

Delivered from the Dark Pit

I am going to ask you to journey back in time. A time of innocence when your heart was young and your life was full of promise. As you are making your way through this journey you begin to realize that your guides, as well as your decisions, are taking you down a slippery slope. You know that you should turn back but you feel trapped. One bad choice after another finally drops you into a deep pit. As your eyes begin to adjust to the darkness, you realize that you are not alone in this pit but in reality you have never been so alone. As you grope through the darkness looking for a way out, your fears turn to desperation. Your exterior looks tough enough, but on the inside you are dying. Trusting others is just not an option. Your hours quickly turn into days and your weeks unfold into months. Then one morning you wake up to the reality that it has been 23 years that you have been



in this pit. Just when you believe you are beyond hope, you feel, you sense, and you see something that you never thought you would experience.

You feel a deep love, you sense hope, and you see light for the first time in your entire journey. And so begins the story of Tim.

Tim's journey began 46 years ago in Chickasaw, Alabama. At the age of two, Tim and his family relocated to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Tim's young life was plagued with a learning disability and a heart bent on rebellion. Like all young children, he yearned for a role model. By the tender young age of ten, when his role models should have been a youth pastor or a little league coach, Tim settled for a role model that would introduce

him to speed balls (a heroine/cocaine combination). Injecting this concoction at age ten, his downward descent was rapid. It was not

(continued on next page)

IN THIS ISSUE...

● PG. 3....NEWS OF NOTE

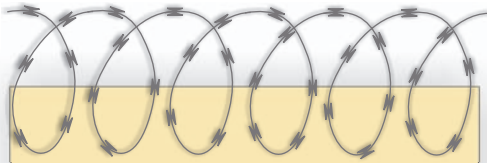
● PG. 4....FROM THE FIELD

● PG. 6....PERSPECTIVES

FULFILLING THE GREAT COMMISSION IN AMERICA'S PRISONS



WWW.WECAREPROGRAM.ORG



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Published eight times a year, *The Connection* provides news and views of friends of We Care Program. We Care Program is a non-profit, interdenominational organization consisting of Christian men and women who share a burden for and commitment to helping incarcerated men and women. We are accomplishing our mission by recruiting, funding, training, placing, and administering missionary chaplains and chaplain's assistants in prisons to provide friendship evangelism, teaching, peer counseling, and encouragement.

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long before friends were scarce due to the fact that Tim could not be trusted. In his own words, "No one wanted to be around me, not even the drug people." Drugs and loneliness consumed him as Tim's life began to spin out of control. Juvenile detention became his study hall and conventional high school ended in the 9th grade. By the time he was 16, when most young men would be going to their prom, Tim was deep into drugs and involved with a married woman.

Loneliness and depression continued to drive this young man deeper and deeper into this pit. With suicide constantly on his mind, he drove his motorcycle into a tree. After three weeks in a coma, he awoke to face more of his nightmare of a life. Still haunted by thoughts of suicide, not even the Black-flag Bug Spray he injected ended his miserable existence. Could there be any purpose for this out of control kid? In his heart and mind he had no purpose and even less of a reason to live. It was evident he was headed for one of three places...the insane asylum, prison or the grave. Tim's destiny was decided when he was convicted of first-degree robbery. With his history of drugs and crime, the outcome was inevitable...LIFE IN PRISON. Drugs and crime finally brought him down. His tough exterior and broken heart only flourished in prison. His life behind the fence gave new meaning to the words fear factor, once even doing 18 months in solitary for driving an ice pick into another inmate. For 23 long years, Tim has wallowed at the bottom of this pit. Day after day, week after week, month after month he was holding on to

nothing. For all these years, he lived in the shadows of another fight or a possible riot.

