



INSIDE Journal®

PRISON FELLOWSHIP'S NEWSPAPER FOR AMERICA'S PRISONS

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Seeking a Season of Peace

by A.R. Quinn

Ironically, a national movement to reduce urban violence began with an act of bloodshed.

One Thursday evening in 1992, hundreds of people from Boston's low-income Mattapan neighborhood gathered at the red-brick Morning Star Baptist Church to attend the funeral for the victim of a drive-by shooting. According to a story that appeared in *The New York Times* the following day, a dozen young men with sweatshirts pulled low over their heads interrupted the service. They singled out another young man, threw chairs at him, and stabbed him 8 times in front of the altar. Guns were fired in the sanctuary. Panicked people fled for the exits, and some, including small children, were injured in the stampede. It was later reported that the attack was gang-related.

At the time of the stabbing, Rev. Jeffrey Brown, then 30, was the pastor of an African-

American church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, near Boston. His goals were modest. In his own words from a presentation he gave earlier in 2015, he wanted "just to be a good pastor, to be able to be with people through all the passages of life, to preach messages that would have an everyday meaning for folks."

But the Morning Star incident, part of a steep rise in crime among the city's youth, changed the direction of the minister's life. Boston-area faith leaders, including Rev. Brown, came together to address a crisis they could no longer ignore.

Street-Corner Conversations

A small group of pastors decided to do something unusual. Just as violence had come into a church building, meeting them where they worked and lived, the pastors would go out to the streets, the source of the violence. They simply began to walk around in poor neighborhoods late at night, making



Rev. Jeffrey Brown, one of the architects of the "Boston Miracle," gives a presentation about crime reduction to an attentive crowd earlier in 2015.

connections with youth who were caught up in the culture of violence. The young people they met might never come to a church service, but the faith leaders could listen. They could

learn to understand them better and help them find direction for their lives. Their conversations were profound.

As Rev. Brown later said, "I've learned some of my most

important life lessons from drug dealers and gang members and prostitutes, and I've had some of my most profound theological conversations not in the hal-

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Photo provided by Rev. Jeffrey Brown

America's Least Likely Church

by Jim Liske

When Rev. Ambrose R. Hyland, a Catholic priest, came to Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora, New York, in 1937, there was no real place for prisoners to worship. Men gathered in a room under the mess hall. Father Hyland thought they deserved better.

The priest soon approached the warden with a request to build a church on prison grounds. It was a bold, ambitious plan; at the time, there was not a single, free-standing church in a prison anywhere in the United States. But Father Hyland was determined, and so were the prisoners whose hard work would turn the dream into reality.

Father Hyland and the prisoners ran into many obstacles.



Public Domain.

The inside of the Church of the Good Thief at Clinton Correctional Facility

The first challenge was what to use for building materials. But as they looked around, the answer became obvious: they would recycle. There was plenty of stone available from the ruins of 19th-century buildings, including an old barn and the prison's original cell block. They would turn a former prison house into a house of God. Other materials were

donated; a formerly incarcerated mobster gave the wood for pews, and two Jewish brothers supplied an organ.

Prisoners worked diligently on the church for several years, and not a single disciplinary problem was recorded. Some discovered new talents. Carmelo Siraci, incarcerated for charges of forgery, turned his "artistic

flair" to a higher purpose. Using fellow prisoners as his models, he learned how to make the gorgeous stained glass windows that accent the church's walls.

The church was dedicated in 1941. It was called the Church of the Good Thief, St. Dismas, in honor of the thief who was executed next to Jesus and said, "Jesus, remember me when you

come into your Kingdom." (Luke 23:42) To this day, the Church of the Good Thief, one of the prettiest churches in the Adirondack Mountains, stands inside the tall, imposing walls of Clinton Correctional Facility. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991.

Rebuilt from Rubble

Many centuries ago, a man named Nehemiah faced similar challenges with a building project. His people, the ancient Israelites, had been defeated in war and carried as captives to a distant country. Those who weren't dead or in exile struggled to survive in Jerusalem, their devastated capital, but the city's defensive walls had been torn down.

Nehemiah came back from exile determined to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. But how? The material he had was mostly rubble; the only workers available were despairing and downtrodden.

