

## Program helps inmates learn a trade, pay back community

By Sandra Brands  
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On the surface, it looks just like a college campus. Geraniums and brown-eyed susans bloom cheerfully in courtyards. Trimmed and shapely hedges mark out the boundaries of the grounds. There's even a playground for the children who come to visit.

Only the guards, dressed in crisp white shirts, indicate that this isn't a school, that it is, in fact, the Minnesota Correctional Facility for Women in Shakopee.

But there is also something of truth in the first impression that this is a school. Some of the inmates will spend part of their sentence taking classes and earning credits from Hennepin County Technical College. But there's a twist. They are also part of a restorative justice program at the institute. As part of their sentence, they will use their newly-learned skills to raise money to give back to the community.

According to construction technology teacher Michele Bevis, the restorative justice program at the prison is relatively new. Some restorative justice programs give victims the chance to confront an offender. Other programs, like the one in Shakopee, give inmates the opportunity to "pay back" a community through work.

The program is voluntary at the Shakopee prison. Inmates are working on projects such as making uniforms for students at West Central Elementary School in North Minneapolis, building planter boxes and wooden reading puzzles for the students, and holding a doughnut sale to raise

\$300 for a banner for the school.

One class is building a storage shed for the Southern Valley Alliance for battered Women. Six students have been building the shed during their morning classes in construction technology.

"To me it's important that offenders can give back to a community," said Bevis. "The community has to provide that opportunity. It's a partnership and gives offenders a chance to give back, to help [them] with self-esteem and to feel the good feelings we all normally feel."

"For me, it feels good to be able to do something for a cause, to give something back to the community that I might have taken away from it," said inmate Jenny Larson, 21, who is serving a sentence for burglary and auto theft. "It's just a great feeling."

Bevis said the idea to build a shed as part of the restorative justice program led her to contact a number of nonprofit organizations in the Shakopee area. The letter came at just the right moment for the Southern Valley Alliance for Battered Women. Executive Director Mary Ann Bigaouette said that when Bevis contacted alliance staff, they were in the middle of building a center to conduct safe child-visitation exchanges between custodial and noncustodial parents.

"We needed an outdoor shed to store lawn equipment for the center," she said. "I received the letter from Michele that asked if we happened to need a shed, and it was just perfect [time]."

The Lutheran Brotherhood branch in Chaska donated the \$600 worth of supplies and delivered the materials to the

prison. When the shed is completed, representatives from Lutheran Brotherhood will pick up the shed and set it up at the shelter.

"We've had a long-term relationship with the battered women's shelter and [in] funding them in various ways," said Jim Sulerud, a registered representative of Lutheran Brotherhood in the Chaska-Chanhassen area. "We saw this as a way to be helpful to them this year. We're glad to make that contact within the Shakopee facility. It may lead to good things down the line there."

The shed is the third the class has built. The first two were sold to the public for \$700 and the money was used to help pay for the cost of the program.

Bevis said that the shed project has been helpful because it teaches the students the basics of house construction, skills they can take with them when they leave prison, either to remodel and repair their own homes, or to enter the work force as skilled construction workers.

For April Rawlings, 29, the class is giving her the chance to learn something she's wanted to learn.

"I wanted to get in the construction trade for a long time," said Rawlings, who is serving a sentence for second-degree assault. "When I found out they had a construction program, I wanted to do it. It's a real good program for someone who really wants to get something out of it."

"You have the satisfaction of building something and sitting back and knowing you did it," said Trina Quest, 23, who is serving a sentence for kidnapping.

"And it feels, good to do something for people who need the help. It's a nice experience."

Alvera Barrett, 32, is serving a sentence for burglary and receiving stolen property. She says she's thinking about entering the construction trade as a profession when she leaves prison. But the construction technology class has helped her in ways she hadn't expected.

"After this [class], I had the courage to take the math test of the GED [for a high school Diploma]," she said. "You need a lot of math for this type of work, and I want to learn more and more."

"Things happen for a reason," Barrett said. "I got a lot out of this experience. I'll leave here with a career."

Inmate Michelle Phillips agrees. The 26-year-old, serving a sentence for first-degree sale of controlled substances, said the class and program have helped her develop a positive attitude and "do things on my own as far as learning goes. It helps you build confidence in your I work."

"People don't understand that the education we receive here benefits us and we take it with us when we leave," said Larson. "It's a misconception that all we do is sit around in prison and do nothing. A lot of women do get something out of the education here. We're applying things that are inside of us, we can learn we're good at something, and that gives us something for when we leave."

Bevis agrees. "These programs are imperative if we expect these people to go back to society and contribute to it," she said.

"I think [the restorative-justice program] is a, wonderful way for people to give back to the community," said alliance Director Bigaouette. "I think the really great thing about this



Inmates, from left, Jenny Larson, Trina Quest, Alvera Barrett, April Rawlings and Michelle Phillips with instructor Michele Bevis stand in front of the storage shed they built for the Southern Valley Alliance for Battered Women.

program is that they are learning skills that, when they are released, they can take to the community,

Bevis, who is a carpenter by trade, teaches full-time at the prison. In the morning, she teaches the introduction to construction-technology class. In the afternoon, she teaches classes in tiling, painting, drywall, electricity, plumbing, siding and blueprint reading. She, too, has noticed changes in the students she's taught over the course of the classes.

She cites the fact that she has "fired" one of her students from her class twice for attitude problems.

"This is considered a work site even if it's part of their education," she said, adding that she has a strict set of rules that her students must follow. The student she "fired" came back, reapplied for a job, and was given a second and third chance.

"Her attitude has changed completely," Bevis said. "She's been more positive, more reasonable. She's teaching the others well and she's more consistent."

Part of what Bevis emphasizes in class is what will be expected from the students in the workforce and what the students can expect when they go to work. "Our thrust is to teach skills that allow these women to survive in a job and to make it in the work world."

"Some of the students are so amazed that they can do [construction trades]," she said. "Even if they don't pursue this, my hope is that the confidence they get from this project will help them in the rest of their lives."