Then on April 17, 2005, at 8:45pm, in what could have been another night of desperation. Tim's life changed forever. Yes, he felt something he thought he would never feel; he sensed something he thought he would never sense, and saw something he thought he would never see. Deep love is what

In his heart and mind he had no purpose and even less of a reason to live.

he felt, real hope is what he sensed, and for the first time in this crazy life there was light shining into the

darkness. On this warm April evening, God reached down into this deep pit with his deep love during a kairos meeting at the prison. Kairos means God's Special Time and that's exactly what it was in the life of this battered, shattered shell of a man. For the very first time, Tim had a real encounter with the very real Jesus Christ. Hope filled this heart of desperation and brought a warm smile to this very dangerous man. Meaning and purpose would now fill this life that was bent on destruction.

This real life story that you have just read is aiming at three different groups of people. The first group is those in their own dark pit, the second is those heading towards the pit, and the third is those who know someone who is at the starting gate of a life going down to

(continued on next page)

News of Note

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Atmore, Alabama

September 2006

Making a Lasting Impact

By David Landis
The Connection

J. O. DAVIS – I met Willie and Don at J. O. Davis Correctional Facility when I served as an assistant chaplain there during my first year with We Care. Now Willie has been out of prison for one year, and Don for several months. For a recent staff day I invited them to share some of their faith walk with us. It was the first time they met since being released.

They encouraged our staff by talking about what it meant for them to have someone available in a counseling and encouraging role while they were incarcerated. I was only one of many who God used to help these men along their journey, and in the process, we became friends. It may not seem like a big deal, but putting my arms around these men to shoot this picture was actually a very meaningful



milestone for me. From a sign shop in Pennsylvania to a prison compound in Southern Alabama, our

paths crossed, and I know for myself, and I believe for them as well, our lives will never be the same.



Welcome!

ATMORE – Arriving on August 1 to begin a one-year term of service in the office doing graphic design work, Sheila Schrock went right to work...and “The Connection” has a new look! Sheila will also be

helping with the bookkeeping when Sarah leaves in September.

Sheila is a member of Fairview Mennonite Church in Kalona, Iowa. She enjoys sports, particularly volleyball, and

likes to be outside. However, she can also be content inside with some yarn and a crochet hook or knitting needles. We’re glad to have you on the team, Sheila. Thanks for coming!

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the pit. Tim would have you know that drugs will destroy your life, and crime will steal your freedom. He would also have you know that a life outside of God’s purposes is a life without true meaning.

You see, the one that created you is the only source of any real fulfillment this life has to offer. No matter how far you have sunk, the Lord can reach down into your pit, whatever that may be, and fill you with His love and His purpose. He, and He alone, can provide the light you need to face another day, and only He can give

you an eternal purpose-filled future with unending possibilities through our one and only hope, Jesus Christ. Behind a very real fence in a very real prison now lives a man who has a hope in his heart and a smile on his face, and who has truly been shown the path to real freedom. 🔥

Brian Eskelinen is the state chaplain at Fountain Correctional Facility, Atmore, AL.

by Brian
Eskelinen

FROM THE FIELD

ATMORE, AL

Fountain Correctional Facility

Recently I acquired a good devotional book, *Life on Purpose*. It has been very interesting to me over the years how often the devotional reading for a particular day is right on target for my needs.

Not long ago, I met an inmate who had lost a young son and was not able to attend his funeral. I attempted to befriend him and share that I had also lost my only son approximately ten years ago. He was very bitter toward God and was not ready to talk. I promised to pray for him.

Several weeks later I was chatting with several other guys, when I saw Sam* waving his arm for me to come and sit at a table with him. I sat down and we talked for about 45 minutes. A friendship was growing.

Before going into the prison on my

last visit, I read from my devotional book concerning "Leading Others to the Lord."

The author was reminding us readers that we don't argue someone into the kingdom of God, but rather "speak the truth in love" and allow the Holy Spirit to convict. I took this book with me into the prison, and after explaining its purpose, I asked if Sam would like to pick out a devotional and I would read it. He did, and the content could not have been more adapted to his needs. Praise God! We then had a great opportunity to discuss the application. God is working! Please pray for Sam—and me.

- Lester Huber

As I walked into the prison, I noticed a coffin sitting on the back of a pickup truck. When I got to the chaplain's office, he informed me that he needed my help to perform a funeral. During the week an inmate had died of a heart attack. Richard* was 78 years old and had spent 45 years in prison, a serial killer wanted in several states. I regret to say that the chaplain and I had never met Richard. I talked to a couple men who knew him. They said he was a "grumpy old cuss."