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Letters to the Editor

Remembering Incarcerated Vets

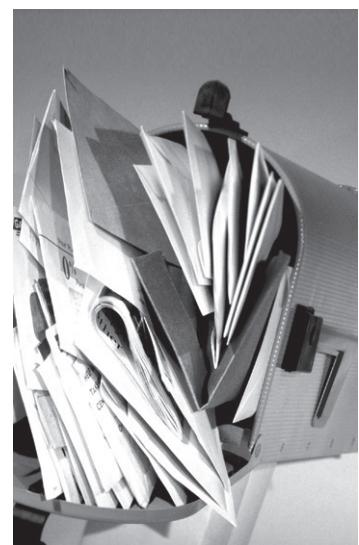
I recently received a copy of your *Inside Journal* Spring 2015 newsletter. I found it very enlightening! However, when I read the two letters from former soldiers, my heart nearly broke! One was from C.H. in Mississippi and the other from D.G. in West Virginia. I have always had a soft spot for our veterans, as I remember the Vietnam days and how I wanted to do something for our servicemen. ... Their letters brought tears to my eyes.

- K.D., Missouri

Colson Task Force

The article in the summer issue on the Colson Task Force really hit home, especially since the problems identified in the federal prisons can be applied to the PA D.O.C. I was really surprised to see that the secretary of the PA D.O.C., Mr. John E. Wetzel, was on the panel. Mr. Wetzel knows what problems his department is facing, and his being on the Task Force gives me some hope that there could be real change in the PA D.O.C. after the Task Force has issued its report and recommendations.

- W.D., Pennsylvania



Thinkstock

A Day With Mom

I am honored to say that today, something broke inside me because of a day known as Day with Mom through Prison Fellowship. I am completely shattered by the realization that we are so loved, even (especially) inside these walls. And that no matter what I have

done out there my past that caused this incarceration, I am accepted, forgiven, blessed, and loved, more than I could have ever known. See, all those years I spent out there busy getting high, running from myself and those who loved me, God had already seen, and let me assure you He causes all things to work together for our good. ... I admit, it is a daily struggle, especially inside this prison, when our fellow prisoners see only our flaws and do everything to upset us and draw us away from God's light. But today I realized that there is absolutely nothing greater than love, God's love, and the love our moms feel for us as we are in here and the love we feel for our children, when we must let them go after a two-hour or four-hour visit.

- E.G., Texas

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Least Likely Church

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With a lot of prayer and a lot of perseverance, Nehemiah found success. Despite great opposition, and the odds stacked against him, he worked with the motley crew of survivors in Jerusalem to rebuild the city's walls. (You can read the whole story in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah.)

Life in a Broken World

Sometimes we hit a low point that makes us realize how truly broken we are and how broken the world is. We look around, we look inside ourselves, and we want to fix things, but what can we do if all we see everywhere is ... rubble? How can God make something beautiful from the misshapen remnants of our mistakes?

1. Realize God is not scared of your mess. God never said that you have to be a "good person" for Him to love you. In fact, He makes it pretty clear that none of us are good people without Him. Jesus compared Himself to a doctor who had come to treat spiritually sick people—not ones who were already healthy. And if you read the Bible, you'll see pretty quickly that many people God cherishes have checkered pasts. He's not intimidated by your rap sheet.

2. Give God what you have.

Maybe you have made a mess of a good thing in your life, or a lot of good things. You might be wondering what God could possibly do with your situation. That's O.K. Just give God what you have, no matter how broken. Ask Him to start working in your life. God can take your broken pieces, unlock their potential, and make something beautiful. That's what grace means.

3. Don't give up. It took a lot of prayer and perseverance for Father Hyland and the prisoner workers to build the Church of the Good Thief. They needed to be creative and hard-working. They had to learn brand-new skills. They even had to stay strong through a court case challenging the constitutionality of a church building on prison grounds. But the end result was worth it: they had a beautiful place to worship, and an enduring testimony to the skill, ingenuity, and God-given dignity and potential of incarcerated people. When God rebuilds our lives from the ground up, He calls us to participate fully in what He is doing, continuing in spite of any obstacles that might come up. It's not always easy, but He promises to be with us, step by step and stone by stone. Along the way, you might find that He is also using you in ways you never dreamed, to heal your family, your community, and your world. ■

Jim Liske is the president and CEO of Prison Fellowship Ministries.

Season of Peace

Continued from page 1

lived halls of a seminary but on a street corner on a Friday night, at 1 a.m."

