New opportunities for offender education

Huntsville Center Dean Donna Zuniga says partners are making a difference. Page 2
Director’s Column

Working together, we are making a difference

Donna Zuniga, Dean, Lee College Huntsville Center

I am reminded every day of the inherent value of special educational opportunities provided offenders incarcerated within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The availability of technical and vocational programs for qualified offenders represents a unique partnership that started in 1966. Now in its 49th year, I am proud to see the role higher education plays in contributing to the success of our students and its positive impact on their families at home.

This ongoing partnership is based on the dedication and support of Mr. Brad Livingston, TDCJ director, as well as individual unit wardens who strive to create a culture of rehabilitation for offenders.

Under new leadership and oversight of the Rehabilitation and Program Division of TDCJ, led by Director Madeline Ortiz, ex-offenders that completed college courses in prison reimbursed the state $602,358 in loan payments during 2013-2014. Over the past two years, the Huntsville Center has enjoyed a 58 percent increase in student enrollment. More students are taking courses because of increased state funding and a new Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree in Business Administration and Management that features six areas of workforce certification.

This past year, more than 400 students earned certificates in technical areas; 87 students graduated with associate degrees in April.

The Huntsville Center also introduced several new initiatives to support offender education and student persistence. Students may now qualify to join Alpha Beta Gamma, the international business honor society. Alpha Beta Gamma is one of the oldest and most prestigious business honor societies in the world, and recognizes outstanding business students and future leaders in business.

“Do you palooza?” was the question answered by more than 240 offenders at the Ellis Unit last fall. These offenders participated in the first LeeLapalooza event which promoted awareness of college programs and opportunities. LeeLapalooza featured several guest speakers and former students who shared personal experiences during and after their incarceration.

Finally, I would like to recognize the importance of offender families and supporters of correctional education who make the real difference!

During the new Legislative session, we will stress the need to continue building bridges of access to education for offenders, in an effort to “pay it forward,” remembering that an investment in offender education lowers the recidivism rate and helps prepare a stable individual who is able to contribute to society.

Special funding provided by the state legislature determines whether offenders are paroled and released with employable work skills and marketable qualifications, or whether they return to the same bad habits which may eventually lead them back to TDCJ.

I invite you to contact your local state representatives and encourage their support of correctional education, as well as contribute to our Second Change Scholarship, so we can continue rebuilding lives and foster a new spirit of generational success!
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LESSONS FROM THE INSIDE
LARRY DOUGLAS
Larry Douglas held his head high as he walked toward the podium. More than 20 years ago he was another eager face in a graduating class of student offenders, and now he was about to deliver a commencement address. For Douglas, the speech marked the culmination of a personal journey that began in 1982 with a 25-year prison sentence. “At the time I began my incarceration, I was a very troubled young man, caught up in a life of crime, drugs and alcohol,” Douglas reflected. “I was plagued by failed relationships and I had a very narrow perspective on life.”

His prison sentence, he says, would soon change that. “The first day I entered the penitentiary, I was interviewed by the warden. He suggested I make the most of my sentence by getting a college education. Until that moment, the idea of going to school had never crossed my mind. But the more I thought about it, I figured it would be a good way to pass the time, so I signed up for Lee College’s Offender Education Program.”

The Lee College Offender Education Program was established in 1966 in partnership with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, and today provides more than 700 student offenders with educational coursework leading to an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree. An AAS degree is the first two years of a four-year baccalaureate degree.

For Larry, however, it provided much more. Soon after enrolling, he says, he found himself immersed in reading, writing and analysis. He sobered up, and in the process, discovered a passion for counseling. “Lee College showed me there was a bigger world out there, one that didn’t involve crime or drugs,” he said. “More importantly, the program taught me to believe in myself. I learned that if I applied myself, I could change my life.”

To say Larry changed his life is an understatement. After earning associate degree from Lee College, he transferred to Sam Houston State University where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology. Later he attended the University of Houston-Clear Lake and received a master’s degree in Behavioral Science Psychology.

In 1992, he joined the Gateway Foundation as a substance abuse counselor working at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) Jester I Substance Abuse Felony Punishment (SAFP) facility in Richmond. He promoted to assistant director of programs in 2003, and retired in October 2014.

During his 20 years of service with the Foundation, Larry not only provided Houston-area inmates with assistance including substance abuse and career counseling, but also trained other counselors on how to work with offenders with addictions and medical needs. His greatest reward, he says, was getting to share his story with inmates about to leave prison to begin a new life. “So many of these men have great potential. They can make a difference if they will set themselves in the right direction,” he said. “If I can shake the past, they can, too.”
It was the summer of 1966 when Lee College Dean Walter Rundell called me into his office to discuss a new program the college was initiating in the Texas Department of Corrections (TDC). He then asked me if I would like to teach an American history class there in the fall.

I was, needless to say, stunned. Teach history in a prison! To convicts I was a young teacher with only two year’s tenure at Lee College and still on probation. I knew what Dean Rundell was saying: I was going to teach in the prison in the fall.

When I told my wife she was not particularly happy. She was convinced I would be murdered and reminded me that I was responsible for two small children. My father, an executive with a natural gas transmission company, was even less impressed. “Boy,” he said, “I did not help you go to college so you could teach criminals.”

That fall, five of us drove to Huntsville on a Saturday. Dale Adams, who taught English, would teach at Goree, at that time the women’s unit. I, along with Don Perry, whose discipline was math, was assigned to Ferguson, the unit for young first offenders. Phil Dignam, English, and math teacher Bob Seale would teach at Ellis, a unit for hard-core recidivists. However, before we were to be dropped off at our respective units, we were to go to the Walls Unit in Huntsville where we were to meet with the legendary director of the Texas Department of Corrections, Dr. George Beto, as well as Alonzo Langley, TDC Director of Educational Services, and the warden.

To say the least, the beginning was not particularly auspicious. Bob Seale was driving, and in Huntsville he accidentally made a wrong turn onto a one-way street. The police officer who wrote Seale a ticket was not impressed with the story of our mission and our plea that we were unfamiliar with Huntsville. Dr. Beto seemed mildly amused when we told him about the incident. There is a wonderful photo of the five of us in the Warden’s office at the Walls, with the warden, Dr. Beto, and Alonzo Langley. I often joke that we look like a group of Baptist preachers: short haircuts, no facial hair (I now sport a beard), dark suits, and narrow black ties.

After a short visit with Dr. Beto, the warden, and Langley, we left for our respective assignments. We dropped Adams off at Goree. Seale then took Perry and me to Ferguson as he and Dignam proceeded to Ellis. Entering the prison, Perry and I were ushered into the warden’s office for a brief orientation. An inmate then escorted us to the education wing where we met with the unit’s director of educational and recreational services. Following another brief meeting I was taken to my classroom, introduced and then left alone with some 24 young men in prison white.

As I somewhat nervously explained the course, I have no doubt that my voice cracked. Little did I realize that I was beginning 20 years of the most rewarding and exciting experiences of my teaching career.

Over the next two decades I drove once, sometimes twice, a week to the Huntsville area prisons: Ferguson, the Walls, Ellis I, Eastham (the unit that Newsweek magazine in an October 6, 1986, cover story referred to as “America’s toughest prison”), as well as south to Sugarland. I not only taught American history, but Texas history, world history, geography, and on one occasion marriage and the family, a sociology course. The program rapidly expanded and shortly over 30 Lee College teachers were making the drive to units in the Huntsville area or to Sugarland.

