

# True

## An Innovative Program For Elderly Inmates

By Mary T. Harrison

**“Hey, Batter, Batter! Hit the ball! Whatsamatter, ya crippled or blind?”**

**“You oughta know, Mac, pushed my wheelchair before get outta the way!”**

**TRUE GRIT**



Northern Nevada Correctional Center  
Senior Structured Living Program

Artwork and photos courtesy Nevada Department of Corrections

# Grit:

This banter was heard recently during a prison wheelchair softball game at the Northern Nevada Correctional Center (NNCC) in Carson City. Thirty inmates, members of a structured living program for elderly inmates, were engaging in one of the program's most popular activities. The program, True Grit, is the first of its kind in Nevada and attempts to deal with the special needs of the rapidly increasing population of geriatric inmates.

## A Proven Need

Nationally, the number of inmates in state and federal correctional institutions increased approximately 750 percent from 1979 to 1997.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this massive increase include an aging "baby boomer" population bulge, longer life expectancy, and lengthy mandatory sentences and "life without" sentences for second-or third-felony offenses.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the U.S. population will continue to age at the current rate until 2010, and then the rate will accelerate. The U.S. prison population is expected to mirror this trend.

In 2005, the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that 12 percent of male inmates incarcerated nationwide were older than 50.<sup>3</sup> Based on data that indicate the average inmate is physiologically about 10 years older than a cohort of never-incarcerated men, the Department of Justice has stated that age 50 is the appropriate benchmark to indicate a "senior inmate."<sup>4</sup>

Reviews of data on inmate cost indicate that the cost of incarcerating a senior inmate is approximately three times that of a younger man.<sup>5</sup>

Several states, including Florida,<sup>6</sup> Georgia,<sup>7</sup> Pennsylvania, Oklahoma<sup>8</sup> and Maryland,<sup>9</sup> have issued position papers or statements concerning the increase in elderly inmate populations and their special needs. Prison systems in Louisiana (at Angola Prison) and California (at its Vacaville Medical Facility) have established model hospice programs for terminally ill inmates, while other states have experimented with compassionate early release programs. However, there has been little correctional programming actually put in place for aging inmates who are not terminally ill but are serving their "golden years" behind bars.

## A Winning Program

Recognizing the need to deal with this class of inmate, Dorothy Nash Holmes, Nevada's deputy director of correctional programs, tasked NNCC's staff psychologist with developing a program to address the special physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs of elderly inmates. The program was to be a structured living program as opposed to a hospice, because the focus was to get the older inmates out of their beds and into more activities and better health. NNCC is essentially the state's medical prison because it encompasses the only inmate hospital (Regional Medical Facility), houses a majority of Nevada's mentally ill inmates and houses most of the physically infirm inmates. Because more than 300 of the facility's 1,250 offenders are age 50 or older and there was limited capacity for the program, the difficult decision was made to set the minimum age for program participation at 60.

It was a challenge, at first, to get the elderly inmates to come to the meetings or participate in the planning sessions because they were held in the Regional Medical Facility. Once the staff psychologist realized that the elderly inmates shied away from the medical facility because "inmates go there to die," the planning sessions were moved into one of the housing units and inmates' interest piqued. Inmates were allowed to apply, or were referred by staff, and were then reviewed by a classified committee to ensure eligibility. Assessment of each potential candidate for the program included an evaluation of criminal history, physical and mental health, work history and skills, life skills, family ties, and community relationships.

No state funds (other than the psychologist's salary) were expended to set up the program. NNCC Warden Don Helling set aside a dayroom and office in one of the housing units for the program and they were renovated using donated materials and inmate labor. Various service organizations, charities and individuals donated materials for hobby crafts and recreational activities. In April 2004, an initial group of 50 men was accepted into the program.