Slowly, the simple act of walking the streets and having conversations became a movement. The faith leaders began to see that young people could be collaborators in curbing violence. They started to partner with the Boston's gang unit and local schools. Violence dropped. From June 1995 to January 1998, there was not a single juvenile homicide in the city of Boston. Overall juvenile murders



Photo provided by Rev. Jeffrey Brown

Rev. Brown encourages those behind bars to help "end the era of violence."

dropped 79 percent, a phenomenon that came to be known as the Boston Miracle.

Twenty years ago Rev. Brown helped found the TenPoint Coalition, a faith-based crime reduction organization that came out of the lessons learned in Boston. He served as its executive director from 2007 to 2013. Since he stepped down, his commitment to stopping violence has not faltered. He now leads an organization called RECAP (Rebuilding Every Community Around Peace), and he travels around the country promoting "seasons of peace," formal periods when leaders

commit to a truce.

The End of an Era

Along the way, Rev. Brown visits prisons. He believes that men and women behind bars hold the keys to ending urban violence. "Season of Peace came out of conversations we had in jail, talking to incarcerated leaders with say-so," he explained in a recent interview with *IJ*. "We can end the era of violence, and there are people on the inside who can help make it happen. They need to know that there are people on the outside who believe in them."

He encourages those behind

bars to take whatever role they can in bringing an end to violence, whether than means mediating disputes or just banding together with others to take a stand for peace. "Leaders need to get together and say, 'Let's squash this beef,'" he says.

Rev. Brown has this encouraging message specifically for the readers of *IJ*: "There is value in building yourself up as an individual. That's important,

because some of the most intelligent, creative, wise people in the world are incarcerated. We need you out here. You are worth so much."

For juvenile readers he adds, "Keep your head up. People outside care about you and want to help you go in a new direction. You've made bad choices and moved into negative situations, but you can have newness in your life. It is possible." ■

PRAYER WARRIOR CORNER

This fall, please pray for the following concerns:

- Pray for the physical safety of all people behind bars, but especially those who are engaged in dangerous occupations like firefighting.

"He will cover you with his feathers. He will shelter you with his wings. His faithful promises are your armor and protection." - Psalm 91:4

- Pray that God would establish His peace in the hearts of people in prisons and jails as well as on the streets.

"God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God." - Matthew 5:9

- Pray that state and national leaders would base criminal justice reform on the God-given worth of those who commit crimes and those who are harmed by them.

"... O people, the Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." - Micah 6:8

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Turning a Mess Into a Message

by Bill McCombes

At a low point in my life, I went to see Ethel "Sister" Lee. She was a kind, grandmotherly woman who lived in a little shotgun cottage in a not-so-great part of town. She stood less than five feet tall, but she was a giant when it came to spiritual insight. Pastors would often call her for help and prayer. I went knocking on her door to seek her counsel, and she let me in. After taking me to her kitchen and setting a bowl, an egg, and a fork in front of me, Sister Lee

said, "Son, do you know how to scramble an egg?"

At the time I owned and operated nine restaurants. I liked to cook, and omelets were one of my favorite dishes to make, so I nodded.

"Show me," she said.

Taking an egg in one hand, I cracked it on the side of the bowl without breaking the yoke and gently let it slide into the bowl. I then began to scramble it.

In the classic 1994 film, *Forrest Gump*'s mother tells him that life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're going to get. At that time, my life seemed more like a box of choc-

olates that had been dumped into a blender. Every imaginable personal problem seemed to have erupted at once. After being a successful young entrepreneur worth over \$2 million by age 30, I was now facing divorce, my business was in bankruptcy, my house was in foreclosure, my car had been repossessed, and my father had been given less than one year to live. I was not sure what any of this had to do with scrambling an egg.

An Impossible Task

With a penetrating gaze of her deep blue eyes, Sister Lee said, "Now, unscramble it!"

I stared at her, not understanding what she wanted.

"Go ahead, unscramble the egg," she repeated.

After a few more moments of uncomfortable silence, I stammered, "I can't. I can't unscramble an egg."

A profound stillness filled the small kitchen. I looked down at the bowl, filled with a very scrambled egg, and slowly turned my gaze back to her. As I looked into her eyes, it was as if I was looking into the heart of God. With quivering lips, I mumbled again, "I can't unscramble this egg."

Her next words cut straight to my heart. "Son, you can't unscramble eggs. You cannot go back and undo the broken, scrambled places of your past. What's past is past. No matter how hard you try, you cannot unscramble eggs."