From the beginning, we insisted that our inmate students meet the same standards as our free world students. Our students were an eclectic group and consisted of every felon imaginable. We treated them with the same respect as we treated our students on campus, and expected to be treated the same as well. We insisted that there be no guards in the classroom as we feared that might inhibit discussion. In my 20-year tenure in the prisons, I can recall only two, may three, minor discipline incidences where I asked a couple of students to quit talking or leave the classroom.

I became acquainted with some of the most interesting and fascinating individuals I have ever had he pleasure of knowing. There was Sonny Evans, the head Building Tender at Eastham. Building Tenders were inmates who, in reality, ran the interior of the prisons until the practice was overturned by the lawsuit of Ruiz v. Estelle. I would not call Sonny by name except that he is no longer with us; he died of a stroke while still in prison. Sonny either took or audited...
every course I taught. He was a great big ugly dude who always sat at the front of the class. I truly believe that after a few semesters he could have taught American history as well as I.

After a few years, we began to witness the positive fruits of our labors: inmates who received their associate degrees and, when released, became productive citizens, often obtaining a bachelor’s and on occasion advanced graduate degrees.

I recall one young man, who became my friend, who had an unenviable record of armed robbery convictions. Somehow he made parole, finished his degree at Lee College, transferred to a university and earned a master’s degree.

Married with two now-grown children, he is currently an executive with a well-known Texas company. He is only one example of a multitude of similar success stories.

When the Carrasco hostage situation erupted at the Walls Unit in the summer of 1974, I was—and if this is not ironic I don’t understand the meaning of the word—sequestered as a juror in the only criminal trial I have ever served. I heard rumors of the incident, and knowing that we had instructors teaching there that summer, I convinced the judge to let me call home to see if any of our people were involved. I was told that Lee College teachers were not among the hostages and that two of my former inmate students had called my house to see if I was all right!

In the meantime, I suggested to my father that he accompany me to visit one of my American history classes at Eastham. Dad, still skeptical of my prison assignment, somewhat reluctantly agreed. This was in the summer; the classes were four hours long and there was no air conditioning. From the start my dad was impressed with the respectful demeanor of my inmate students and their apparent enthusiasm and desire to learn under less than ideal circumstances. During the breaks, he visited with some of the students, and by the time we left the unit late that afternoon, he was a convert. Dad was active in the Baytown Chamber of Commerce and subsequently gave a speech to the Chamber endorsing the importance of the college experience in a prison and its role in reducing recidivism.

And that is the point. We are aware that participation in the college program has a profound impact on reducing recidivism and have the statistics to support the claim. We trust that others will take heed and continue to support college behind the razor wire.
INSIDE THE WALLS
THANKS TO TWO STATE SENATORS, AN INNOVATIVE NEW PROGRAM IS BRINGING POSITIVE CHANGE TO TEXAS PRISONS

One of the newest efforts at correctional education in Texas draws its inspiration from an unlikely source: the infamous Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola.

For 15 years, that prison has been home to an innovative program that educates offenders as ministers through a Bachelor of Biblical Studies program administered by New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. The program has been credited with a major cultural change within the maximum security prison.

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In 2011, the first 40 Texas offenders entered a similar program housed at the maximum security Darrington unit in Rosharon, southwest of Houston. The Texas program is administered by Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, a Fort Worth-based institution with a Houston campus. It receives no public funds for its operation, but is supported by private donations.

Dr. Ben Phillips is director of the program. His assistant, Lee College alumnus Brandon Warren, is the only other full-time staff member. Other faculty, Phillips said, are shared with the Houston campus or employed part-time.

Phillips said the program differs from other education programs in a significant way beyond its religious connections and private funding: It is geared toward educating long-term offenders rather than those about to be released.

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Where most offender education programs require participants to be nearing release, applicants to the BBS
program have to have at least 10 years remaining on their sentence. Applicants can be from any unit in the prison system (any male unit, since Darrington is a male prison), and are transferred to Darrington if accepted.

Phillips said the plan is to return them to other units after graduation, to serve as mentors to other offenders.

Even early in the program, he sees the results beginning. “One of the things we see happening is that they are looking for ways to be in ministry to the guys around them,” he said. One group of students has started a Bible study that has already reached over 200 offenders.

“We’ve seen guys who have started trying to take responsibility for their culture,” he said. He described the prison culture as “corrosive,” taking a toll on both offenders and staff.

While Phillips works for a Christian seminary and holds a distinctly religious perspective, he understands the state will judge the program on purely secular standards. The mission of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, he said, is not just to keep people safe by keeping criminals segregated from the rest of society, but also to rehabilitate.

“This kind of thing fits their institutional mission if moral rehabilitation is accomplished,” he said.

If Southwestern’s program has results similar to what Louisiana has seen at Angola, Phillips said the benefits will be measurable—with payoffs ranging from reduced property damage to the prison itself to reduced costs from a safer operating environment—with corresponding savings in medical care for injured inmates and staff.

If the program and its graduates can help reduce the corrosiveness of the prison environment, he added, TDCJ may further benefit from reduced employee turnover.

For an offender to enroll in the BBS program, he must have a GED and have academic test results proving he can work at a level of at least an eleventh grade education. He must also have a good disciplinary record, and recommendations from prison staff confirming a willingness to be of service to other prisoners.

Phillips said the school asks the prison system not to pass on information related to the applicants’ race or religion until after a student is accepted. Since the program has a Christian focus, Phillips said, most applicants are Christian. However, even in the first two classes accepted (about 80 people), the students already include students who are Muslim and Jewish, as well as “some [religions] I’ve never heard of,” he said.

As with other programs, a major part of the BBS program is simply introducing offenders to a new way of looking at life. “A significant and easily overlooked part of any educational program within the prison,” Phillips said, is that it is “designed to connect people to reality.”

“It’s about the truth.”
For most released offenders, returning to prison represents failure. For Brandon Warren, it represents success.

Warren, an alumnus of the Lee College Offender Education Program, has returned to prison not as an inmate, but as a central player in a new program that has high ambitions for turning lives around through faith-based higher education. He serves as administrative assistant for the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Biblical Studies Program at the Darrington prison unit in Rosharon, southwest of Houston.

Like most people in the system, Warren entered prison without a high school diploma. After attaining his GED from the Windham School
District, he enrolled in the Lee College program to work toward an Associate of Arts in Humanities degree at the Hightower prison unit. (That degree program has since been eliminated due to budget cuts.)

“I actually think I got 128 hours,” he said—nearly double the requirement for an associate degree. “But because of my time—I only had an eight-year sentence and was up for parole in the fourth year—I wasn’t going to be eligible for a bachelor’s program, so I just stayed there and took everything. I took air conditioning and refrigeration, construction carpentry, the horticulture class; I was only three classes shy of getting the Associate of Arts in business administration. I got as much as I could while I was there.”

While he accomplished a lot in a short time, Warren acknowledged he didn’t take advantage of the educational offerings right away. “That was my third time being incarcerated,” he said. “I did 13 months in juvenile, six months in state jail, and then I got that eight-year sentence.

“I was 19, and I just decided I didn’t want to be involved in gangs anymore, or that lifestyle. I wanted to be an educated man.

“The school was there and readily available. It was a blessing from God that I landed there as opposed to a unit where college courses were not offered.”

Despite a rough start, Warren took to education. After getting out of prison, he pursued and earned a Bachelor of Biblical Counseling degree from the College of Biblical Studies in Houston. After that, he enrolled in the Master of Divinity program with Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary at the Houston campus of the Fort Worth-based institution.

