

DATELINE: January 31, 2011

## IT'S TIME FOR A NEW "RESPONSIBLE INMATE-TAUGHT EDUCATION (R.I.T.E.) PROGRAM" IN PRISON

*attached photo: Libby stands behind Sister Ann Raymond Wood (at left), Sisters of St. Joseph, and others at the St. Augustine Mother House on October 16, 2010, at the Jubilee Celebration recognizing Sister Ann's fifty years of service. Sister Ann has been Charlie's loyal supporter and friend for over fifteen years, since she taught the "R.I.T.E. Program" at Sumter C.I. in 1995*

In 1989, while we were assigned as vocational air conditioning aides to instructor Art Rabon at Polk C.I., David Tal-Mason and I spoke frequently about the state of prison educational and vocational programs. At the time the FDOC emphasized such programs, which were fully-funded and staffed by professional, certified teachers and instructors who taught a variety of courses; however, we both saw the writing on the wall, and knew that times were changing.

The Polk C.I. School provided a full range of classes during the day, including G.E.D. College business and computer classes at night were funded by individual Pell grants. Vocational Plumbing, Air Conditioning/Heating, Welding, and Upholstery classes certified prisoner graduates, who were able to get decent jobs upon their releases.

Besides working for the vocational air conditioning instructor, a retired U.S.A.F. aircraft crew chief, I tutored other prisoners in reading literacy in the school, and in the college computer classes at night. Those days are long gone.

Fast forward to 1994: now at Avon Park C.I., I worked as an aide to instructor Larry Hagan in the vocational graphic arts program, tutoring computer typesetting and desktop publishing classes to the students. Ten years before, at Zephyrhills C.I., I'd worked as an aide in the Graphics Arts Program associated with the PRIDE print shop, doing the same tasks.

One day Mr. Hagan came out of his office, beckoned to me, and told me I had a phone call. A phone call? Prisoners don't get phone calls on state telephones. He assured me it was all right. Olive Atkins, a teacher at Sumter C.I., introduced herself to me.

She explained that I had been recommended to join the "Responsible Inmate-Taught Education (R.I.T.E.) Program" at Sumter C.I., starting soon. The DOC was recruiting college-educated prisoners statewide to enroll in the upcoming R.I.T.E. Program, anticipating budget cutbacks that would reduce the paid teacher staff. Trained inmate tutors would take the place of professional teachers, keeping the educational programs going.

I asked Ms. Adkins who had recommended me for the program out of the many thousands of prisoners statewide. My old friend, David Tal-Mason, she said, had written and applied for the federal grant that paid for the one-year pilot program. She put David on the line. He encouraged me to agree to the transfer, promising that it was a worthy program I'd approve of.

I was surprised that David had been able to put together a grant proposal that actually resulted in a fully-funded program that wasn't looted by the FDOC bureaucrats in Tallahassee. In 1980, at Raiford, my friend and fellow prisoner, Steve Opella, worked in the substance abuse program, down the street from my job in the GOLAB Program, the acclaimed prisoner self-help program that was the model for many later programs. Steve put together a \$40,000 federal grant to fund the expansion of the substance abuse program, and was thrilled when he was informed that the grant had been approved. His elation turned to

anger when he received a letter from Tallahassee with an accounting of how the \$40,000 had been spent before it got to him.

The FDOC grant office sent a list of expenditures. \$10,000 for office expenses, \$8,000 for convention expenses (must have been some party). \$2,500 for telephone expenses. Thousands for printing costs. When the shooting stopped, the bottom line was that the entire \$40,000 of the federal grant had been consumed by the central office, and not a dime trickled down to the actual drug program at the prison level.

Steve had an influential friend who called Tallahassee and threatened to go to the feds and the news media if the officials kept all the grant money. After much dickering, the bureaucrats agreed to return ten percent, \$4,000, which Steve used to buy a Sony color TV, VCR, and video camera setup for the program. Years later, I'd told my friend, David, about that, and when he submitted his grant for the R.I.T.E. Program, he inserted safeguards that prevented the DOC from hijacking the funds. Apparently, that strategy had worked.

When I arrived at Sumter C.I. on the Bluebird, the rattletrap prison transport bus, with twenty or so fellow prisoners, we were greeted by a diminutive woman with a big smile who introduced herself as Sister Ann Raymond Wood, a Catholic nun in the order Sisters of St. Joseph. She would be the R.I.T.E. Program instructor. Catholic nun? In prison? What had I gotten myself into?

The next day I was called into Roger Smith's office. Mr. Smith was the education program manager, in effect, the prison school principal. I'd known Roger Smith for several years, having met him at other institutions when he was in charge of installing education computer systems, and he knew my background. He'd approved my entry into the program.