"However, if you are willing to take the broken and scrambled times of your life and turn them over to God, He will take what was meant to harm you and create a beautiful omelet. And you will be able to take that same omelet and feed others and help

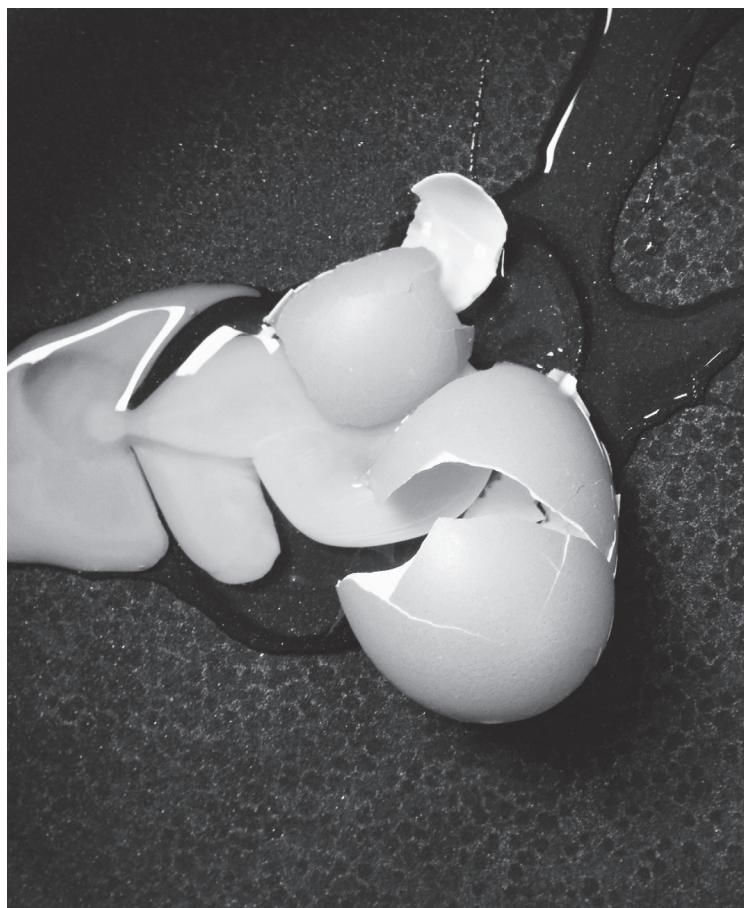
them. With God's help, you will bring strength, nourishment, and help to many others. You cannot unscramble your mess, but you can take that same mess and turn it into a message that will help others."

All Mixed Up

No one can go back and undo the past, but God can give you a new beginning. He can take the pain of your history and turn it into something with value and purpose for the future. In fact, that's His specialty. If that idea sounds attractive to you, you can get started with a simple prayer from the heart.

Dear God, I've made a mess of things. I thought my way was best, but I've hurt myself and other people. Please forgive me. I give myself and all my baggage to You—do what You want with me, to turn my mess into Your message.

If you want to start a new life of forgiveness and wholeness by knowing God and following Him, *Inside Journal* wants to help. Through one of our partner organizations, you can receive a free correspondence Bible study, and an NIV Bible, if you don't have access to one, by writing to "All Mixed Up," c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA, 20146-1790. The materials are available in English and Spanish.



**No one can unscramble an egg,
but God can unscramble the most mixed-up situation.**

room. I'm not sure how long the tears fell off my chin into the scrambled egg, but when I left the kitchen, I had given all my past to God. I knew that I could become all that He had created me to be. I found great freedom in that decision that day. I knew my past would be transformed from a mess into a message, by the hand of God.

2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (NLT) No matter how scrambled the eggs of your life are, whether you, a friend, a relative, or even an enemy "scrambled your eggs," you can allow God to set you free from your past and turn your mess into a message. ■

Pastor Bill McCombes and his wife Nancy are founders of JesusQuest International, a ministry to prisoners, the homeless, and those in need.