He credits the prison education program for his shift in direction. “It changed my world view,” he said. “It changed the way I understood the world and my role—my place—in it.”

There was a practical effect, he said, since being in class all the time insulated him from the violence of the day room, but that was not the real impact. “The intellectual effect was that I began to see my role in the world completely differently.

“When I started, my personal goal was to become an ‘expert’ in all of the fields of psychology, sociology and philosophy; that’s how naïve I was. I thought such a thing was possible for a human being.”

“When I started school I quickly saw that I didn’t really know anything. That’s why I got the degree in humanities. I saw that ideas were very similar in different religions, and philosophy and psychology are talking about issues of free will and determinism.”

That radical change in perspective was something Warren saw in other students as well.

“There were students who were in the college, but were still involved in gangs. These began to see their involvement differently. They began having condescending attitudes to the thought patterns of their friends and the reasons for doing the kind of things they did.”

At the time, there were also classes in criminology and juvenile delinquency. “They began thinking about what they were involved in completely differently,” he said.

He said he sees the same transformation in the students in the Biblical Studies program. “It expands people’s thought processes, which can be quite humbling. Humility begins to change people’s relationships.”

Warren has, in a sense, been part of the prison Biblical Studies program since before there was a program. When he started at Southwestern, he said, he told administrators his desire was to someday return to prison to teach what he was learning in his theological studies.

Three months later, he said, he received an email from the dean telling him that the seminary was exploring the feasibility of starting a program within the prison system. In 2011, as the program started, Warren was on board—working to see that others have the same life-changing experience he did.

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PHOTOS:
Left: Darrington Unit Class of 2015. Brandon Warren shown front row left with the students of the Darrington Unit Undergraduate Program from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Above: Brandon and colleagues at a recent conference.
Dr. Michael Gary got into prison education almost by accident, but 30 years into it, he’s still enthusiastic.

Gary actually retired three years ago when Lee College was forced by budget cuts to eliminate most of its full-time faculty teaching academic courses. He immediately took a part-time job teaching the same courses he had before.

In 1982, Gary was teaching at Sam Houston State University while completing his PhD work. To help make ends meet, he took a part-time job teaching science for Lee College inside the prison. “Once I got in the system and discovered what kind of students I had, it became long-term at that point.”

Not long after starting to teach, Gary said, he realized that prisoners weren’t what he had seen in the movies. “These folks are just ordinary people—there, but for the grace of God, go I.”

“Most of them don’t have a high school education when they get into prison,” he explained. “They get their GED while they’re there, and then those that are enterprising decide to go to college.”
One success story Gary tells is of a former offender who now holds a responsible management job in a private sector near where he served time. “He came into prison with a third-grade education, got his GED, and started going to Lee College. He got his associate degree, enrolled at Sam Houston State and got his bachelor’s degree, then transferred to the Ramsey unit where he got most of his master’s degree before he was released.”

Comparing his time teaching in prison to his time teaching outside, Gary said, “I like it better than teaching in the free world. When my guys come to class, they sit there. They don’t eat lunch and throw things on the floor or cause a disruption. They generally don’t chit-chat among the class.”

“They’ll do what you ask them to do,” he said, even under harsh prison conditions. Since Texas prisons are not air conditioned, cell temperatures can easily remain over 100 degrees even at night in the summer. Crowding is a fact of life, and privacy is nonexistent. Even so, “if I ask them to read five chapters, they read five chapters. If I ask them to write a long essay exam, they write a long essay exam,” he said. “You’ve got to admire them for giving it a shot. They work hard.”

“Education in prison works,” Gary said. “If you get your associate degree, the recidivism rate’s about 10 percent—90 percent stay out, 10 percent come back. With no higher education, the recidivism rate’s about 60 percent—you stand a better than 50-50 chance of coming back to prison.”

The prisoners who make the effort to take classes are those who are ripe for change. “They want to do better—that’s why they’re in our classes. They’re tired of the life that they’ve led—they want to be productive citizens.”

For those offenders who persevere to get an associate degree, Gary sees graduation day as a turning point in their life—for many, the turning point that will mean they won’t be returning to prison.

“When graduation comes, they go in there with a black cap and gown on,” he said. For people forced to wear all white all the time, the color change is a powerful sign that they are, for this day, “no longer inmates, or convicts, or offenders or whatever the current buzzword is—they’re graduates. They look like a graduate.”

Gary said he usually begins his classes reminding students that what got them where they are is a history of failure. “They failed to complete high school; they failed to have good relationships with their teachers, their peers and whatever else; they failed to obey the laws of the state of Texas. They got caught and didn’t have enough money for a high-powered lawyer to get them off so here they sit. So, your deck’s already stacked against you. You have that attitude, ‘I’m going to fail,’ so it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

“But when they go to college—when they take that first college class and pass — that’s a success,” he said. “So they take another, and another, and they pass those, too. Sometimes they don’t pass, but they’re persistent and they take it again.”

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“Every class that they take is a
A Matter of Degrees

Lee College programs inside the walls give students real-world skills

By Mark Fleming

The Lee College Huntsville Center offers eleven technical programs, each designed to help students gain skills and prepare them to take — and pass — an appropriate certification test. For example, welding students are prepared for nationally recognized skill certifications in industrial welding skills, truck driving students are encouraged to take a commercial driving test. Certificates help students get valued jobs in the real world.

In some programs, students have the opportunity to take classes such as Technical Math and Technical Writing and earn an associate degree.

The associate degree adds a well-rounded state-mandated curriculum to vocational skills classes and provides students the same degree they would attain in any other two-year college in Texas.

As evidenced by a recent Recidivism Study, academic programs which reflected the greatest impact on recidivism, such as the AA and AS degrees, were the very ones eliminated during the 82nd Legislative Session.

An Associate of Applied Science degree requires at least 19 hours of general education, including English, social science, math or science, computer literacy, speaking and humanities courses.

An Associate of Arts or Associate of Science degree, which requires at least 44 hours of general education, requires more course work in the same areas.

Under any of the programs, the student must complete a total of 60 credit hours to graduate.

How do these programs help students? Here’s a “personal look” at several of these popular programs.

Air Conditioning Program is a Cool Success

In most ways, Charles Elliott is like many other owners of small air conditioning companies. He opened up shop about a year ago after working several years for a larger company. He depends largely on a few major clients—in his case, a large Humble-area church and a property management company with 300 or so properties.

Like hundreds of other people in similar positions, he employs people, buys supplies, pays taxes, and keeps the cool air flowing that Houston depends upon.
What’s different is that he has accomplished this in just over five years since he’s been out of prison — and he credits a Lee College program with making the difference.

Elliott went to prison at the age of 18. Like most fellow offenders, he did not have a high school diploma, and no obvious indication that he wouldn’t follow the all-too-common cycle of repeated incarceration known cynically as “serving life on the installment plan.”

However, after making use of the opportunity offered by Windham School District to get a GED, Elliott enrolled in Lee’s air conditioning and refrigeration program.

“If I hadn’t had classes in prison,” he said, “I don’t know what I’d do, because I don’t know how to do anything else. If I didn’t have an actual skill that I could make a good living with, I can’t imagine where I’d be today.”

Elliott was released from prison before he could complete his Associate of Applied Sciences degree, but said he took all the classes he could in the time he had.

Even before his release, though, the program offered benefits.

“Obviously you’re learning, but on top of that you get out of the chaos for two hours here and there.” The time spent in class, he said, “is the closest to reality that you get.”

What really paid off for Elliott, though, were the contacts he made through the Lee classes. “I would say that the network helped me every bit as much as the actual skills I learned.”

