have caused her to spend over 13 years behind bars by the time of her scheduled release in 2013.

Even at her sentencing hearing, she expressed regret at the string of choices that led her to that day.

In recent years, her children, now ages 14 and 11, have regularly weighed on her mind. Regular visits have proved unsatisfactory in helping her maintain the close connection with them she craves.

"There's not really much you can do in there," she said. "It's like an institutionalized visit."

That's where the Wilsonville Rotary Club's Through a Child's Eyes program has come into play and proved itself invaluable for Gates and other inmate mothers.

Started in 2003 and now held each July at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, Oregon's only women's prison, TACE, as it is informally known, is a volunteer-run event that provides incarcerated mothers a unique opportunity to spend an afternoon with their children in as un-prisonlike a setting as everyone involved can make it.

Volunteers man booths filled with games and activities for kids, while others cook and hand out burgers and other snacks, including cotton candy. The program has grown from an initial event with 55 volunteers to this year's gala on July 10-11 that featured 107 volunteers and over 100 inmates and their children.

"This is a unique opportunity," said Brian Belleque, Westside Institutional Administrator for the Oregon Department of Corrections.

Belleque oversees Coffee Creek and seven other prisons. He said there is nothing remotely like TACE in any of the state facilities holding male inmates.

"You don't see this in prisons every day," he said. "It's just great to see the women and their kids interacting. There's nothing on this scale. Other events are probably one-tenth of this size, if that."

The women who take part almost unanimously find this to be a lifeline between them and their children.

"I've gone every single year," said Gates. "I think I only missed the summer of 2003. It's what keeps me out of trouble."

If you don't have a clear conduct record in here you can't go to these events."

Chris Randall is lead life skills coordinator at Coffee Creek, in charge of setting up TACE and a host of other educational programs for inmates Coffee Creek. He also heads the committee dedicated to organizing and running TACE each summer, along with companion children's events in the spring, fall and winter. He said none of these would be possible without the extensive work put in by volunteers from Wilsonville and further afield in the metro area.

This is particularly true with TACE, by far the largest children's event held at Coffee Creek.

"It just brings together a lot of different members of the community," Randall said. "You get a lot of community support from the Rotary Club and other community members involved in what we're doing here."

### **NOT LIKE A PRISON**

"I look forward to it a lot," said inmate Melissa Smith, currently serving out a sentence for manslaughter handed down for her role in a fatal drunken driving crash. "It's a chance to spend some time with our kids. I know it seems like it's not that big of a deal, but we get to see them eat a meal and a hug them and normally we only get to see them eat snacks."

Smith's twin sons, eight-year-olds Evan and Nicholas, have been raised by their grandparents ever since their mother was sent to prison. They both appreciate the opportunity TACE provides them to spend time with her.

"Yes," said Evan when asked if he looks forward to TACE each summer. "Games and the dogs," are his favorite activities, Nicholas added, referring to the booth set up around the Labrador retriever puppies being trained as guide dogs by inmates, another popular Coffee Creek vocational program.

"Yeah, the dogs," Evan agreed with a shy smile.

It's the family's sixth consecutive TACE event, and the extra time with her kids is paying off in ways Smith didn't even expect. Not only do they get to experience the unique pleasure of brushing a guide dog's teeth with liver-flavored toothpaste, the bonds built during the process have lasted through the years.

"I've had a lot of volunteers compliment me on how good I am with my kids," she said. "And that feels really good knowing we can still have an impact on our kids. That's what this event is for."

For Diya Gates, TACE and its offshoots are something to relish after spending virtually her entire life without her mother. She and her brother Anthony have lived with their grandmother, Lorraine Slattery, during that time.

"They were just one and four," Slattery said, recounting the kids' ages when mother Wendy was sent to prison. "This (TACE) is very important. It gives us, how do I phrase this, scheduled visiting. We know when we're coming and what we're going to do, and what's really nice about all of this is that it's not restricted at all. I can sit in the shade and they can go play."

The Gates kids agree.

"It's pretty cool to come out here with your mom," Diya said. "It feels really good. We get to do all sorts of fun stuff with her. We really appreciate what they (volunteers) do for us so we can visit; it's really cool that they do that. It feels like you're not really in prison."