At 3:00 that afternoon, Chaplain and I went out to perform the funeral. This was my first "prison" funeral, and I wasn't sure what to expect. No family

members were present, since attempts by the warden and chaplain to speak to Richard's family were unsuccessful. When we got to the prison cemetery, the casket was already over the hole, held up by 2' x 4's. Chaplain, Warden, two officers, and I gathered around the plywood casket. Chap prayed a simple prayer and asked me to read some verses from Joshua. Chap then gave a short meditation emphasizing "even though we did not know him, God did." Chap asked if anybody had any nice thing to say about Richard. No one said a word. The officers told the inmates, who had dug the grave and were standing to the side, to lower the coffin and start to shovel dirt.

As we drove back to the prison, my mind was flooded with thoughts. Although I do not know Richard's last words before he died, I do know that he was not living a Christian life. I also know that if he does want to change his eternal destination, it is too late.

This prison grave side moment made me think about what kind of legacy I want to leave behind. Will people stop and shake their heads trying to remember if I was a Christian, or will I be martyred for my faith? However I leave this world, I am ready, and I want to try to live like it is my last day.

- Blaine Copenhaver



Mentoring is one part of the Faith Dorm program that has evolved over the years. Originally designed as a visitation program, its priority now is to connect soon-to-be-released inmates with volunteers who can walk alongside them as they journey the often difficult pathway to the realities of life in the free world. Volunteers meet bi-monthly with assigned dorm residents to build friendships, to give encouragement and counsel, and to work through issues relating to job and home plans, family and financial matters, health, emotions, and faith.

In gratitude for the selfless service of the volunteer mentors, residents of the Faith Dorm recently planned a "Mentor Appreciation Night" and invited the mentors into the dorm for a special program presented to the entire community of 240 inmate residents. After an opening prayer and song, Chaplain Brian Eskelinen delivered an inspirational message on the virtues of mentoring, which was followed by the



Mentors Lester Huber (picture on left) and Shelton Tatum (above) alongside the men they are currently mentoring in the Faith Honor Community.

testimony of one dorm resident and his mentor. Finally, as a token of appreciation, cards signed by dorm residents were given to each mentor present. Mentors were touched by the outpouring of appreciation shown by the Faith Dorm Community.

- David Landis

MARYSVILLE, OH

Ohio Reformatory for Women

“God, this is a whole lot deeper than anything I’m trained to deal with,” I prayed as her bunkie continued, “She’s binging and purging every day. She’s struggling spiritually. Please see her.” I didn’t mind talking to her, but those eating disorders were way out of my league. It scared me.

We met. She’d been raised in church; the only family member who turned out “wrong.” Her step-father mistreated her because she wasn’t “his.” That, and peer pressure, turned her to alcohol. Overwhelmed by life, alcohol was her only escape. She confessed her anger at her step-father, and we broke any evil attachments that had been formed and talked briefly about her eating problems. I was relieved she was already seeing a staff psychologist. We agreed to meet again, but she didn’t show up. Again, I was relieved because I kept telling God I wasn’t trained to deal with that type of problem. (He agreed with me.) But I kept praying for her.

She showed up for the next appointment, and even as I was silently praying for God to give me the words to say, she broke in: “I’m free! I’m in prison but I’m free. And it feels so good. Out there, life had become over-whelming, and I kept praying, ‘God, I need a break!’ He gave me one! He sure did! He put me here! And I found my way back to Him. I needed to come here.”

She’d written her mother regarding her step-father, and they had resolved some issues—and she hadn’t binged or purged for 2 ½ weeks! “I just realized how ridiculous that was. I’m seeing everything so differently now! It’s amazing! Just think, I had to come to

prison to be free!”