When he was first released, Elliott was only able to get low-paying jobs, first as a telemarketer, then as a cafeteria worker.

His break came when another former offender, Chris Avirett, invited him to move from San Antonio to Houston to work for Avirett’s air conditioning company.

Avirett, like Elliott, entered the Texas Department of Criminal Justice at age 18. It was his first time in prison, he said, but he already had a long list of felony convictions behind him.

Sentenced to 15 years, he served eight, and used that time to accumulate as much education as he could.

“It wasn’t that I was stupid,” he said, “but that I had no marketable skills. That’s what got me into trouble. So, when I was sentenced, I was determined to become a better and more productive member of society when released.

“Fortunately,” he continued, “we had the Lee College program. It provided an avenue for me to better myself and ultimately reach my goal.”

Avirett earned an Associate of Applied Science degree in Air Conditioning and Refrigeration, and also an Associate of Science in Business Administration.

“For somebody that’s incarcerated, it’s nice to be treated like a human being and respected on the level of a student.” Like Elliott, Avirett said the benefits of being in college started right away, not just in later employment.

“It completely revolutionized my world view,” he said. “Government class provided me insight into the benefits of authority, which I honestly never respected. Obviously.”

“I enrolled in academic classes such
as English literature and government to develop a world view more in tune with the rest of society."

"My eyes were opened to the way the world worked for most people," Avirett said.

After his release in 2001, Avirett said he was able to get a job within a month due to the education and degrees he had attained.

In 2003 he was able to get his state license and start his own air conditioning business, which grew to nearly $2 million in sales. By 2010, he employed about 20 people. Avirett sold the air conditioning business in early 2012. He now works as an air conditioning design consultant and is pursuing other business interests.

Over the years, Avirett has made a point of hiring other ex-offenders through his Lee College contacts. "The availability of a college program to re-shape my mind and radically alter my world view really made a profound difference in my life," he acknowledges now.

"The instructors at Lee College are absolutely phenomenal. They give a lot to the program and care about what they are doing. They are passionate and believe they are creating positive change. They certainly did with me."

**Truck Driving Provides Keys to a New Life**

For students in Lee College’s truck driving program, the road to a new life can be seen from the cab of an 18-wheeler.

About three dozen students enroll in each of two sessions annually to learn how to drive the big trucks—giving them the keys to a well-paying job in an industry that needs more drivers all the time.

Jim Harrell and Troy Allen teach the classes, which can earn students a badge of honor they are quick to show off proudly — a commercial driver’s license.

"This is an opportunity to earn a good, comfortable living," said offender student Anthony Ray. "You can actually see yourself getting out and going somewhere."

Allen said the course can be a challenge. It is not unusual, he said, to get students who have never driven a car. Often, he said, students show plenty of confidence while in the early, classroom portion of the course, but not as much when they actually get behind the wheel.

Part of the driving is done inside the prison yard, with students practicing tight turns, backing up to a loading dock and even parallel parking. For tight turns, they have to drive the truck through a series of cones, coming within 18 inches of the cones without hitting them.

Harrell said the course provides benefits for both the inmates and for the prison system even before release, as many of the successful graduates of the course are assigned to drive prison vehicles — garbage trucks, buses and delivery trucks — saving the state the cost of hiring drivers.

Another student, Phillip Wells, said he has taken other courses from Lee College while inside. "Lee College has been very instrumental in my rehabilitation," he said. "Truck driving will probably be the trade I use to get a job when I get out. I'm very grateful to Lee College."

**Welding Ignites a Spark with Students**

Welding offers great work potential for former offenders, especially for those willing to relocate.

Teaching welding in the prison environment, though, offers its own set of challenges. Welding, after all, is all about making and breaking the bonds that hold metal objects together—and
requires using the same tools that can easily cut through the bars and fences designed to keep offenders inside the prison.

Wayne Knuppel has been up to the challenge for more than 22 years, shepherding his students through a course of study that garners nationally recognized welding certifications while maintaining the exacting security requirements of his special classroom environment.

In all his years with the program, Wayne has never had a student try to use metalworking tools to get out other than by the approved method of parole followed by employment.

Many of them have made it out by that route. Knuppel keeps a notebook of contacts he has had with former students who are working across the country and using the skills they gained in the Lee College program.

"We are able to push them hard," he said. "They get out and do well."

It's not unusual, he said, for a student with a welding certification to leave prison and start working at $20 an hour. A number land jobs, he acknowledges, that pay better than his does.

His students understand, however, that competition is fierce, and their record will be a big strike against them. One student, Amos Fox, said, "If you've got a group to choose from, offenders are going to be the last ones you look at."

Fox was older when he went to prison, and said he always took a job for granted. He knows it won't be easy when he returns to the free world.

Like most people, he admits he never gave much thought to what happened in prisons. "You want them to work, but don't want to think about them," he said.

Classmate Ricky Thomas is also aware of the competition he'll face in the job market.

"This program gives me a step above the rest when I get back into society."

For Jason Wendt, welding is a new career direction — one he needs since his criminal record will prevent a return to his old job.

"I'm trying to diversify myself," he said, noting there are only a certain number of jobs open to people with felony convictions.

Another student, Jeffrey Cole, was previously a firefighter, and will no longer be able to qualify for that position.

"I had no idea that there were college programs inside the penitentiary," he said he is grateful to Lee College for being there for him.

Amos Fox added that the education goes beyond just metal-working skills.

"He [Knuppel] not only teaches us the technical skills, but also how to keep a job in general," he said. "Every instructor I've had emphasizes the relation of the knowledge to the work you're going to be doing out there."

"I'm thankful this program exists."
Call him the preacher of Huntsville prisons. When longtime instructor Paul Allen takes the floor to teach a business course inside the walls, it’s likely he will open class with a sermon on personal responsibility. Before opening the textbook, he reminds his students they have every incentive to succeed in college.

“They consider me more than an instructor,” he says in his all-business tone. “I care that these men succeed, and they know it.”

He calls prison education a “calling,” an inner knowing that he is where he is supposed to be, where he was meant to be, doing what he is best fitted to do. Students recognize his fire and sincerity, and fill his classes to capacity semester after semester, year after year.

Paul Allen, instructor, philosopher, preacher, has preached encouragement and life principles to inmates for roughly 30 years, and never tires.

“I learned after a few years that business education is just the background for what I do,” he acknowledges. “My real job is to help these men overcome their rough backgrounds, change directions, and become better because of it.”

It’s done through a stick-to-them, tough love approach and sincerity that has earned Paul and his colleagues “street cred” on the units where Lee College holds academic and technical programs.

“Inmates are people like the rest of us,” Paul says. “Many are victims, perhaps of domestic abuse, rejection or addiction. But when you speak to them every day and look them in the eyes, you begin to see the side no one else sees. You
care about them. Some of these guys were destined to be locked up, but that doesn’t mean their life is over; it means they have to find a new path and move on.”

Education helps open the door to that new path.

“Prison can be a place of spiritual awakening,” says the college administrator. “Here, they ask ‘why?’ and ‘what if?’ I tell them we don’t ask ‘what if?’ here, or ‘Why am I here?’ or ‘Why am I locked up?’ We ask, ‘What now?’ ” “What’s next?”

Paul tells them, in no uncertain terms, to live in the “right now,” and “embrace what you have, not what you want.

“I tell them to put away the things they can’t control. I ask them, ‘What are you doing right now? Can you control where you are? Do you have a great opportunity to get an education, or what?’”

