



OUR VIEW

Education can pack life-changing clout for prison inmates

Tuesday, December 29, 2009

Reporter Kathy Aney's recent story in the EO on what has happened to two prison inmates after release could serve as a good conversation starter in this time of depleted budgets for education and other public services.

Her report told the story of Michael Lucia, who spent eight years in Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution in Pendleton before release into a scary world. But his decision to join a clock repair class and to earn a GED certificate in EOCI helped his chances. Even though his income from repairing clocks and cars is below what he made as a truck driver years ago, he feels happy about his present situation and about his future.

The story also reports on a former prison inmate, David Koch, who went from cleaning floors to attending flight school to become a flight instructor. He started a green energy company and wrote a book on his prison experience. These days, Koch gives seminars to inmates and runs a company which helps inmates with incubator businesses.

Koch said he feels strongly that committing crimes and returning to crime after release are tied to lack of education and lack of direction. "The core, underlying problem is illiteracy," he said. "Just like lions and tigers, people will use their teeth and claws to find clothing and shelter and protect their territory" if they lack the tools to function in society.

That makes sense. And it takes a supportive correctional staff and moxie inside the inmate to make an education program reach a felon in his 20s or 30s and change his direction in life.

EOCI in Pendleton contracts with Blue Mountain Community College to teach inmates. Since 1985, more than 2,000 have received either GED certificates or adult high school diplomas.

State law requires all inmates to enroll in functional literacy programs except for those who are sentenced to less than a year, are sentenced to life, are sentenced to death or are developmentally disabled. Inmates also must achieve certain scores on state tests in order to enroll in literacy - reading, writing and comprehension - classes.

In addition, EOCI has the New Directions Education Project, which was started in 1999 by Evelyn Hanks and other area educators to provide college level courses. That program, supported by private donations and grants, usually includes two college courses each term. Cost is \$25 per student per term. For example, History 101 and Writing Composition 123 were offered this fall, and Geology 103 and Speech 115 will be taught this winter term.

EOCI inmates also can take advantage of distance learning courses through Louisiana State University, Ohio State University and Penn Foster Career School. Inmates are not allowed to use the Internet, though. The prisoners pay their own expenses in the distance learning program.

The importance of literacy and providing other life tools is also an issue of course in the earliest levels of schooling. With Oregon's heavy reliance on the state income tax to support the public schools (and other state services), Oregon school districts have kept dropping school days and teaching positions. Given the choice of teaching reading, writing and comprehension in grade school vs. teaching those skills in prison, most would choose grade school.

But another factor comes in. Even with well-funded schools, some parents are absent from their children's development in grade school. Many of those kids are adrift and will remain so until intercepted by the Marine Corps, police officers or judges.

Doug Harder, information officer for EOCI, says the quarterly graduation ceremonies at the Pendleton prison pack quite an emotional clout. As inmates in cap and gown receive GED, high school degrees or occasionally college degrees, it is apparent to family members and friends in the room that something life-changing is happening. It's preferable to equip people when they're starting their lives, but a saved life is a saved life anytime.