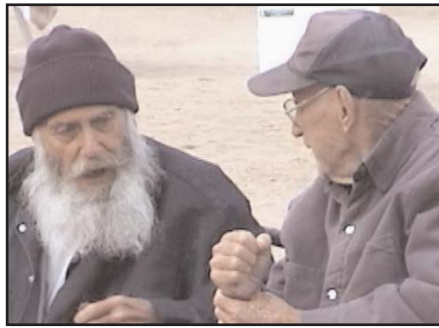
Other special programs within the DOC had selected catchy names and logos for themselves, and the "old guys" didn't want to be any different. After long, spirited and sometimes heated debate, the name True Grit was selected. Because one of the first special activities that occurred was a visit by a large Flat-coat Retriever therapy dog named Willie, it was a unanimous decision that the dog should appear in the logo. A man in a wheelchair, and an eye-patch for the dog completed the picture, and True Grit was born. As a final touch, a local businessman donated T-shirts, sweatshirts and baseball caps with the imprinted logo.

Together with Nevada's Division of Aging Services, the program was designed to enhance physical health (by means of various recreational and physical therapy activities); mental health (using group and individual therapy and self-help modalities); and spiritual health (coordinated with the prison chaplain and volunteers). It was established as a daily program, with varying activities each day of the week. Although all participants are not required to engage in all activities, such involvement is encouraged.

Contact with the local Delta Society brings two, and sometimes three, large therapy dogs into the prison on a



John Henry Marks became a barber in 1947, after serving in World War II, and cut hair for more than 50 years. Here he is looking for his homerun of the day.



During a fall softball game, Jesse Roseen (right), 87, tells Al Bailey (left), "This is the most fun I've had in prison." Bailey responds, "This is the most fun I've had in my life."



Stanley Brooks (right) performs an original composition to Balou, a visitor from the Delta Society.

monthly basis. During their first visit, there was not a dry eye in the unit when an elderly inmate wept saying, "I haven't petted a dog in 37 years!" Willie, the "Death Row Dog" (named that by the inmates because he was saved from being euthanized), is often joined by a huge Leonberger named Brendan and a golden retriever named Baloo. These dogs provide stimulation and contact that both the men and the dogs enjoy. One inmate, serving a life sentence, has been "rejuvenated" by writing and performing songs about the therapy dogs. He says: "Before True Grit, I spent 23 hours a day in my rack [bed]. Now I am in the program, writing and performing songs."

Warden Helling and Glen Whorton, the director of corrections, both enthusiastically support the program. As the program has matured and expanded, there have been several additions. All materials used in the program have been donated by various organizations or purchased using funds from a handful of generous donors. Word of the program spread in the community after the local newspaper featured a front-page article with photos of the "old codgers" playing a rough game of "wheelchair basketball." That exposure resulted in donations of supplies for crafts and volunteers signing up to help.

Wheelchair softball during the warmer months and wheelchair basketball during the winter provide needed physical and social activity for the True Gritters. There was resistance at first to using wheelchairs on the playing field and basketball court, but once the activity got under way, it was completely supported. In True Grit, these games are not for the faint-hearted. In a recent, competitive wheelchair basketball game, there were a number of collisions and one participant temporarily lost his artificial leg. Despite that, Fred, 87, who is serving a life sentence, declared, "I haven't had this much fun in years."

For the more fragile men who might suffer serious injuries during vigorous sports, there is a pedometer program, in which men walk (or roll their wheelchairs) around a set course in the institution, racking up mileage and earning kudos. Their goal is 10,000 steps a day.

A prized activity by some of the men, and one that keeps their arthritic fingers nimble, is making latch-hook rugs. Helling granted special permission to get some of the tools into the unit. Crafts that the men make are donated to the local senior citizen's center and sold through its craft store, with the money going to the senior center. In this way, the True Gritters can give back to the community.

One of the most spectacular successes of 2005 was the True Grit production of "12 Angry Men." The emotion and

realism that the inmates brought to this presentation was amazing. The participants and the audience of regular NNCC inmates thoroughly enjoyed the play. They have proposed "The Producers" as their next featured play.