“If a student doesn’t have an answer to ‘what now?’ he won’t have an answer to ‘what’s next?’” the seasoned professional explains. “Without that, he will be going around in circles. Without a ‘what next?’ he’ll be back at ‘what now?’ time after time.”

Paul is persistent, tenacious, sometimes stern, and always direct. “Every one of our students is going to get out of prison someday,” he says. “I ask them, ‘Are you going to stay out?’ That’s what I’m here for. I promise them that if they will do everything we expect them to do in their college coursework, not only will they get out, and perhaps get out sooner, but they will have skills and a mindset that can keep them out.

“I teach them to be accountable to themselves, to their families and those who depend on them, and to Lee College.”

His point is well taken, too. Studies affirm that an offender released from prison with a college education is seven times less likely to return.

Paul isn’t the only instructor that believes firmly in his mission as an educator. He quickly checks off a series of names of soulmates that share the same passion.

“We have great instructors here who have made this profession a long-term career. Each of these instructors does more than teach a class; they help inspire these individuals to achieve what they once thought was impossible. An inmate taking several classes can get the best from each of them. They tell me, ‘I’m getting something here you can’t get anywhere else.’

Paul admits that, though he has never “done time,” he understands the men in his classroom.

“If ever there was an ‘inmate whisperer,’’ he confides, “I’m that guy. When I was young, I had a speech impediment and an attention disorder. I had no self-confidence. When I was in school, the teacher would call on me and I’d rarely have the right answer.

“So I can sense when an inmate is having a bad day, or lacks direction. I ask, ‘what’s going on?’ I tell him he can be whatever he wants to be, then I ask, ‘When did you give up on yourself? When did you quit?’ I get him back on track.”

It’s more than grades because there’s more at stake than grades, Paul points out. Serious issues are in play, and to succeed in prison and beyond, an inmate has to find answers to difficult questions.

“We light a fire beneath these guys,” Paul says. “I remind them that no one cares more about their education than they do.”

Amazingly, his message resonates. Offenders seek him out when they need help with their coursework. And they tell their friends.

“I ask them, ‘What does it mean to become an educated man? Does it take a college degree?’ I tell them I’m not going to tell them to read the textbook or prepare for the next quiz — they have greater reasons than that to work hard. And they do.

“I want to give these men the type of education they deserve, the kind of education they missed out on,” the instructor concludes. “So many that get out come back to tell me, ‘I wouldn’t be where I am today if it had not been for Lee College.’ That’s our story. That’s why I’m here.’”
You might say James (Scooter) Langley, Jr., grew into his job naturally. His father taught horticulture for Lee College in the prison system for 31 years. When Dad retired, Scooter applied and has been teaching in the same position for the past five years.

They are two peas in a pod in other ways, too. Both are proud Bearkats, graduates of the horticulture program at Sam Houston State University. Both live in the same town and attend the same church.

And both consider it a calling to teach their profession to offenders inside the O.B. Ellis Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Their desire to make a difference has helped make the Lee College Horticulture program perhaps the best of its kind in the nation since 1978.

“A lot has changed since then,” father J.T. recalls.

“In those days, you had to be approved by the warden as well as by Lee College. The warden thought my hair was too long. While he and the dean talked, I was led back to a building where one of the inmate barbers cut my hair. My first experience in the unit was trusting my hair to an inmate barber.”

Teaching conditions were stressful, too.

“I walked into the prison on Feb. 16, 1978, my first day to be in class,” J.T. says. “There were 15 students and one textbook. The textbook was published in 1951. There was no course outline, syllabi or teaching instructions. I saw immediately that we had to restructure the program.”

He started the process of developing curriculum and outlines, moving the program into the next generation. Before long, every student had an up-to-date textbook.

From that day forward, the program has steadily improved. Today, son Scooter has modern equipment and software for his courses, including a full computer lab. Lee College offers a full-blown, 62-credit hour program that culminates into an Associate of Applied Science degree in Horticulture.

Thanks to Lee College and J.T., the Horticulture program now teams up with Texas A&M to offer advanced students the Texas A&M Master Gardener Certification Exam. Students who pass this comprehensive exam are awarded the prestigious Horticulture Technician Certificate that greatly enhances job prospects and employability.

“What we teach inside the walls is the same we would teach in the free world,” Scooter says. “Perhaps the only difference is that offenders can’t take
field trips or participate in community projects that would garner additional experience."

Instead, students cultivate small plots of ground and grow their own plants. They landscape the grounds and the lawns of the officers’ section, and operate a “wardens garden” that supplies vegetables and herbs for the dining hall. Lee College supplies herbs and seeds that Scooter distributes to other units. Herbs and vegetables grown by offenders for use in the prison system save the state more than $80,000 each year. They send plants to the Wyndham School System, too, adding to the savings.

Father and son both admit the work has become “personal.”

“We spend so much time here,” J.T. says. “We come early in the morning and stay the day. When you do that, you get to know your students.”

“We are a mentor and a counselor to these guys,” Scooter adds. “We can’t get into their personal lives, but we can work with them to help them achieve their educational goals.”

His dad agrees. “Graduation is a highlight for me,” he said. “I love to watch a hundred or 150 students receive their degree every year. It’s great to see their progress and completion. After you’ve been here awhile, you see the connection. You see the change in their lives, the energy that builds in them to stay out of prison.

“Over the past decade, we’ve had perhaps 200 students complete the Texas A&M Certification program,” he says. “Of these, only two have returned to prison. That’s the best part of all, far better than what they learn in class.”

Scooter recalls the day he saw one of his students “go home.”

“I actually got to walk him to the back gate and say goodbye. Just to see this grown man start to cry and tell me what I’ve done to help change his life, how he got a new beginning and a skill from his classes, and how much he appreciates all Lee College has done—was more reward than I can describe.”

Scooter has no intention of leaving anytime soon.

“Once you see the difference you make, you’re hooked,” he says. While Lee College is “here to stay” in Texas offender education, both father and son know the future will have its rocky moments.

“I’m troubled when politicians make cuts without understanding the benefits of the program,” J.T. confesses. “I understand the need to make budgetary cuts, but when you look at the big picture, it’s easy to see how these programs give offenders hope and purpose and a skill, which reduces recidivism and produces productive citizens. The return is incredible.”

The program his dad nurtured for more than three decades is blossoming under Scooter’s leadership. Lee College is adding classes and expanding to a 12-month program. Students will learn more material that way, he says.

“We have made great strides from the day Dad began teaching,” Scooter acknowledges. “We don’t water anything down. There are four or five horticulture programs taught in Texas prisons now. I’d put this program up against any of them. Because of our association with Texas A&M, I think we have the best inside-the-walls program in the nation.”
I was a bad, angry kid my whole life.
I was just a little girl when my mom divorced my daddy,
and I was angered and hurt by her decision. I was
“Daddy’s little girl,” and I couldn’t imagine life without
him.

Mom was strict and had rules. Daddy was easygoing. As a
child I thought Mom didn’t love me as much as him because
she was strict, but I later realized she simply cared about my
well-being.

At the age of 10, the babysitter’s son molested me. The
pain and anger I already felt became an insurmountable rage
because I became so fearful, too. I rebelled and mixed up with
the wrong crowd. It started with vodka and orange juice at
13. At 14, it was cigarettes. By 15, I had run away from home
and was trying all kinds of drugs — white crosses, pink hearts,
357s, and cocaine. I tried crystal meth at 17. When I used
intravenously, the high took all my pain and fears away.

After I got pregnant at 18, Mom helped me stop the drugs
cold turkey. After my daughter was born, I married a man
who became violent. I got pregnant again and divorced my
husband in 1990. I had my third daughter soon after.