By: [Josh Kulla](#)

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## **Local Humane Society seeks to promote animal well-being**

Seven-year-old Gunter probably wouldn't be by state parole Officer Chris Hooley's side without the Umpqua Valley Humane Society.



Cheryl Donahoo, Umpqua Valley Humane Society president, discusses the group's efforts recently at its thrift shop on Southeast Stephens Street in Roseburg as her dog, Lily, looks on.

*MICHAEL SULLIVAN/The News-Review*

The drug-sniffing German shepherd has helped the Myrtle Creek-stationed Hooley with countless drug busts since he was young. But the Oregon Department of Corrections Parole and Probation Division has no money set aside for veterinarian bills and other expenses. Besides paying Gunter's medical expenses, the society gave \$1,000 to buy the dog a bullet-proof vest.

“Whatever we need for him, they step up and get it for him,” Hooley said. “We probably wouldn't have a drug canine program if it wasn't for them.”

Supporting the work of police dogs is one of many ways the Umpqua Valley Humane Society helps animals in Douglas County, President Cheryl Donahoo said.

Founded in 1953, the organization works with law enforcement and emergency personnel to ensure the well-being of animals, she said. For example, the society has stocked fire trucks in Douglas County with oxygen masks for dogs.

To further its mission of eliminating suffering to animals, the Humane Society also provides pet food to owners and pays for emergency vet care and to spay and neuter pets.

Although it doesn't operate a shelter, or have plans to build one, Donahoo said, the Humane Society helps pets find new homes.

Adopting an animal is free and keeps animals from having to stay in a shelter, she said.

Much of the Humane Society's funding comes from donations, often collected through donation containers in stores throughout the county, and from proceeds from the Umpqua Valley Humane Society Thrift Shoppe and Resource Center on Southeast Stephens Street in Roseburg.

Like Hooley, Douglas County's sole Animal Control deputy, Lee Bartholomew, said the Humane Society helps the county cover vet bills for abused animals. The group also pays for Bartholomew's continuing education.

The Humane Society has also provided Animal Control with vehicle-window thermometers to document the temperature inside a vehicle in which an animal has been left.

“We don't have a whole lot of money set aside for vet bills,” Bartholomew said. “I'd be hard pressed to do this job if I didn't have (the Humane Society).”

Animal Control and the Humane Society officials make presentations to students from kindergarten to high school in an effort to prevent animal abuse.

Donahoo said people often call the Humane Society to report abused or neglected animals and that she screens the calls, referring the most serious cases to Bartholomew and attempting to resolve others.

“It takes some of the burden off Animal Control,” she said. “I'm able to either calm them down or send an officer.”

Hooley said that while visiting the homes of paroles and their families, she often recommends that they get Humane Society help caring for their pets. After all, she's had a good experience with the organization herself.

“If I called (Donahoo) up ... and said I need a new dog dish, I'd probably get three tomorrow,” she said.

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Gary Staffield of Roseburg pets Rose at his home Thursday. Staffield and wife, Kay, adopted the yellow Lab from the Umpqua Valley Humane Society in 2005.  
*MICHAEL SULLIVAN/The News-Review*

# Seeds of freedom

*Female inmates find redemption, new skills in gardening, recycling*



CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT / PAMPLIN MEDIA GROUP

Coffee Creek inmates Francis Frost (left) and Jill Litzinger plant a small cucumber vine that they started from seed in the plastic-bottle greenhouse they helped build.

**Sustainability is a logical goal at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, the Wilsonville prison that houses Oregon's entire population of female convicts.**

There, inmates help reduce costs by reusing materials and growing their own food. And, through environmental stewardship, they are gaining skills and confidence that are crucial to recycling imperfect lives.

Which is the whole point.

This spring, a crew of six inmates completed an innovative greenhouse built from used plastic soft-drink bottles. At 6-

by-12 feet, the building is small. But it's part of a growing trend at Coffee Creek and elsewhere that may help improve America's prisons.

Forty years after the original Earth Day, all of Oregon Department of Corrections' 14 facilities have implemented sustainability-minded programs, ranging from recycling to organic gardening to alternative energy use. Prison officials, staff and inmates – and taxpayers – are seeing the benefits.