Roger Smith advised me that he was assigning me multiple tasks. I would participate in the R.I.T.E. training program for certification, but I was also to be Sister Ann's aide. What she was not to be told, to be kept between us, that I was to be responsible for her personal safety. There would be no incidents. Tallahassee had informed the warden nothing would happen, that if anything happened to the Catholic nun inside the prison, everyone's heads would roll. Mr. Smith told me that when Sister Ann arrived at 7:30 AM each morning, I was to be at the front gate waiting to escort her to the school, and unless she was in the restroom, she was always to be in my sight. At 4:30 PM, I would escort her back to the front gate and wave goodbye. They did not have the manpower to give her a security escort all day, so the job was mine. Failure would not be tolerated. Thankfully, for the year she spent teaching the all-day classes, her safety was never threatened.

Sister Ann was an English teacher by training and years of experience in Catholic schools had well-equipped her to handle a classroom of prisoners. These weren't your ordinary prisoners—they'd been screened, had far more education than the average illiterate prisoner, and ranged from a retired Marine gunnery sergeant, to an astronomer, a contractor, real estate man, a couple of former teachers, and, among others, a college student who'd gotten hooked on drugs and committed murder. That was just in the first class. Subsequent classes were equally diverse, marked by a common desire to help their fellow prisoners. Sister Ann ably dealt with them all.

Most of the men recruited for the R.I.T.E. Program had already been working in education programs in prisons across the state, and had been recommended by their supervisors to participate. Besides Sister Ann, other teachers and occasional outside experts taught all the subjects required in prison education, including classes on how to be prepared to teach every class, which meant they had to brush up on multiplying and dividing fractions, as well as science, social studies, English grammar, reading, and writing skills.

Not every session involved hard work. Sister Ann had initially come to Sumter C.I. in past years to conduct "Shakespeare Seminars," an experiment to discover whether prisoners would respond to and appreciate Shakespeare's plays. Her seminars were enthusiastically received and the sign-up was always

quickly filled. Prisoners appreciated the lessons and story lines of "Hamlet," "MacBeth," and even "Romeo and Juliet," just as millions of others had for hundreds of years.

In the R.I.T.E. Program class, a reading of Hamlet and a commentary by Sister Ann, explaining what those archaic words meant in Modern English developed into a class play that combined Shakespeare and "Star Trek," that entertained and educated the participants and audience.

The program was a success. The graduates went back to their respective institutions and helped their fellow prisoners learn to read, write, and hopefully earn G.E.D. certificates, a basis for further accomplishments.

After the program ran its course, Sister Ann went on with her service to the Church and society. For many years she served as a counselor to the young men at Jesuit High School in Tampa, Florida, and became a breast cancer survivor. She continued our friendship that had commenced in such unlikely circumstances and maintained a correspondence that continues to this day, always encouraging me, praying for me, and serving as not only a positive influence, but also as an inspiration in my life by her example of selflessness and service to God and others.

In October, 2010, Sister Ann sent me an invitation to a Jubilee Celebration recognizing her fiftieth anniversary as a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph, along with several other long-serving nuns. Of course, the officials at the prison would never have let me attend, even if I had promised to return afterward. I asked my dear friend, Libby, if she would attend in my place, which she happily agreed to do. The accompanying photo, among others, helped to document the event.

As for me, the R.I.T.E. Program lives on and continues to pay dividends fifteen years later on the original investment. I continued to work in education at Sumter C.I. for three more years as an aide to Dr. Smith, tutoring the youthful prisoners in the Boot camp Program in the G.E.D. essay test. In the years that I worked with those young men, their G.E.D. graduation rates were consistently the highest in Florida, both in prison and out.

Teaching "English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)" classes at Columbia C.I. followed, along with literacy tutoring for prisoners who could not read. Today I teach two classes of ESOL at Wakulla Annex C.I., consisting of mostly Hispanic students learning to speak, read, and write English.

With the economic crisis affecting every aspect of our society but the very rich, it seems, with the "prison crisis" being discussed endlessly as ways to cut the budget become more drastic, as education becomes a convenient target to hack away at, it is clear that the lessons learned in the "R.I.T.E. Program" fifteen years ago are applicable today.

No one disputes the fact that educational and vocational programs are important keys to prisoners getting out and staying out of prison, becoming law-abiding citizens, working at meaningful jobs, supporting themselves and their families, rather than continuing to be burdens on society.

It is also clear that out of the over 100,000 people in Florida prisons, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of educated, intelligent men and women willing to help educate their fellow prisoners if they had the proper training. This is a valuable resource that has been ignored for too long. A new "Responsible Inmate-Taught Education Program" is a cost effective way to reverse the downward spiral in prison education. Why don't we give it a chance?

Charlie