Mom ended up raising all three daughters.

I worked construction for a while and drew a nice check, but
I stayed off the drugs because the company tested employees.
I fell in love and married again, realizing too late that my new
husband was also abusive. He got drunk one night and held a
gun to my head. I left him.

Depression over my divorce led me back to hard drugs, and
addiction took hold. From 1997 to 2006, I was in and out of
hotel rooms, living with friends and abusive boyfriends. I used
to dig needles out of hotel room walls, bleach them, and reuse
them, not knowing who had used them before.

By age 30, I was homeless with no food, no blanket, nothing
but the clothes on my back. One day I walked out of a motel
in Channelview and sat on the side of Interstate 10. I looked at
the tracks on my arms and thought, “What am I doing? This is
I got clean for a year and a half until Hurricane Rita hit in 2005. My hours at work were cut, but I still had bills. I knew I could make quick cash selling drugs, and unfortunately, I relapsed. One night, I was driving to Houston with a man I was seeing, and he decided to rob a liquor store. He got two hundred dollars and a forty-year sentence. I got eight years.

I had six previous sentences in county jail, but that was nothing compared to three years in the state penitentiary. It's funny, but I praise God now for that two hundred bucks. That arrest ended my relapse and changed my life. Prison made me sit still. My family didn't send money or mail for a long time, and they didn't visit often. I was lonely and my only friend was God. I started reading the Bible, and soon, I'd completed 65 prison Bible studies. As I studied, I realized real love wasn't what I found on the streets. Love is tough. It's about sacrifice.

I took cognitive courses offered through the Windham School District. My teacher, Ms. Bohne, said, “If you change your thinking, you'll change your behavior. If you change your behavior, you'll change your destiny.” Those Huntsville Center professors believed in me, and still do.

It was Ms. Bohne who told me I had blamed my mother for everything bad in my life. She said, “You’re projecting everything that goes wrong onto her. It isn’t her fault. You have choices, Monica. You can choose to not get angry.”

For the first time, I realized “choosing” meant I could change. I wrote out a five-year goal which included an associate degree and a BA. I decided, that day, to turn my life around.

When I studied, my thinking changed. When I got out, I was three years clean and sober, and I knew I could stay that way. My only relapse was a can of Skoal my first day out.

At first, my education was so bad that I couldn’t pass the D-level Entrance Admission test, where they measure academic levels in Math, English, Science, and Social Studies. After studying for eight long months, I took it again with shaky hands after four hours of cutting weeds with a garden hoe. I prayed “God, you know what I’ve studied; please help me to recall what I’ve learned and help me do well on this test.”

I really wanted to start college classes at the unit, and I needed a high score to take the THEA entrance exam. I passed the A-level EA with a 12.0 composite across the board.

My self-respect returned as I became a serious student, but I didn’t notice it until other people started to respect me. After two years, I made the Phi Theta Kappa [Honor Society], and Mom showed up at the induction. It was the first time she’d told me “I’m proud of you” in years.

Prison was a dark place. I saw things I’ll never see again, but I was still afraid to leave when I got my walking papers. They walked me out of the gate on November 10, 2008, and I said, “I don’t want to go home.” I thought, “I’ll just stay here, never use drugs again, never get beaten by a man again. All I have to do is cut the grass every day.” I was afraid I didn’t have what it took to live on the outside. That’s why the first thing I did — I mean, the first moment I could — was get into Lee College.

My previous choices still make life hard. My felony record restricts me because employers tend to see that background check instead of who I am now. I majored in drug and alcohol counseling because it gave me the knowledge and wisdom needed to maintain my sobriety. I graduated May 2012 with my AAS in Drug and Alcohol Counseling with a 3.9 GPA, Summa Cum Laude. Now I am studying process technology.

Already I use my education for my 4- and 7-year-old stepsons. I teach them to deal with things in ways that maintain the peace and serenity in our home. My grown daughters acknowledge me as their mom, and I have a grandson.

When I look back, I really wouldn’t change a thing. It sounds crazy, but I wouldn’t know compassion if I’d never experienced pain. I wouldn’t know real love if I hadn’t experienced the hate and competition on the streets. I’ve gone from victim to victorious warrior. I am happily employed, and now, happily married.

I once lost everything, but I regained the things that really matter, things I get from faith in God — dignity and self respect. My family loves me. I’m a mother, grandmother, wife, a better daughter and sister, and a respected citizen.

God says I’m a beautiful piece of work, and I believe it.
A Tale as ‘Old as Thyme’

Working with herbs can be “liberating”

By Adriana Rizo
Mountain View Unit, Gatesville, Texas

My name is Adriana Rizo. I am a 34-year-old Mexican-American serving 50 aggravated years. I have been incarcerated for 14.5 years at the Mountain View Unit in Gatesville, Texas, and expect to see parole in 10 years. I’m a theory-x, type-a personality. I’m a self-motivated go-getting leader by nature.

During my stay here at the Mountain View hotel and resort, I have been employed in mostly white collar, air-conditioned, sit-down jobs. However, I have worked on and off in the field (the hoe squad, which is considered the lowest of jobs on the corporate ladder) throughout my career here.

For the past five years, I have been employed as a horticulture specialty grower n the herb garden for Sgt. Edward Meier. When Sgt. Meier mentioned creating a herb garden, at first I felt I was too good for more manual labor, but it was better than being stuck in the dorm. So I began volunteering to care for the herb garden. Mind you, this was after working all day out in the fields.

At its inception in 2008, I had absolutely zero knowledge or interest in herbs or gardening. It was just a job and I was not an outdoorsy person. I couldn’t tell you the difference between an herb or a weed if my parole...
depended on it. HerboLOGY 101: If you pull it and it grows back, it was a weed. If it doesn’t, it was an expensive herb.

Under the tutelage of Sgt. Meiers, I have now become an expert herbologist. I have come to appreciate not only the nutritional and culinary uses of every herb in our garden, but the medicinal and household purposes as well. I have learned to identify each plant by sight, smell, taste and seed. Sgt. Meier’s unorthodox training methods surpass anything that could have been taught in a book. His two green thumbs and his immense knowledge in farming can at times be intimidating. To say that he knows his stuff is an understatement. As a management major, Sgt. Meier’s supervisory techniques are also an enormous part of my new skill set that I will utilize in the free world.

There is an unexplainable feeling in gardening that makes you want to do better. Not to please your boss or anyone else, but for yourself. It takes you back to the basics. You think back that people have been able to serve that plant to others since the beginning of time. To see something you planted come to fruition and to be able to serve it to others and expose them to what you have learned is an amazing feeling. It has given me a sense of accomplishment and purpose. I have two black thumbs, so I have to try 10 times harder for some of my plants to grow. At times this has proven difficult working for someone who just has to look at something for it to sprout up.

Working in the herb garden leaves a lot of time for self-reflection and behavioral observation. It has taught me to acknowledge my weaknesses and turn them into strengths. Where I once felt that working outside in the herb garden was merely a job, now it has become my passion. The women who work beside me will attest that this is the best job in TDCJ. Yes, I am in prison.

My garden is surrounded by razor wire fences. But out there, I am free. To get to work outside every single day surrounded by nature doing what we love; who gets to do that? There are people in the free world today more imprisoned than I am.