Not far from the whimsical greenhouse sits Coffee Creek's organic garden. Inmates grow enough produce to seed a nutritional education program, donate to the Oregon Food Bank, and defray the cost of feeding 1,158 inmates, as well as roughly 400 male prisoners awaiting assignment to other facilities at any given time.

"It's enough to supply vegetables through the summer," says maintenance supervisor Susan Marlin.

## Feeding the soul

Coffee Creek's greenhouse, a tiny patch of green inside a forbidding cyclone fence topped with razor wire, doesn't contribute much to overall production. But it provides a few carefully chosen women with another kind of nourishment.

Jill Litzinger, who is approaching the end of a nearly two-year sentence for cocaine possession and distribution, joined the project when work involved scrubbing bottles in the cold of winter.

"I thought it was gonna suck," says Litzinger, who had little understanding of sustainability and fewer construction skills when the project got under way. "My stepfather has always recycled and I personally hated it.

“Coming out here and recycling, and doing it every day, it’s natural now. I am helping the community by recycling.”

Litzsinger, 27, now plans to enroll in community college to study building trades when she is paroled in September.

“I want to do this as a career choice,” she says. “I know I’ve learned a lot.”

The greenhouse is a marvel of sensible reuse. The 20-ounce bottles, derived from vending machines at the prison, are mounted on PVC pipe left over from an irrigation project. The wood frame was fashioned from lumber in an old deck being replaced.

Sheets of corrugated plastic that seal the walls were the only store-bought element, Marlin says. “Virtually everything else was recycled.”

The project cost about \$200, says the project’s no-nonsense supervisor.

“The ladies learned framing and squaring and hammering, pouring concrete, mixing concrete for the posts, a lot of things in the construction-type field,” Marlin says.

“It’s amazing how many women have never experienced anything growing from a seed. It’s exciting for them. So many females in their lives have never run equipment. That was big.”

### **Newfound pride**

Perhaps nobody found more meaning in the work than Francis Frost.

The pretty, athletic 28-year-old has lived at Coffee Creek more than eight years. She arrived at 19 following sentencing on a manslaughter charge in Coos County. She had stabbed an ex-boyfriend to death.

Frost shows visitors around the greenhouse with an evident sense of ownership, pointing out a cucumber plant.

“It did not grow under the grow light,” she says. “We put it out here and it came up. It liked the greenhouse.”

Alongside the cucumbers are tomato, jalapeño and habanero peppers.

“I never pictured it,” Frost says of the project. “Then we actually ended up building it. I think everybody’s really, really proud of it. It’s an actual greenhouse. We grow things in it.”

One might be tempted to see the greenhouse as Frost’s child, except she already has one. She was pregnant when she arrived in Wilsonville. Now she’s 16 months from becoming a full-time mother to a 9-year-old boy.

“I have to start over,” she says, momentarily tearful.

But she has no trouble viewing the work she’s done at Coffee Creek as a long course in responsibility. She’s learned to operate heavy equipment, worked on landscaping outside the walls, and kept herself motivated when the early phases of the greenhouse project called for tedious work in difficult conditions.

“In doing this, we had to problem-solve a lot of things,” she says. “We got annoyed with each other sometimes. We had to figure out how to work through that.

“It’s nice to give something back, to be on the right side of society.”

Marlin watched the transformation.

“Some of them come from very abusive backgrounds and have no confidence,” she says. “The recycling gives them the idea that they can do anything and, yes, giving back to the community is huge.”

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## **Prison trains hard-core gardeners**

Coffee Creek is one of many Northwest prisons pursuing sustainability initiatives.

At Northeast Portland’s Columbia River Correctional Institution, inmates are cultivating an 8,000-square-foot garden that generated 12,655 pounds of produce last year. During the growing season, inmates produce close to half the prison’s produce needs, says Dale Ahlstrom, physical plant manager.

“It’s all fresh,” he says. “It hasn’t been sitting in somebody’s warehouse. Plus it’s all organic.”

The prison’s organic garden and recycling programs have become hugely popular with inmates, Ahlstrom says. The last time the call went out for participants, 60 inmates sought a handful of positions.

“These are hard-core felons,” he marvels. “That’s pretty good.”

