

WILSONVILLE SPOKESMAN

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By [Josh Kulla](#)

THE POWER OF FAMILY

Coffee Creek Correctional Facility inmates are thankful that Wilsonville Rotary Club's 'Through A Child's Eyes' allows them to see their children

It may be an event aimed primarily at children.

But Coffee Creek Correctional Facility's groundbreaking program "Through a Child's Eyes," or TACE, as it is commonly referred to, holds just as much meaning for the mothers at Oregon's only women's prison.

"I'm really, really grateful to be able to spend time with my daughter and fiancé," said inmate Michelle VonWald, who is six months into an 18-month sentence for violating probation on an earlier conviction for identity theft.

An eight-year U.S. Army veteran, she developed a serious methamphetamine habit after leaving the military. She said it took less than three years for her to hit rock bottom.

Now, VonWald is using TACE as motivation for completing drug treatment and completing her sentence.

"You're excited to hug her, hold her, see her play," she said. "It's a tremendous relief from the guilt I have from being here."

VonWald was among the several hundred women who were allowed to spend up to two hours with their children and other family members last Saturday and Sunday at the winter TACE event, postponed from its original December date because of the weather.

It is sponsored jointly with the Rotary Club of Wilsonville, whose volunteers troop to Coffee Creek twice yearly for the event. Rotarian John Ludlow traditionally dresses as Santa Claus and hands out gifts to the children of inmates donated by local businesses and members of the Wilsonville community. Other volunteers take family portraits, provide food and otherwise help out.

"It's nice," said Nick Gordon, VonWald's fiancé and father of the couple's daughter, two-year-old Haleigh.



Photo By Josh Kulla

Coffee Creek inmate Michelle VonWald enjoys a laugh last Saturday with daughter Haleigh and fiance Nick Gordon.

Coffee Creek superintendent Nancy Howton said TACE, held in the summer and winter each year since December 2002, is definitely a favorite of inmates. “It’s one of the most impactful for them,” Howton said last Saturday, watching the joyful reunions taking place in the medium security wing’s visitor room. “And it’s not the typical visiting environment.”

Inmate Melissa Smith has taken part in every TACE event held at Coffee Creek since her incarceration five years ago. She is exactly halfway through a 120-month sentence for manslaughter, and said TACE has helped her remain in a good frame of mind despite her surroundings. It has also let her stay in contact with twin 6-year-old sons Evan and Nicholas.

“I love it,” she said. “I think it’s great. There are a lot of things we don’t get to do with our kids, and I think this is good for the kids.”

Smith said that because inmates must remain at a level one, or most trouble-free, behavior rating for at least six months to participate, TACE provides a strong incentive for inmates.

“I’ve been to every single one of these, and it’s a reason to stay out of trouble,” Smith said. “How horrible would it be to have to tell your kids, ‘I got in trouble,’ and not be able to come?”

VonWald agreed. “I would have never thought I’d have an opportunity like this,” she said. “In prison of all places.”

1/14/09

DRCI inmate graduates *Electrical apprenticeship program*

By [Holly M. Gill](#)

It was a proud moment for John Mackinnon. Some 60 of his peers, as well as his father and supervisors were all on hand to congratulate him as he finally achieved a longtime goal.

Last Thursday, Jan. 8, Mackinnon, 37, graduated from an electrical apprenticeship program, after passing his exam with an

outstanding score of 94 percent.

What makes his achievement remarkable is that Mackinnon is an inmate at Deer Ridge Correctional Institution, in the 11th year of a 12-year sentence for kidnapping and assault. His peers are other inmates in the physical plant, and his supervisors are prison officials.

"This is a monumental event," said Kevin Hormann, assistant superintendent of transitional services, as he congratulated Mackinnon. "I couldn't have imagined when we opened in 2007 that we would get this far."

The Department of Corrections program which has allowed Mackinnon and two other inmates to become journeyman electricians



Photo By Holly M. Gill

DRCI inmate John Mackinnon, left, was congratulated last week by his father Taylor Mackinnon, of Cornelius, and dozens of his peers as he became the institution's first inmate to graduate from a new electrical apprenticeship program. Mackinnon helped set up the program.

is a dream come true for Mackinnon, who began laying the groundwork for the program in 2004.

At that time, he was incarcerated at Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla, working in an industry laundry job, earning \$150 a month -- high pay for an inmate, whose pay typically ranges from \$30 to \$80 per month. Laundry wages were higher since the prison took in outside jobs.

"Five years ago, I was just looking for something positive," he said. "I was either going to let this kill me or make something of my life."

For several months, Mackinnon followed around Two Rivers' chief electrician, Jim O'Bannon, a supervisor, pleading with O'Bannon to allow him to work on an electrical licensing program.

