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Downeast volunteers keep jail residents connected

by CRAIG IDLEBROOK

Judy Garvey spends a lot of her free time in jail. Since 2001, the Blue Hill resident has coordinated Volunteers for Hancock Jail Residents (VHJR), a program that offers classes and programs to residents of Ellsworth's Hancock County Jail.

Garvey founded VHJR after watching a family member go through the jail system. Since then, she's realized many other Maine families are in the same boat.

"Sadly, incarceration is so common now," she said. "Every family has someone they know who is dealing with this."

While there were always a few programs available at the Hancock County Jail, Garvey realized jail inmates typically had two choices of what to do during a day, watch TV or pace the concrete cellblock. She wanted to help transform jail time from a waiting period to a time where residents could get the help they needed for their underlying problems.

Garvey and other volunteers began offering programs and classes that might improve residents' lives and keep them connected to the outside world.

One of the first VHJR efforts was a yoga class. At first, Garvey worried that the residents would find the yoga poses too difficult, but she was surprised to discover the majority of jail residents had great balance. A jail inmate told her why.

"Half of us are fishermen," the inmate laughed.

But Garvey says it isn't just fishermen who end up at the jail. "It's people from all professions," she said.

She says jail residents come from a broad cross-section of society, but often end up in jail because of one thing in common: "Eighty-five to 90 percent is due to what I like to call chemical-addiction illnesses," Garvey said.

Many of their addictions stem from attempts to self-medicate underlying mental illness. Between 25 and 30 percent of jail residents have records of mental illness.

"This is supposedly diagnosed," she said. "What about everybody who wasn't diagnosed?"

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VHJR programs help residents find ways to channel the stress of incarceration and addiction withdrawal into positive avenues. For example, a popular program called "Free Inside" teaches stress reduction and breathing relaxation exercises to deal with depression anxiety. The class continues for residents even after they leave jail.

"It helps with really getting the stress off your back," Garvey said.

Another popular VHJR program is one-on-one visiting, where volunteers meet individually with jail residents for an hour a week.

Along with self-help programs and tutoring, VHJR also offers classes in art, computer use and writing. The writing program has produced two volumes of original essays and poems, called "Notes from the Inside". Garvey says there's a power to putting the struggles of addiction on paper for family members to read.

"It makes people feel better," she said.

Every weekend, VHJR volunteers also push a huge book-cart through the jail's narrow halls. This library-on-wheels is eagerly anticipated by jail inmates, especially those in solitary confinement.

Garvey also helps coordinate regular concerts and performances. Many area musicians have donated concert time to the jail, including Ellsworth city manager Stephen Gunty.

Cranberry Isles mailboat captain Rick Cegelis gives regular acoustic guitar concerts at the jail with his musical partner, Peter Golbitz. Cegelis, who sees the concerts as an extension of his own ministry work, says it's important to help jail residents remember that people on the outside still care about them. "People in jail tend to get labeled as outcasts," Cegelis said.

While Cegelis understands that jail residents are in there for doing something wrong, he also thinks that circumstance and chance is often what separates the incarcerated from the free.

"Every one of us, in some way, has our own weaknesses," he said.

A jail concert isn't a chore for Cegelis. He says a musician couldn't find a more appreciative audience.

"After you do it, you realize you get a lot more than you gave," he said.

Sergeant Flo Pelkey, Hancock County Jail's community connection coordinator, facilitates VHJR work by helping volunteers go through safety orientation. She says she's

been impressed with the work VHJR has done.

"We've seen some nice benefit," Pelkey said.

She says from a practical standpoint, any program that helps jail residents also help correction officers. "Anytime they're occupied doing something is a good thing," she said.

Garvey says there is always need for more volunteers. VHJR could especially use more visitors, library volunteers, and tutors. q

For more information or to volunteer, please call Judy Garvey at 374-2437.

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