Master gardeners from Portland Community College and Portland State University offer instruction at the prison, and they confer certificates to high-performing participants.

“We had one guy who had been down for 27 years,” Ahlstrom says. “He didn’t have a clue what recycling is. We gave him a skill. When he hit the streets, he did get a job.

“We’re in a changing time,” Ahlstrom says. “Everybody wants to go green.”

Up north, Nalini Nadkarni founded the highly regarded Sustainable Prisons Project, a partnership between Washington State Department of Corrections and Evergreen State College in Olympia.

At four Washington facilities, offenders operate beehives, organic gardens and recycling programs. They also serve as foot soldiers in efforts to farm valuable forest moss and protect wild prairie plants and endangered frogs.

Nadkarni, an Evergreen professor, has seen a wide range of benefits from sustainability initiatives: a prison that could pass on a \$1.4 million waste treatment plant by persuading inmates to scrape their plates after meals; offenders turned into college degree candidates; and a lifer whose decision to protect the planet gives meaning to her existence.

“What is comes down to is every human being can be connected to the earth in a positive way,” Nadkarni says. “We don’t know the hard data yet, but we know that there is something

rehabilitative about working with nature. I think we are going to be changing the way we view prisons in our society.”

**BY ERIC BARTELS**

*Pamplin Media Group, Aug 12, 2010*

# Yoga time

*Practice gives women a new peace, and a new view on life from behind bars*



PHOTO BY  
AMANDA WALDROUPE

**BY AMANDA WALDROUPE**  
STAFF WRITER

**T**wenty four women gather at seven in the evening each Thursday in what could be an elementary school classroom: there is a white board on one wall, file cabinets and posters listing career and life skill goals, along with facial expressions to describe different emotions.

The women are dressed in red shorts and blue T-shirts. The only differences are their apparel are the shoes they are wearing and hair accessories. Team uniforms of sorts, but the emblem on the back of each T-shirt tells a guest otherwise: The seal of the Oregon Department of Corrections, with the word "INMATE" in large, capital letters at its base.

The women are inmates of Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville, the only one of

Oregon's 12 prisons that is exclusively for female inmates.

The classroom these 24 women are in is within Coffee Creek's minimum security facility, in a building adjacent to the prison yard where dozens of other women, in the same red shorts and blue T-shirts, are walking, running, playing pickle ball or simply hanging out in the hot evening sun and conversing with their fellow inmates.

These 24 women, however, are seeking a reprieve from the noise and crowd that evening.

They are waiting for their yoga class to begin.

The lights have been turned out, with the exception of one: a garishly bright fluorescent emergency light near the door. Light streams in from a long, rectangular window in the back.

The women chat to each other and laugh as they roll out yoga mats over drab green carpet. They are

all seated in cross-legged positions.

Laurie, their yoga instructor that evening, calls the class to attention. (Laurie has asked that only her first name be used for this article in order to avoid any potentially dangerous stalking situations when prisoners are released in the future.)

"I always like to begin with seated meditation," Laurie tells the class. "You can sit on your block if you want to. Find some place that is comfortable. Let your hips be heavy in the mat."

As Laurie talks, the women adjust themselves. Everyone is seated facing forward in similar cross-legged positions, sitting as straight and tall as they can. The only movement is the gentle rising and falling of their chests as they breathe.

"Relax your shoulders," Laurie continues. Her

*Above, inmates at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville practice yoga under the tutelage of trainers from Living Yoga in Portland. The course uses the mental and physical discipline to help the women restore balance in their lives.*

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## YOGA, from page 1

eyes are closed, and her hands rest on her knees. "And let a little quiet come into your heart. Let go of where you came from today or where you want to be, and let yourself be."

"Let the quiet settle over you."

These inmates do not often have the opportunity to have a quiet moment to themselves. "Prison is a very noisy place," Laurie says. "Yoga can be a sanctuary for them."

The only sounds in the classroom as the women continue meditating are the quiet rustles of breathing. But they have not completely escaped noise. The walls seep with noise from countless other rooms.

Karen Baker, 51, sits in the back of the classroom with her friend Isis Harris, 33. She says she's aware of the noises around her before she is even completely conscious at five every morning. "I can hear at least 20 women breathing," she says. "There are doors opening, toilets flushing. The sounds of living with many women."