Each month, True Grit has a group birthday party for members who have a sobriety birthday, a true birthday or who are just celebrating surviving another year in prison. The men of True Grit publish an occasional journal, which comments on activities of the group over the previous month, features inmate poetry, memorializes deceased members and annotates upcoming events. One volunteer, Ruth Stacy, started a project for the men to write "ethical wills"—statements to their families as to how they would like to be remembered after they die and, in some cases, apologies to their victims.

True Grit includes a small cadre of "National Treasures"—men in their 70s or 80s who fought in World War II. Later in life they may have become habitual criminals after the war or succumbed to violent behavior. Some have been imprisoned because of vehicular homicide, while others have been convicted of sexual offenses, possibly a result of early Alzheimer's disease or other cognitive impairment. Regardless of their offense, their national service is recognized and honored by the other inmates. For these veteran True Gritters, the staff psychologist provides donated books, journals and music about soldiers' wartime experiences.

## Impact

What has been the impact of the True Grit Senior Structured Living Program? Qualitatively (numerical data are still being collected), the number of infirmary visits by elderly inmates has decreased; the amount of psychotropic and psychoactive medications they use has decreased; the general feeling of well-being of the men in the program has increased markedly; and the fear of dying alone in prison has been reduced. On at least two occasions, men in the program have died in prison, but they have died with one or more of their peers with them. NNCC does not have a formal prison hospice program in place, but the companionship of the men in True Grit provides a similar level of support. The musical inmates in True Grit even serenade their counterparts who are confined to the infirmary.

The elderly inmate situation is not going away, so Nevada and the rest of the United States need to aggressively address the issues of: advanced medical care in prison, including hospices; geriatric mental health services; transition and community re-integration for those who

will be released; early (compassionate) release; and post-incarceration housing.

True Grit is only a beginning, albeit a successful one. What is next for Nevada's elderly inmates? Program staff plan to collect data in order to assess outcomes and present such outcomes to the state Legislature. Additional mental health assessments will be incorporated into the program, and funding for additional programs via grants from government and private sources is being pursued. The perceived need for additional training of staff with regard to the special needs of elderly inmates is being addressed. An affiliation with a health sciences university is being developed, with the idea that student interns in various health-related disciplines will be able to learn while working with the elderly inmates.

True Grit has provided the elderly inmates, many of whom will be incarcerated for the rest of their lives, with a reason to get up in the morning. They no longer spend hours in bed or sit stagnant on the benches in the prison yard. It has proved to be an effective way to assist the neediest inmates and it parallels the kind of age-specific activities and camaraderie they would get in a senior citizen's center in the community. As an added benefit, seeing the "old guys" come back to life has given hope to many other DOC inmates and has shown them some humanity in a place that can, all too often, become devoid of it.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hoelter, H.J. 2001. Institutional issues. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, 38(1): S38-S39.

<sup>2</sup> Georgia Department of Corrections. 2004. *Executive Summary: Georgia's Aging Inmate Population*. Augusta, Ga.: Georgia Department of Corrections.

<sup>3</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2005. *BJS Bulletin*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (January).

<sup>4</sup> Falter, R.G. 1993. *Selected predictors of health service needs of inmates over age 50*. Doctoral. Dissertation, Walden University.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Justice. 2000. *Health issues and geriatric inmates*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>6</sup> Florida House of Representatives. 1999. *An examination of elder inmates services: An aging crisis*. Criminal Justice and Corrections Council Committee on Corrections.

<sup>7</sup> Georgia DOC, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Wheeler, M., M. Connelly and J. Wheeler. 1995. Aging of prison populations: Directions for Oklahoma. *Oklahoma Criminal Justice Research Consortium*, Vol. 2:72-79.

<sup>9</sup> Duckett, N., T. Fox, T. Harsha and J. Vish. 2000. *The aging prison population*. College Park, Md.: State Commission on Criminal Sentencing Policy.

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