Doing HIS Time: Meditations and Prayers for Men and Women in Prison

By James C. Vogelzang with Lynn Vanderzalm
Revised Edition with Study Guides

Foreword by Charles Colson

Doing HIS Time

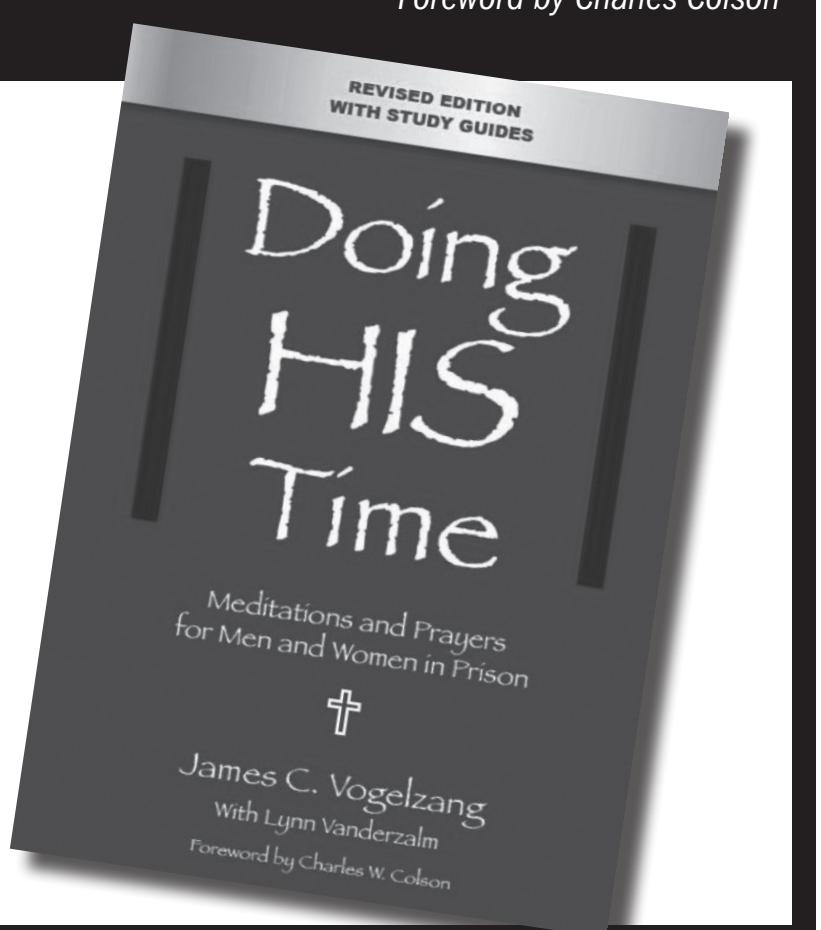
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Pope and President Visit Prisoners

In recent months President Barack Obama and Pope Francis have made separate, historic visits to U.S. correctional facilities. Their actions have helped bring a national focus to the incarcerated population and boosted efforts to reform the system.

President on "Fixing the System"

In July, during a week of speeches and events designed to bring attention to criminal justice reform, President Obama became the first sitting American president to go to a federal prison. He went to western Oklahoma's FCI El Reno, which houses more than 1,200 men in its main medium-security facility and a minimum-security satellite camp.

While at the prison, the president met with six men incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses. The president's conversation with the prisoners was filmed for an HBO documentary hosted by Shane Smith, co-founder and CEO of VICE Media. The hour-long film, called "Fixing the System," was released earlier this fall.

In remarks to the press afterward, President Obama noted that his direct conversation with prisoners was the most poignant part of his visit. "When they describe their youth and their childhood," he said, "these are young people who made mistakes that aren't that differ-



Pope Francis washed the feet of prisoners outside Rome, Italy, when he first became the head of the Roman Catholic Church.

ent than the mistakes I made and the mistakes that a lot of you guys made. The difference is they did not have the kinds of support structures, the second chances, the resources that would allow them to survive those mistakes."

He added, "I think we have a tendency sometimes to almost take for granted or think it's normal that so many young people end up in our criminal justice system. It's not normal. It's not what happens in other countries."

The president said that he feels empathy toward prisoners, many of whom share a background similar to his. He grew up with a single mother and had only a limited relationship with his Kenyan father.

"There but for the grace of God," he said to reporters.

The president's July visit to

FCI El Reno was part of a larger second-term push for justice reform. In the days prior, he gave a major speech about criminal justice to the NAACP and commuted the sentences of 46 nonviolent drug offenders.

Pope Visits Curran-Fromhold

Pope Francis, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, made his first visit to the United States in late September. Millions of American Catholics and admirers of the pope thronged his route as he made stops at the White House and Congress in Washington, D.C., and the headquarters of the United Nations in New York.