I sat there, mouth open but speechless, rejoicing with her but mostly thanking God that He was big enough to set her free without my interference! He did it all Himself! “For we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us.” (II Corinthians 4:7)

– Wilma Mullet

MONTGOMERY, AL

Tutwiler Prison for Women

Tension at the prison was building. Administration was in the process of moving some inmates to Louisiana due to overcrowding. This always upsets the balance of things in the prison, and the tension had spilled over into the chapel. I was even being affected by it. One evening I looked back over the week and tried to find out why I was so discouraged.

The Holy Spirit encouraged me to put on “the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness” (Isaiah 61:3). I needed to rejoice in the Lord. I am to stand strong when the tests come. In John 16:22, Jesus was encouraging His disciples, “Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you.”

I need to cling to the promises in God’s Word and not let Satan and circumstances steal my joy. No one can take it away from me unless I allow it. With Christ as our Light, we already have the victory over the darkness, and we have the promises that we will see Jesus in the city of light. What a glorious future we have to look forward to! Let us be encouraged and let our JOY be full.

– Anna Miller

CENTURY, FL

Century Correctional Institute

I was reminded again recently of how easy and natural it is to justify our own actions and consequences. While I was visiting some inmates in disciplinary confinement, several of them told me how they got there. One inmate said that he was there due to his own stupidity. Others placed the blame on someone else. They seemingly felt it was not their own fault. They blamed an officer for misconduct, etc. and were placed in confinement during investigation. One even claimed “for his own protection”! Guilty or not, they were all locked up.

As a chaplain, I’ve heard a lot of similar stories. Many people don’t want to take responsibility for their own attitudes and behavior. It’s simply easier to blame someone else. (That’s an old excuse from a perfect setting. It’s become a perfect excuse for any old setting!) We gain our reputation from what others think and say about us. Our character, however, is who we really are when we think no one else is watching. We might be falsely accused and even thought to be peculiar or different. But since our character is what really matters to God, that is what should also matter the most to us. Let’s be diligent in pursuing a godly character. Then when we are falsely accused, it doesn’t really matter because the Holy Spirit satisfies us with the same peace and joy as before. We won’t have to prove our innocence. Our character will speak loudly enough to convince God, and that’s really what matters.

Titus 2:8b. “...so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.”

– Marvin Bender

CONSTRUCTION VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

We are building a new ministry headquarters and would love for you to help us make it happen!

Projected timeline and areas of need are available at: www.wecareprogram.org.

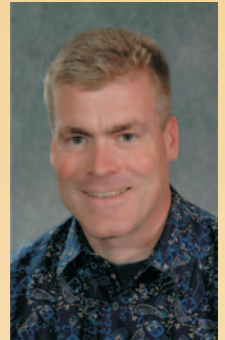
Specialized work crews and general volunteers needed in all phases of the construction process.

For information, please contact Don Metzler: 251-368-8818 or don@wecareprogram.org.

PERSPECTIVES

with David R. Landis
President

I'd love to hear from you.
Contact me at
dave@wecareprogram.org



Even though I am completely fulfilled in the ministry God has called me to, pulling into my driveway after a day of work is something I really look forward to every day. Why? Most days, one or more of my children come out to greet me before I ever make it to the door. In fact, recently, my three oldest children came running out and wrapped me up in a group hug, and they wouldn't let me go. In that moment, my mind went back to a decision I had made about eight years earlier.

I had started and operated my own business for about ten years up to that point, and to make a long story short, a season of personal spiritual growth had opened my eyes to the fact that the way I was arranging my priorities between family and business were not in accordance with the way God wanted me to go. Some radical business downsizing decisions were made, which ultimately

steered our family towards an assignment with We Care Program.

As I have related to men in prison for the last seven years, I think I can say without much hesitation that the

“My priorities between family and business were not in accordance with the way God wanted me to go.”

lack of a positive fatherhood figure in childhood is the one issue that is most commonly referred to whenever one goes below the surface in counseling. Sadly, the same situation is very common in church settings as well. Having heard it over and over, and now realizing some of the blessings that have resulted from my own life

decisions, has given me a greater determination to place my family first and ministry second. Not everyone may agree with me, and I still have my share of shortcomings as a father and husband, but you will have a hard time convincing anybody in my household that it should be any different. 🙏

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