



VIEW FROM THE CHU

Stepping Up

A letter from the new View from the CHU editor-in-Chief

It is a great honor to be the new leader of the Journalism Program and Editor-In-Chief of the “View from the CHU” (VFTC). I believe it is only with a humble heart and dedicated spirit that I was able to accept this role. These shoes, which were left to me by my friend and mentor Nathan R., are truly big ones to fill. I wish him success in life and know that he will be great in whatever he puts his mind to.

Looking forward, I’m excited about the many opportunities this new chapter has in store not only for my life but the Journalism Program, the VFTC, and ACI as well.

Thanks to Warden McKendley Newton, Associate Warden of Programs Yvonne Wilkins-Smith, Administrative Assistant Lekeya Chisolm, Program Coordinator Preston Ellison and our dedicated volunteers, Lynne Hummell and Gwyneth Saunders, our publication is still up and running during this Covid-19 pandemic.

While keeping the VFTC going is at the top of my priority list, it is but one of the goals I hope to accomplish during my tenure as Program Leader. With the help of the journalism staff, we hope to offer our “Introduction to Journalism” class to the entire ACI. We also hope to develop a new Photojournalism course. This class will be dedicated to teaching both the technical and the artistic aspects of the job that today’s reporters are required to know.

These are only a few of the objectives we hope to accomplish and with the dedication of my journalism team, the support of ACI staff and administration and the tireless efforts of volunteers, I believe we can make the publication greater than ever! Thank you for giving me this chance.

Humbly, Adam S.



Minister, Musician, Chaplain

Ava Harris, Allendale Chaplain

As many of our readers know, Ava Harris serves the pivotal role as ACI's Chaplain. Not only does she lead Sunday morning Protestant services, but she constantly crusades to help the less fortunate. Among many other demands, Chaplain Harris provides grief counseling services to those residents who need a sympathetic ear. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, she finds her services needed now more than ever. The VFTC staff sat down with her and gave them an effort to learn more about her and her mission.

In February 2020, Harris assumed the role of ACI Chaplain. With 40 years in ministry and gospel choir experience, she humbly described her feelings toward her new position with one simple word: "Nervous."

Within her first week in the position, she called a meeting with the leaders of ACI's religious groups. Her agenda was to discover "what has been working and what has not." She also met with Columbia International University graduates and ACI's choir members to discover the same. She then began taking steps to develop a comprehensive spiritual community that served the needs of all ACI residents.

Then tragedy hit hard! Along with the rest of the world, ACI faced a pandemic—the likes of which no one had encountered before. This unforeseen event significantly elevated her role as a counselor. While residents struggled to cope with their losses, anxiety, depression and feelings of isolation, they searched for somewhere to turn. That led to a more active approach in grief counseling and active listening. "I don't give a lot of advice," Harris said. "I listen, and for those who desire, we pray. But I personally can't do anything to help but listen." As she serves ACI, she seeks to practice Jesus's advice: "Be wise as a serpent and humble as a dove." (Matthew 10:16).

Harris continued to explain how covid has affected her daily operations: “It has made me more aware of my surroundings—where I am, and what I touch,” she said. “The last thing I want to do is take the virus home or be the one who brings it into ACI.”

When asked how she came to be ACI’s chaplain, she admitted her life plans centered neither on ministering nor living in South Carolina. At age 17, she started singing and playing the piano for “A Touch of Faith,” a University of South Carolina gospel choir. As a young woman, she left SC to pursue a career in corporate America, only to be called back to care for her ailing parents.

She struggled with the decision to pursue pastoral duties for quite a long time. Admittedly, a congregation of her own was not something she wanted. She explained how she tried to bargain with God to “Let my music be enough.” When her senior advisors asked about preaching, she recalled thinking: “Who in their right mind would want to pastor?” God had bigger plans however, and just after accepting a job with Blue Cross, she was called to ministry.

Harris began her life in ministry by becoming a chaplain for a hospice organization. After a time, she found herself with an opportunity for prison ministry at Turberville C.I. While working there, she realized she wanted something closer to home. After applying various positions with no luck, she had almost given up hope. A friend encouraged her to try one more time.

Just before Christmas 2019, SCDC called with an offer for ACI’s chaplain position. “After meeting Associate Warden Wilkins-Smith, I just knew I wanted to work here”, she explained. “I still have to pinch myself to see that I’m not dreaming.”



Recovering from K2

Recently ACI found its inmates under attack. The culprits were not religious fanatics or microscopic organisms, but the greedy drug pushers who preyed on the weakness of some of ACI's inmates to profit from their addiction to K2. Recognizing a sharp uptick in K2 overdoses during the preceding weeks, Associate Warden Wilkins-Smith organized a K2 recovery group which first met on Sept. 11, 2020, at 2 p.m. in the Multi-Purpose Building.

Pamela Derrick, registered nurse of the Health Care Authority, introduced the K2 crisis by describing some of the potential consequences.

"This K2 usage is just getting crazy," she said. "I don't understand why anyone would want to swim in his own vomit. There is nothing I can do to bring you out of it. There is going to be death, and I don't want to see anyone die for any reason here. There is going to be some brain death."

Resident Nathan R. followed with a personal anecdote. He related how he woke up in the holding cell so disoriented that he had to ask the Warden, “What happened?”