"(O'Bannon) finally said, 'You're willing to give up \$150 a month?'" Mackinnon explained. "I wanted to get a trade. I didn't have any skills to use when I get out."

His persistence paid off. "When I got into it, it wasn't an actual program; it was just a hope of getting it started," Mackinnon said. "Me and another inmate read through the OARs (Oregon Administrative Rules) and put together a curriculum that matched the outside programs.

The program was eventually approved by the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries, and Mackinnon took a cut in pay down to \$50 a month as he began his electrical apprenticeship working within the prison system.

Over the next few years, jobs included wiring for a new laundry system, sewing center, mattress factory and woodshop at Two Rivers.

At DRCI, he helped wire the metal and wood shops for the medium-security prison, as well the inmate television project in the minimum-security portion of the prison.

Eric Herrera, who supervises maintenance operations, said the project to run cable and power lines to each inmate bunk was expected to cost about \$140,000. Inmates are allowed to pay to have a small television.

With inmates working on the project, he said, "I think it ran us \$65,000 to \$70,000, and they did it in record time, and every inspection we've had has just been outstanding."

In order to become a journeyman, Mackinnon had to complete 8,000 hours of hands-on work, and 6,000 classroom hours, and learn everything in a 100-page book. "It took about 4 1/2 years," he said, of studying two to three hours a day.

The hands-on work included: 2,000 hours each of work with power distribution, installation of electrical circuits, and manual and automatic controls, and 1,000 hours each of work with motors and troubleshooting electrical problems.

"He's a model inmate," said Herrera, noting that Mackinnon has a clear record for the past nine years. "That's almost unheard of in prison. He's a role model for his peers."

Mackinnon hasn't always been so dedicated. His path took him through some difficult times first. When he was given a mandatory sentence in 1997 for his part in driving around an old girlfriend as she assaulted another female, even his father thought he belonged in prison.

For his first three and one-half years at the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem, Mackinnon said he continued to get in trouble and use methamphetamine -- and other drugs that were smuggled in.

But the dangerous lifestyle got to him. "That's a rough place," he said. "I just woke up one day and I couldn't let it go on any longer."

Mackinnon, who married and divorced early, also had two young sons -- now 18 and 16 -- to think about. "They're really good kids," he said. "At least they've learned that from my mistakes."

He is confident that he has also learned from his mistakes. "I'm done with that whole lifestyle," Mackinnon said. "It's like night and day."

His father, Taylor Mackinnon, who drove to Madras for his son's graduation ceremony, is very proud of his son. "He's so capable. He has a future now. He has something he can rely on for a source of income, and he can take care of himself."

Hiring Former Offenders

Janie Marsh Overcame the Odds

Deborah “Janie” Marsh will be the first to admit that life lessons are not always easily learned. Her descent into drug abuse began when she was just 12 years old and snuck vodka from the liquor cabinet. As a teenager, she got hooked on methamphetamines.



Janie Marsh

It wasn't until she was arrested for the 24th time that Marsh took control of her life. Convictions related to illegal drug use, burglary and identity theft earned the mother of five a three-year sentence, but good behavior and successful completion of the prison's rehabilitation program cut that term in half.

“Freedom started when the handcuffs came on,” says Marsh, who was sick from malnutrition, alcohol and drugs. “I wasn't even on this planet anymore.”

As a requirement of her probation, Marsh needed to find employment within one month — a feat she accomplished with the help of Goodwill Industries of the Columbia Willamette (Portland, OR). Just days after her release, Marsh walked into the Goodwill's Job Connection* center in McMinnville, OR, and met with a career counselor to work on her résumé, which was just the ticket she needed to gain lasting employment.

After working with the Goodwill, Marsh sought a job for the first time without drugs in her system. With the help of the Job Connection, she had an updated résumé in hand when she met with a landscaping company — and was hired the same day.

“She was a fantastic interview,” recalls Joe Evers, owner of Oregon Green Landscape. “Her résumé stood out. She was eager...I wanted to give her a chance.” Evers is grateful for the Job Connection program and the employee Goodwill sent his way. “I have had this business 11 years. Clients keep asking, ‘Who is that girl? She is amazing!’”

Now that she has straightened out her life and refuses to give in to the drugs, her employer says Marsh puts in 110 percent. And, better still, she loves to start each day, rain or shine.

“I am happy, content and excited about life,” says Marsh. ■

** Job Connection is a free service designed to help individuals find a job within 30 days. The center offers one-on-one personalized service to help individuals develop effective résumés, hone interviewing skills and identify employment goals. Job Connection staff also help individuals identify potential employers, locate immediate job openings, fill out job applications and secure local support services.*



Goodwill Industries of the Columbia Willamette