Twice-weekly yoga classes have become a retreat for Baker, Harris, and the rest of the women from the noise, chaos and constant stress of prison life.

It is taught by volunteers through the Portland-based organization Living Yoga, a non-profit providing yoga classes to prison inmates, people in drug and alcohol treatment, and other disadvantaged and vulnerable people who normally would not have access to yoga classes.

The class is one of a variety of life skills classes Coffee Creek offers to help inmates successfully re-enter society when they are released. Prison staff say the classes also keep inmates' time structured and decrease the possibility of rioting.

The women taking yoga are not stereotypes. The women at Coffee Creek have strong spirits, are determined to improve their lives, and are even cheerful. They look forward to the day they are released, the day they will begin to live the better lives they are trying to prepare themselves for in prison. Many of them credit yoga for their personal transformation, and say it has completely changed the way they think about themselves, other people around them, and the world they live in. It's profoundly changed their lives and given them hope that their lives after prison will be different and better than the ones they led before they entered.

**B**aker and Harris have both experienced intense emotional transformation as a result of doing yoga, beginning with the fundamentally simple fact that they have become friends. In any other circumstance, they might not be: Baker is 51 years old, and Harris is 33. Baker is white, and Harris is African American. Baker was a physical therapist before entering prison, and Baker worked in administrative jobs.

Baker is at least a head taller than Harris, and easily the tallest person in the yoga class, and her shoulders, though thin, are straight and broad. Baker's long, curly hair is pulled back in a ponytail. The identification badge she wears shows that her hair was light red when she first came to Coffee Creek. Now what hair has not already turned white is graying.

She looks directly at the people with whom she speaks. Harris, the more quiet of the two, is more likely to look at the ceiling as she speaks or when she is trying to form a thought. Both of them have eight months left before their release. Baker describes their sentences as "doing Measure 11 time," referring to the mandatory, minimum-sentencing law for violent person-to-person crimes that Oregonians passed in 1994.

Baker is serving an eight-year sentence for killing two people in a car accident while she was under the influence of alcohol. Harris is serving a six-year sentence for assault.

"I went through a real process here," Harris says, laughing. "The first two, three years were rough. I was focused too much



*Karen Baker, foreground, and Isis Harris practice yoga at the Living Yoga class at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. Baker says yoga has become a way of life. "Every time I step off the mat, I'm not even the same person," she says.*

outside of myself."

Six months ago, Harris missed two yoga classes. Coffee Creek has a rule that inmates are kicked out of yoga class for a period of time if they miss two classes. Harris had to rejoin the wait list, which has as many as 50 inmates on it, before she rejoined. "This time," she says, "I'm steadfast."

Harris says the classes she has taken for the last five years helped her become more calm, introspective, and gain a better, more compassionate understanding of herself and others. She has also lost 12 pounds and gotten off anti-depressants.

"It helps center you to feel more like you," Harris explains. "When I leave yoga, I feel good. You feel reinvigorated after the fact. You feel looser in your body. I'm inside my whole body versus living in my head."

"That is so cool," Baker says.

Baker joined the yoga class after being in prison for two weeks. That was six years ago. "It didn't take me long to realize how granite hard these floors are," she says, and the effects that would have on her body.

Baker says her lifestyle prior to entering prison was "super active" and describes herself as an "adrenaline junkie." At first, taking yoga was simply about competing with herself. "I wanted to strike those poses," she says.

But slowly, she says, she stopped worrying about trying to prove something to herself and others about her physical abilities. "Now I'm working into ease," she says.

She practices yoga every day. "It's become a way of life for me. Every time I step off the mat, I'm not even the same person exactly," she says, because she feels herself changing and growing after each practice.

Harris says that yoga has helped her become more introspective and understand what type of person she is. "I'm grateful for the experience of getting to know me better," Harris says.

"It gives you the opportunity to connect your mind and your body," Laurie says. "Often, we live in one or the other."

Living Yoga was founded in 1998 with the intention of providing free yoga classes to marginalized and vulnerable populations of people who otherwise do not have access to yoga. The organization relies on 70 volunteers, including Laurie who has volunteered at Coffee Creek since August.