What happened was that he had succumbed to temptation and used some K2, which had been given to him as the “real deal.” The subsequent disorientation, anxiety and delusional paranoia brought his usage to the attention of the wing officer. “I have been fighting addiction my entire life, more unsuccessfully than successfully,” Nathan admits. “I thought I couldn’t fall out. It took that shock. There is something better for me than this.”

He acknowledged the detriment of his K2 usage to the multiple leadership positions during the “walk of shame” back to the dorm. While he thought he would be judged harshly for his downfall, he was instead surprised to discover that his friends were filled with love and support for him.

The positive outcome of this event is that Nathan now acknowledges he has a need for his addiction problems to be recognized. Unfortunately, the support system that helped him stay clean was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Quarantine rules temporarily prevented him from seeing his Certified Peer Support Specialist (CPSS) counselor, who lives in another dorm. Now that his addiction issues have been brought to the light, Nathan stated, “I am finally ready to devote myself to recovery. I’ve gotten away with stuff for too long.” He has renounced his leadership positions and taken many personal steps to begin the recovery process.

Nathan’s personal revelation was followed by an equally powerful one by Christopher W. This former user admitted that while at Tyger River Correctional Institution he smoked K2 daily for two years. He continued this behavior despite seeing multiple people die from the drug. His best friend suffered a cardiac arrest from which Christopher was successful in resuscitating him. He is now two years clean and in recovery.

David Y., a CPS graduate, followed with a positive message. “Recovery is possible,” he said. It happens every day.” David also emphasized that while many around you may act like your friend and encourage your addictions, only to laugh and gossip about you when you inevitably stumble and fall, there is a network of people who care about your well-being here in the form of CPSS graduates. He encourages those among the population to make a confidential contact with a CPSS volunteer and begin the recovery process.

AW Wilkins-Smith and Maj. Shawanda Washington ended the program with a similar message. Both stated that SCDC does what it can to protect inmates. AW Wilkins-Smith related that it is her job, on occasion, to inform the family members of the death of an inmate from a drug overdose. She often must answer the question from family members: Did you do everything you could to help my son make a good decision? In respect to that question, yard wide NA/AA/EA classes are now being held with social distancing mandates in mind. This is happening in an effort to address this growing problem and give those interested in recovery the tools to work towards solutions in their lives.

Scott H.

Peer Support Update

The 13 Certified Peer Support Specialists at ACI recently received 12 continuing education requirements.

The training, which was delivered via Zoom because of the Covid-19 pandemic, dealt with ethics, crisis management and motivational interviewing, a technique used by mental health and addiction professionals to compassionately help clients move toward change.

David Y.

TESA/T for T Graduation

Smiles covered the faces of the graduating members of the TESA and T for T classes as ACI residents gathered together for a celebration that had been postponed for weeks.

Speeches were cut short as the smell of the catered meal reached the noses of the residents and staff alike. Resident TESA Facilitator Mark B. did manage to show his pride for both classes and stress the importance of TESA. “It’s not just teaching,” he said. “It’s about the ability to develop relationships with others.” He encouraged his students to take the lessons learned in class and apply them in every aspect of life.



Warden McKendley Newton encouraged the men to be proactive during this pandemic. “I don’t want you guys to be stagnant,” he said. He stressed the importance of the classes as to not only better ourselves but to also help keep the crime rates low. “Today is your day,” he stated. “I’m so proud of you! I thank each one of you for what you do and keep up

the good work.”

This sentiment was echoed by Associate Warden of Programs Yvonne Wilkins-Smith, Peer Support Volunteer Mike Crawford and Maj. Shawanda Washington.

As certificates were awarded and bellies filled, the smiles of the residents grew bigger still. The pride in their accomplishments was clearly on display for all to see.

Adam S.

Corporal D Dunbar

A Struggle with Covid

The illness began on a Friday. Cpl. D. Dunbar had arrived at work feeling fine. He passed the temperature check without a problem. ACI’s yard was under quarantine and Dunbar’s days were consumed with transporting sick inmates to Lee Correctional Institution, where they were being cared for. He had used the provided N-95 mask and latex gloves for the transport runs.

Suddenly, Dunbar began to feel something heavy in his chest and began to have pains like an electrical jolt when he took a deep breath. He had gone from feeling completely normal to coughing and chest pain within a matter of hours. The administration sent the corporal home to convalesce, where he stayed in a separate room from his wife and children. He loaded up on orange juice and Tylenol. His cousin brought him an elderberry tonic. On Wednesday, he went to one of those drive-up test sites where a nasal swab revealed that he had COVID-19.

Dunbar spent the next two weeks in self-quarantine with coughing and chest pains. He lost his taste and smell. His temperature maximum was 102.7 degrees Fahrenheit. After two weeks, he had a follow-up covid test in an Orangeburg church, which was negative.

Dunbar said he didn't have any pre-existing conditions that might have contributed to a worst outcome. In the past, Dunbar worked at a golf course. There he might eat 60 snicker bars in a half-day.//is this really true or perhaps a typo? 60 Snickers bars seems like a lot/ for 4 hours// After arriving at SCDC, he gave up this habit, and, in reflection, his improved health and absence of pre-existing conditions probably contributed to avoiding a worse outcome.

Scott H.