I have also learned public relations and interdepartmental skills. We deal with so many departments and individuals on a daily basis, both wearing gray and white. Everyone doesn’t like herbs. Many people are fast-food babies like I was. They don’t like anything that doesn’t come out of a can. But ignorance isn’t bliss. Through knowledge and exposure to new experiences at chow time, people can be taught to try new things. Dealing with the attitude of “We don’t like grass in our food” can be very trying. At first I didn’t, either. I would eat a little leaf of cilantro and a few onions. But being constantly exposed to it, I just got curious what all the hoopla was about. Now, anything that doesn’t have a handful of garlic, onion chives and cilantro is bland in comparison. We are extremely fortunate that Kitchen Captain Michael Tamlin, our food service manager, uses every single herb we send him.

Sgt. Meier has encouraged me to push my limits and expand my knowledge. It is uncanny how weather-conscious I have become working in the herb garden. Is it going to rain? Or, is there fear of a frost? These are things I think about daily and, most times, subconsciously. Choosing a landscape that will be aesthetically appealing is also a skill on its own. The very first thing you will smell as you turn the corner to my garden is the strong smell of my compost pile. Yet, another skill I have attained, to utilize all organic matter to make compost. I’m immune to the smell now, but I always get a kick out of seeing the reaction of people who aren’t.

I utilize all this knowledge and life skills on a daily basis. I will use my extremely vast skill set as a master gardener when I get home and introduce it to my family. Herbs are as old as thyme. It is sad that so many of us had to come to prison to learn so many skills. I am fortunate and thankful to have become proficient in such an amazing field. We should all be so lucky.

I would like to encourage you to come see our herb gardens here at the View. At one time, TDCJ was self-sufficient with its agricultural departments around the state. It should be that way again.

Mountain View Herb Garden: changing lives one herb at a time!
In a very real sense, Kyle Redford is carrying on with the family business.

Both mother Gayle and father Rodney are long-time fixtures at North Channel Assistance Ministries, a local food pantry serving residents on Houston's east side. Kyle, 30, came as soon as he could. He serves as the non-profit ministry's primary "muscle" for food pick up, delivery, storage and inventory. Together the family has helped the food pantry expand its services from 1,200 families a year to more then 15,000, and its food supplies from around 144,000 pounds annually to more than 2 million. Kyle is a force in motion. He uses the ministry’s truck to pick up food from the Houston Food Bank, then makes rounds at dozens of retail outlets and grocery stores in the area. He picks up food products that are nearing the end of their shelf life, clothes, toys and household items that are “gently” flawed, too. Whenever a store manager calls with product to move out, Kyle is on the go.

Consequently, struggling families visiting the food pantry in Channelview find a wide assortment of meat and produce, canned fruits and vegetables to help them through a rough time, as well as household items and bicycles that help improve their outlook and chances of landing a job.

“To people who walk everywhere, a bicycle is as valuable as a car,” Gayle says.

From 8 am until 6 pm Monday through Friday (many weekends, too), the Redford family helps connect people with desperate needs to life’s basic essentials. Rodney, a successful entrepreneur, handles the business side. Gayle does the paperwork and

The Prodigal

Kyle Redford carries on the family ‘business’ at North Channel Assistance Ministries
takes clients “shopping” among the shelves of the 2400-sq. ft. facility. Kyle makes certain the shelves are always filled.

According to Gayle, the North Channel Assistance Ministries has been serving the east side since 1985, thanks to an organization created by local churches and ministers. Its ministry stretches from the Interstate 610 bridge over the Houston Ship Channel to the San Jacinto River bridge, from Summerwood to Galena Park. Gail has been a volunteer from the start.

“Back then, we were only able to provide the basic food staples,” Gayle says. “Tuna was our meat; macaroni and cheese our other big item.”

Kyle arrived to stay in 2013 and began making regular trips to the Houston Food Bank, pulling as much as 12,000 pounds of food from the bank’s loading dock every month.

“Better food changes lives,” Gayle has learned. “If a person can go from eating tuna and macaroni and cheese to something really good and nutritious, it makes a difference how they perform throughout the day. If a person begins the day with bacon and eggs for breakfast rather than macaroni and cheese or nothing at all, it provides a lift for the entire day.”

Rodney agrees. “Food not only supplies a hunger need; it relates to every part of a person’s life,” he explains. “If mom and dad don’t have enough money for food, they will let a child eat and go hungry themselves. Or they will pick medicine over food, which has other consequences.”

Families can come once a month and walk out with enough to last until their next visit. Most take home a large box or two of groceries.

“They get to pick what they want off the shelves,” Gayle notes. “No two people are alike.”

Kyle has a personal relationship with store managers to whom he is both accessible and responsible. He responds to each call. He loads every box of food, unloads it, and places it in the right place at the pantry. That means he lifts each box three times.

What makes Kyle Redford so special, his parents say, is the road he travelled to get to his unique place in the ministry.

In 2000, when Dad got in trouble with his multi-million business, Kyle took it hard. Six months later, when he saw his girlfriend die in an automobile accident, he crumbled. To cope, Kyle turned to drugs. Life turned ugly. Eventually, the only escape was prison.

“Prison kept me alive,” he says now. “It made me stop and get clean. It gave me a place of safety where I could get my life straightened out.”

In prison, Kyle found two important tools of change. He picked up a Bible and reconnected to his faith. And he began taking culinary classes, first through Alvin Community College, then through the Lee College Culinary Program in the Eastham Unit.

“Lee College gave me much more than a trade,” Kyle points out. “I found discipline and hope at the same time. My instructor respected me, which helped me respect myself.”

When he walked out the barred doors four years later, Kyle Redman was radically different. He had a driving need to help others, and was armed with an Associate Degree and a SafeServe certificate, a required credential for the work he now does at the food pantry.

“The future of the ministry appears solid.

“This is my life,” Kyle is quick to say. “Every day, we give away food, Bibles and clothing, and we can’t keep enough. “This is where I belong. As long as I’m here, helping others, I’ll be all right.”
Sanctuary of Thought

There’s a lot going on inside the Wynne Unit these days.

Inside the walls of the Wynne Unit, down the long corridor and through two sets of iron-barred gates is a center for intellectual pursuits and tranquility nestled among a backdrop of white walls and drab white uniforms.

The Lee College Instructional Technology Lab, near the prison library, is a daily stop for students serious about their college studies. Around the center are rows of tables and chairs where Lee College freshmen and sophomores read classroom assignments and write essays.

The computers are intranet only. While not connected to the outside world, however, each is loaded with the Powerpoint presentations of college instructors, as well as reading assignments and tutorials that help students dig deeper into their subject of interest.

Diane Carpenter, a retired IT instructor, has organized and run this “sanctuary of thought” the past three years.

“The lab is open Mondays from 8:15 to 11:30 a.m., and each Wednesday from noon until 3:30 pm, and 6 till 9 pm,” she says. “And every time it is open, it’s full.”

She explains that each computer is utilized and each chair is occupied by students reviewing what they have learned in class. There is space for 31 at a time. “If we could keep it open eight hours a day, five days a week, every space would still be taken. This is a popular place.”

But there is much more than studying going on in the newly updated center. Carpenter enlists the help of a dozen trained tutors, and those tutors, advanced Lee College students or graduates and offenders themselves, serve as role models and mentors to other college colleagues.

Getting a tutorial assignment is tough. Tutors must have completed 45 credit hours, submit an application form, and have no disciplinary issues. They are approved by both Lee College administrators and the warden. The rigorous criteria makes the volunteer job a privilege.

“Tutors trained in one specific area of expertise help students working in that area,” said tutor Luke Teixeira, who has been assisting since 2006. “We help them when they have questions about the materials, and get them prepared for tests. We get to know each of them, and literally walk each one through to their degree.”