The organization believes that yoga can help its students successfully recover from addiction and re-enter society when their prisons terms end.

Yoga, in particular, can help inmates deal with the stress of living in a prison environment.

"Prison is a place where there is constant boredom and constant noise. It's hard to find peace," says Randy Blazak, an associate professor of sociology at Portland State University.

Baker says the peaceful mindset yoga gives her helps breaks up the monotony of meals, sitting on beds to be counted, working, and going to bed at the same time every evening.

"They need every tool available to them to keep in touch with themselves," Laurie says.

Aside from taking yoga, Baker and Harris have used their prison terms to better themselves. It seems an odd thing to say about an institution that punishes and sequesters people from society. But both Baker and Harris feel more confident about themselves and their future because of skills they have acquired while in prison. Baker learned hair design, and Harris took a class giving her experience in optometry. Each inmate spends eight hours each day working, and Baker works outside in the gardens surrounding the minimum-security facility. Harris works in what is called the "resource room," helping women with their resumes and other job-related tasks.

"Being in a prison should be all about growth," Harris thinks. It is an inmate's only chance to reinvent their self before release into a world potentially made up of the same habits and lifestyle that led to prison. In her own life, Harris has been "more future forward." She gives yoga a lot of the credit.

"You have to create your own prison experience," Baker says.

"Ninety-five to ninety-seven percent of inmates are released back into the community at some point," Blazak says. "We have to think about what type of people we want to come back into our communities."

Harris says being in a prison can be a punishing experience if you let. "There are a lot of people who are lost," she says. "They haven't found direction yet."

"There's a hell of a lot of depression in here," Baker says, agreeing.

**A**fter meditating for a few minutes, Laurie leads the class in a series of yoga postures collective called a "Sun Salutation." She demonstrates the "Cat-Cow" posture on her mat at the front of the class: keeping hands shoulder distance apart and knees beneath the hips in a "table top" position, Laurie alternates between arching her back in a "cat position" and sinking it towards the floor in a "cow position."

"Stay here for a few breaths," Laurie instructs.

One posture involves doing a push up. One woman pushes herself up too quickly, and Laurie stops the class to teach a "proper" push up. "Go for the straightness," she says, slowly lowering her body to the floor.

The women do an exercise for their stomach muscles halfway through the class. Laurie tells them to lift their feet and upper parts of their body into a V-shape. Their arms stick straight out in front of them.

Everyone tries to hold the pose. Some wobble, and there are quiet gasps for air or moans as one or two women fall down to the floor, and then try the pose again.

Baker and Harris hardly flinch next to each other. "I appreciate the solitude of it," Harris says of yoga. "It's peaceful for me, even though it's not easy."

As peaceful as yoga is, it requires a lot of movement that uses the flexibility and strength of a person's entire body. For the next pose, the women find themselves lying down on their mats again to stretch out their hamstrings, the tendon behind the knee. They raise one leg at a time off the floor and toward the ceiling, grabbing their leg at the back of the knee with both hands.

"It's not working for me," one woman says. She sits in a cross-legged position and looks around her. After another brief moment, she lies down and tries the stretch again.

"All it takes is perseverance and doing it a little bit every day," Laurie says.

The last pose of the class is also the most peaceful and easy to do. It is called "Savasana," which translates to "corpse pose." Everyone lies down on their mats, facing upward. Their feet are slightly apart from one another. The palms of their hands face upward, or touch the mat, or are simply relaxed next to their body.

"You have seven minutes to relax into your Savasana," Laurie says quietly.

"Release the muscles in your face, relax your shoulders, relax the muscles in your hands and fingers."

"Feel your heart beating in your chest."

Loud applause from the next room breaks the silence.

"Bring your thoughts around to your true self," Laurie says, almost murmuring now. "Connect with that beauty."

Everyone's eyes are closed. The room is completely still.

Laurie twists around to a small black stereo she has brought, and a soft, chant begins to play. Laurie reads aloud a passage attributed to Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, and the class ends.

Baker, Harris, and the rest of the women wear broad smiles as they roll up their mats and put their shoes and socks back on. The laughter and talking is more natural and relaxed than before class.

After stacking the mats onto a cart outside the classroom, the women disperse down the hallway or outside to the prison yard.