On Sunday, September 27, the pope stopped at a location less well-known to the world at large: Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility near Philadelphia,

Pennsylvania, a large facility with thousands of residents.

Pope Francis, a 78-year-old native of Argentina, met with 100 prisoners and members of their families in Curran-Fromhold's gymnasium. At the front of the room was a six-foot-tall walnut chair that prisoners had built especially for the pope's visit. The pontiff thanked them for it, saying, "It's very wonderful. [...] Thank you very much for the hard work."

Dressed in white robes and speaking in a soft voice, the pope, who has washed the feet of prisoners at other facilities in the past, shared about the scene in the Gospel of John when Jesus washed the feet of His followers.

The pope explained, "In those days, it was the custom to wash someone's feet when they came to your home. ... Everyone walked those roads, which left

their feet dusty, bruised, or cut from those stones. That is why we see Jesus washing feet, our feet, the feet of his disciples, then and now."

"We know in faith that Jesus seeks us out. He wants to heal our wounds, to soothe our feet which hurt from travelling alone, to wash us clean of the dust from our journey. ... He doesn't ask us where we have been, he doesn't question us about what we have done. Rather, he tells us: 'Unless I wash your feet, you have no share with me' (John 13:8). Unless I wash your feet, I will not be able to give you the life which the Father always dreamed of, the life for which he created you. Jesus comes to meet us, so that he can restore our dignity as children of God. He wants to help us to set out again, to resume our journey, to recover our hope, to restore our faith and trust. He wants us to keep walking along the paths of life, to realize that we have a mission, and that confinement is not the same thing as exclusion."

Pope Francis encouraged all prisoners to support one another and take advantage of every opportunity for restoration and rehabilitation.

"[Jesus] comes to save us from the lie that says no one can change," he said. He helps us to journey along the paths of life and fulfillment. May the power of his love and his resurrection always be a path leading you to new life." ■



President Barack Obama visited FCI El Reno in Oklahoma.

Prisoner Crews Tackle Wildfires

by Steve Rempe

As the wildfires raging through much of California continue to stretch the abilities and resources of professional firefighters, assistance is coming from an unexpected source—men and women in the California corrections system.

As a record-setting drought dries out the state, 4,000 prisoners have joined forces with roughly 6,000 firefighting professionals in an attempt to tame fires that have burned hundreds of thousands of acres, destroyed property, and cost lives. Working for about \$2 a day, the prisoners are, in the words of California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation spokesman Bill Sessa, "in the thick of it, cutting fire lines and helping to save large areas of California."

Jacques D'Elia served as a member of a similar fire brigade, fighting fires in the Mendocino National Forest for nearly three years between

2011 and 2013. After he was released, he reflected on the time spent in a fire camp in an interview with The Marshall Project, a nonprofit news organization focusing on the criminal justice system.

"It was so physically demanding—but I have to say, it was an honor, a privilege, and a gift to be doing it," D'Elia told The Marshall Project. "Every day, we wanted to prove we were better than the professional firefighters who were there. And it made me understand how much good I could do and how proud of myself I could be at the end of the day, which never happened in prison."

"I almost forgot I was incarcerated sometimes," he added. "The staff treated you like a human, not a number."

The job is dangerous. As Sessa noted, "When you're actually in a fire—this is not a small grass fire, these are fires with flames 100 feet tall."

Still, many California prisoners volunteer for firefighting duties. The money is good by

prison standards, and instead of cells, firefighting crews generally sleep in barracks-style accommodations. Prisoner-fighters, who are carefully screened, go through two weeks of physical fitness training and then receive an additional two weeks of training from Cal Fire, a state agency. They are broken into teams of 12 and often take

on fire suppression projects, like breaking a path through vegetation in an effort to stop a fire in its tracks.

Cory Sills, a California prisoner interviewed for a public radio station, recalled one of his first mornings on a fire crew. He said, "The lieutenant comes out and he goes, 'Look, we'll treat you like men first, fire-



Despite the dangers, many incarcerated people in California volunteer to battle the drought-stricken state's frequent wildfires.

fighters second, and prisoners if we have to.' That right there, that stuck in my head for two years now because now I have a chance to be treated like a man."

D'Elia also reported a good overall experience battling blazes.

"I truly believe that the fire camp saved my life," he said. "I had always struggled with drugs and alcohol, and I have been sober ever since that camp, which is partly because of AA but also because it made me appreciate myself, feel as though I had a purpose in me." ■

PRISON FELLOWSHIP

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