Luke says he was a “remedial student” when he took his first class years ago. “I barely passed.” Like others in his situation, he thought asking for help showed weaknesses.

But he found instructors and other students encouraging and willing to share. He reached out, and learned to trust. Now, he enjoys helping others who are just like he was then.

“Stepping outside your comfort zone helps you better yourself. I found I enjoyed helping others,” he says.

Another tutor named Charles affirms the importance of helping others through tutoring. “It helps me, too,” he adds. “It builds me up. When I see that light bulb turn of understanding turn on in a face, I get proud. I think, ‘That’s my guy!’”

Yet another, an offender in his late 30’s, acknowledged he had come out of a life of gangs, drugs and violence. “Making good grades in school here helped me see that I could fit in and belong,” he says, smiling. “Education gave me a different mindset. It inspired me to want to help others, too.”

“Tutoring is the first thing I’ve done to help others in my entire life,” he says. “Now, when I see people who knew me from the old days, they don’t recognize me. I’m not scamming people. I’m mentoring and teaching. You could say Lee College and this study hall has totally changed my life.”

A new perspective, a new level of confidence, positive participation in society; students who found help now helping others.

There’s more going on than meets the eye inside the Wynne Unit study hall these days.
John Whitmire: Education and rehabilitation go hand in hand

Texas Senator John Whitmire, who chairs the Senate Criminal Justice Committee, believes that education is essential to a criminal justice program that is “both tough and smart.” Whitmire, a Democrat, represents much of north Harris County, including the north part of Baytown. While the main Lee College Campus is out of his district, much of the college’s coverage area is in it.

In recent sunset review hearings on the prison system, Whitmire has suggested the role of community colleges in offender education should be maintained, possibly even expanded. He is quick to say his support of correctional education is not soft on crime. “I started in ’93 [on the criminal justice committee], and there were plenty of folks, including me, that were tough on crime. But all you’ve got to do is drill down on it and you realize that being tough alone is not going to work—you’ve got to be tough and smart.”

“We release about 7,000 people a year out of prison,” he said. “Most offenders will be released at one time or another, and it’s just common sense that if you release a better person than the one you got, it will enhance public safety and save money.”

Whitmire said the correlation between educational achievement and incarceration is clear. “The average offender, “he said, “functions on about a six-and-a-half grade level. Large numbers suffer from learning challenges such as dyslexia, attention deficit—it’s largely a poorly educated group of individuals, with most of them being school dropouts.”

“Education, in my judgment, would be a key component to any rehabilitation plan,” Whitmire said.

He acknowledges that education is not the only answer. “Equally important is drug and alcohol treatment and mental health services.”

“I really do believe the public’s been way ahead of us on this for a long time,” Whitmire said. “The public is smarter than a lot of politicians give them credit for being. Drug and alcohol [treatment], with some education, makes a better person.

“If you’re going to punish them, which we’ve decided to do, while you’ve got them locked up, you ought to be rehabilitating them to make them a better person, so you don’t have future crime victims, and these people can start paying taxes instead of being a burden,” he continued.

“What’s tougher on someone,” Whitmire asked, “than making him get off drugs, get off alcohol, get an education and turn his life around?”

Whitmire was quick to add, though, that his rehabilitation emphasis is for the majority of offenders who are in prison for drug-related or low-level property crimes. For more serious criminals, such as murderers, rapists and child molesters, “we lock them up and throw away the key, and do a pretty darn good job of it,” he said.

Another reason Whitmire supports education programs in prison is money.

“What’s more fiscally conservative than fixing somebody’s problem where you don’t have to support them for the rest of their life?” he asked. “It’s very expensive to incarcerate people.”

Whitmire sees community colleges as a vital part of offender education.

“They do a great job of education people in the free world;” he said. “There’s no reason why they shouldn’t do more inside the prison.”
Sylvester Turner:
Funds shortage creates a public health hazard

Even though he is a practicing attorney, State Representative Sylvester Turner said his interest in criminal justice reform came from his role as a legislator, not as a lawyer.

It was when he was named to chair the subcommittee on criminal justice for the House Appropriations Committee in the mid-90s that he began to see the cost savings the state could derive from expanded education and rehabilitation efforts, he said.

About 10 percent of the Texas State budget goes to supporting its criminal justice program— prisons and related activities. This makes it the third-highest spending category for state taxpayer dollars, behind health and human services and education.

“Every year,” he said, “we are paroling about 70,000 people from our criminal justice system. That’s a large number of people coming out of our criminal justice institutions and integrating back into society. I think it’s important for these people to come out with some degree of education and not be totally illiterate and unprepared with what they need to integrate back into society.”

Releasing offenders unprepared to make it in the free world, he said, will lead to a higher recidivism rate. Higher recidivism means more costs for building and maintaining prisons—not to mention more victims of crime.

“What we have tried to do since 2007 is be smarter, specifically, to provide more diversionary type programs within TDCJ. A part of that, in my estimation, is to provide offenders with educational opportunities.”

Turner sees a role for community colleges in the effort to reduce recidivism, crime and spending.

“Community colleges play a vital role in the educational arena across the board, whether you’re talking about within the correctional system, or people in the free world, so to speak. It is very difficult for many, many thousands of individuals to get their higher education without the active participation of community colleges.

“Community colleges play a vital role in providing educational courses to offenders inside our correctional institutions. They are needed. If we’re going to achieve our goals and objectives in terms of providing these offenders with education, getting them back on the road of rehabilitating them so that they can integrate back into society, community colleges play a pivotal role in achieving those objectives.”

Where does Turner see funding for prison education going in the future?

“If we repeat that,” Turner said, “we are going to be paroling thousands of inmates into the free world who will be less prepared to integrate back into society. Ultimately, you’re going to see the recidivism rate increase.”

“I believe we are creating a public health hazard. I think it is a threat to everybody’s security when we are not doing what we should to assist these persons at being a little bit better prepared to stand on their own two feet and make a decent living, as much as possible, in the free world.”

“Now, if we cut any more, then basically what we are saying is that in the State of Texas, we simply want to warehouse these individuals and not do anything to try to rehabilitate them or to educate them.”

“That may benefit us in the short term from a budgetary point of view,” Turner said, “but from a public safety point of view, I think it will make us less safe in the long-term.”
IT’S A FACT: EDUCATION CHANGES LIVES

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500 will apply to Lee College. Only 200 will receive needed financial assistance that can make their college education possible — and change the course of their future.

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Lee College was one of the first institutions of higher learning to offer college credit classes to offenders in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice in 1966 and is considered one of the largest and most successful college educational programs in the country.

The Huntsville Center currently offers student offenders at four TDCJ units and one private unit course work leading to the completion of an Associate of Applied Science degree. These programs help students to prepare for gainful employment and personal success once released from TDCJ.

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The Britt/Hodgin Second Chance Scholarship provides educational opportunities for offender students who attend the Lee College Huntsville Center. The scholarship recognizes two outstanding individuals who are widely credited with much of the early success of the Huntsville Center and its significant contribution to the reduction of offender recidivism in the state of Texas.

Funds are managed by the Lee College Foundation and will be used to help students in the Offender Education Program pursue their education.

Contributions may be made online at www.lee.edu/foundation. For additional information about the Britt/Hodgin Scholarship, please contact:

Pam Warford, Executive Director
Lee College Foundation
PO Box 818, Baytown, Texas 77522-0818
Office: 281.425.6361 • Fax: 281.425.6880
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pwarford@lee.edu

$190 enrolls one offender student in college programming