SECOND CHANCE

From Skid Row to Honor Roll

The Monica Bennett-Oakley Story, Page 12
“Let’s Keep a Good Thing Going”

Donna Zuniga, Dean, Lee College Huntsville Center

I heard the comment repeated during a recent gathering of alums from Lee College’s Offender Education Program. Almost to a man (there were no women alums present), these grateful former students acknowledged their current success in the free world to faith, supportive families — and what they learned in college classes while behind bars.

One was a computer programmer who has worked his way “up the line” at a major company to run its computer networking infrastructure. Another was an entrepreneur who is turning what he learned in horticulture classes into a start-up landscaping business.

Most did not want us to use their names. They have been out long enough and have blended into their communities so seamlessly now that colleagues and friends might be shocked to hear of their past, they said.

Education, they told us, gave them the focus and discipline to stay optimistic while in prison, and the skills which they learned in college classes into a start-up landscaping business. Time and again, Lee College got the kudos. Former students brushed tears away from their eyes as they thanked long-ago college instructors for caring enough to push them along to a college credential.

As dean of the program, I never get tired of these stories. It’s the reason we do what we do — and the reason Lee College has provided a premier community college education program to Texas offenders since 1966. We are in the business of changing lives through education, and nowhere do the results shine brighter than it does through the lives of former offenders.

It must never be forgotten that offenders who learn in prison are much less likely to return to prison than offenders who do not. More than 70 percent of offenders who leave prison with no education return, compared to only 10 percent of offenders who complete two years of college while in prison.

These “achievers” leave prison to take their place in society, working and raising families, paying taxes, and contributing to their community and state.

 Sadly, the Lee College program, and others like it in Texas, help only hundreds of offenders each year when thousands are eligible. The great majority of qualified potential students are hindered by a lack of financial resources. State funding for these programs was cut by 41.5 percent in the last legislative session, and is under scrutiny again this year.

Yes, public schools, highways and infrastructure need public funds, too, but in the “long view,” we are hard-pressed to find a state program that does so much good — with a proven record of success — as does offender education.

Education funds for offenders can help us reduce the overall cost of prisoner upkeep.

Please help us tell the story of our success so we can open the doors of opportunity to Texans needing a “second chance” in years to come.

It was an important first step. Nearly two dozen alumni of the Lee College Offender Education program met recently in Conroe to discuss ways to help support offender education and form a first-ever offender education chapter of Former Lee, an association of former Lee College students.

Special highlight of the meeting included a reunion of former students with some of their instructors. Attendance included retired horticulture instructor, J.T. Langley, and biology instructor Dr. Michael Gary, as well as program Dean Donna Zuniga and administrator Paul Allen.

Many had not seen each other since their time in class together inside the Ellis Unit. “It’s great to know that in the workplace represents the skills and knowledge and then apply your instructional efforts with a proven record of success — as does offender education.”

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A historic meeting of former students expresses support for offender education

A Gathering of Friends

Director’s Column

“We need their stories. The students provided feedback on the quality of instruction in both academic and technical programs, and gave input for the development of new curriculum. “Our students represent the best measure of our success in education,” Dean Zuniga said. “Their ability to acquire new skills and knowledge and then apply that in the workplace represents the true purpose of everything we do. What they tell us about how well we did for them is extremely helpful to us as we go forward.”

Alums left the meeting committed to finding and networking with other former students who are settled into careers and community life after prison. From the half-day gathering, former students said they want to meet frequently to take a more active role supporting offender education while building a network of alums and providing opportunities for reconnecting and fellowship.

Retired Lee College instructor Dr. Michael Gary visits with a former student at the first meeting of Huntsville Center alumni
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. 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. 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. Elliott was enrolled in the Lee air conditioning program while Avirett was still in prison, serving as a teacher’s aide in the AC program.

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,” Elliott said. “I enrolled in academic classes such as government class, 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!”
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. “I had no idea that there were college programs inside the penitentiary,” he said. “I’m trying to diversify myself.” He said 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. “I’m trying to diversify myself.” He said he was 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 emphasized the relation of the knowledge to the work you’re going to be doing out there.”

“I’m thankful this program exists,”
By Steve Lestarjette

What Paul Allen teaches goes beyond the textbook, and reaps rewards

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,” he 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.

‘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 hadn’t been for Lee College.’ That’s our story. That’s why I’m here.”
TWO PEAS IN A POD
Father and son have grown a legacy inside the O.B. Ellis Unit walls

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 high-light 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 watch 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.”
From Skid Row to Honor Roll

By Monica Bennett-Oakley
with Teri Mondisett

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 11, but the clothes on my back. One day I walked out of a motel 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 what I found on the streets. Love is tough. It’s about sacrifice.

When I studied, I realized real love wasn’t what I found on the streets. Love is tough. It’s about sacrifice.

I took the Cognitive Class offered through Lee College at the Riverside Unit. 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 because 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 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.

I haven’t decided which four-year degree I’ll get, but I already 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 victims 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 am 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.
Sylvester Turner: Shortage of funds for offender education contributes to 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 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.”

The progress made since 2007 suffered a setback in 2011. “Unfortunately, in the last legislative session we reversed and made significant reductions to the educational side within TDCJ. I think that will hurt us in the long term,” Turner said.

Where does Turner see funding for prison education going in the future? “We’re walking a tight rope,” he said. “During the last legislative session, offender education programs were reduced by approximately 27 percent.” Between college programs and the much-larger pre-college programs, the cuts meant that about 16,700 fewer inmates took classes in the 2011-2012 school year than had in previous years.

“If we repeat that,” Turner said, “or if we don’t work to restore some of those cuts, 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.”

The next legislative session has the opportunity to reverse some of the cuts that have been made, Turner said. “Hopefully, we won’t reduce any further,” he said. “Better yet, I hope that we can restore some of the cuts that were made in the last legislative session. That’s my view.”

“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.”

Mailbag

A forum for students, alumni, family and friends of the Lee College Offender Education Program. Address e-mail correspondence to either: Paul Allen, pal.len@lee.edu, or to the Editor: leecollege@lee.edu.

PROUD OF COLLEGE’S ACADEMIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS

I recently received a copy of Second Chance, and I must say I really did read it cover to cover in a state of awe and wonder, pride and overwhelming satisfaction in what Lee College has accomplished and continues to accomplish since I departed Lee in the summer of 1964. “Awe and wonder,” I know, is redundant, but what I just rhetorically set aside all considerations of good English style, for I could say it over and over and still not say enough. My pride grows out of the fact that I began my teaching career in two colleges in the summer of 1955 at Lee College. Dean Rundell had recruited me right out of a master’s program at UT that summer, and had offered me two classes in freshman English. In one class was John Britt. Yes, the same Britt in that picture on page 3 of Second Chance. And that, in part, explains the “pride and satisfaction.”

I have been in touch with John over the years, have seen him also, and have watched him lead and direct humanities at Lee in ways that constantly amaze me. This issue of Second Chance crowns the other accomplishments I’ve seen. Very few things in the world of academe can match the accomplishments of Lee College and its people and the way the college has served the cause of higher education. Community colleges have always served people in ways other institutions have not: anyone who has taught at a two-year college sees it every year—new chances, new beginnings, new accomplishments most often for those who would never have had the opportunities, but this example inspires like no other.

Reading John Britt’s story of how Dean Rundell selected him as one of the team of faculty, I could not help but recall my own years at Lee, and envied John and his “group of Baptist preachers” and their first days behind the razor wire. Do you realize what this sort of thing does for an old academic? It makes real the abstractions he held when he began life as a teacher, and it turns promises into deeds. We can, we do, change lives.

— Joe Gilliland

Lee College faculty and college administrator, retired
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Can you help?

THIS YEAR, MORE THAN 800 TDJC OFFENDERS IN HUNTSVILLE WILL BE ELIGIBLE FOR THE LIFE-CHANGING BENEFITS OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

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.

You can make the difference. It is a proven fact that the recidivism rate for offenders with a college education is only 10 percent — far lower than the 70 percent return to prison rate for parolees without an education.

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 TDJC.

YOUR ONE-TIME CONTRIBUTION CAN HELP A TEXAS OFFENDER EMERGE FROM PRISON WITH A REAL CHANCE FOR SUCCESS. A partnership with TDJC keeps tuition costs low.

PROVIDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE HAS NEVER BEEN EASIER — THANKS TO THE BRITT/HODGIN SECOND CHANCE SCHOLARSHIP.

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
www.lee.edu/foundation
pwarford@lee.edu

$190 enrolls one offender student in college programming