

VIEW FROM THE CHU

A newsletter created by residents of Allendale Correctional Institution

In this issue:

Horticulture workers ...pg. 3

'United makes us one' ... pg. 5

Scenes around ACI ... pg. 6

Game on! A thank you ... pg. 7

In Memoriam ... pg. 8

Volunteers

Volunteers might not be onsite, but they haven't forgotten about the men and staff at Allendale.

While some groups have sent treats, books, games and other items to the men, others have had little connection.

This newsletter, with articles and photographs by the men, was compiled over a few months to bring some news from the inside to the volunteers, to let them know that the men and staff are doing the best they can to get through these uncertain times.



Members of Book Club discuss their most recently read book.

ACI struggles to find 'new normal'

By Adam S.

Whether in the newspaper, on television, radio or the internet, newscasters everywhere are talking about "a new normal." Here at ACI, staff, residents and volunteers are also trying to find our "new normal."

The CBU program has suffered in many ways during this COVID-19 pandemic – most notably in the loss of two residents to the insidious virus – but residents' daily habits have suffered as well.

"The lockdown was rough," resident Eric H. said. "I'm glad that it's over, but we gotta get a routine going."

NORMAL continued on pg. 2



It felt good to get outside in the sun.

Life at ACI changes on a daily basis. The COVID-19 pandemic demands even greater changes by the residents and staff. With no end to the pandemic in sight, all parties are working diligently to demonstrate the strength and resilience of the CBU program in rising to this challenge.

The “new normal” means finding a way to deal with problematic residents who cannot be quickly transferred to another institution when they disrupt the community in various ways. The “new normal” means accepting that volunteers will not be able to meet in person with residents for the foreseeable future.

While trying to find some semblance of routine, residents are struggling to incorporate new health and safety regulations into their daily lives. Following suit with the rest of the nation, residents are expected to wear face masks at all times when outside of their cells. They are also expected to balance efforts to lower the

dorm noise level while still observing social distancing guideline.

Dorm workers clean the dorms with increased frequency. They pay special attention to common areas such as the phone and kiosk room, handrails and door handles. They spray these areas with disinfectant many times per day.

“We’re working really hard to keep the virus away,” Bamberg dorm worker Clyde C. explained.

Resident program leaders strive to gain momentum in getting their program classes going again. CRI board members, including Camille Nairn and Kent James, assist through conference calls every two weeks. In this remote fashion, volunteers continue to provide the support that is the lifeblood of ACI’s success.

Many non-essential staff now work from home in an effort to thwart the spread of the virus. However, the staff members who remain work tirelessly to stay one step ahead of catastrophe. The administration makes sure that all people entering the institution have their temperature checked. All staff also must wear mandated masks and face shields.

ACI’s COVID-19 five-week quarantine ended on June 2. Since that time, the institution has not had an outbreak reoccurrence. Most of ACI’s residents accept that the CBU programs cannot function the way that they did in the past. Through any obstacle that the program now faces, there is a distinct effort to make the best of our current situation. Residents are reminded that it is not in times of ease, but rather in times of difficulty, when the measure of a man is revealed

Everyone searches for a glimmer of hope and the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel that will signal a return to normalcy. Until the day dawns when visitors and volunteers walk the institutional grounds once again, ACI will continue to live a “new normal.”

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Horticulture workers dig deep for motivation



Their work ethic doesn't emphasize speed but rather an unrelenting steadiness of hand and mind. They work long days together, only to return to Bamberg Dormitory where they share a cell. They are a team in every sense of the word, echoing each other's words as they explain their passion for a job well done.

"When I'm working, I'm able to focus on what I'm doing and clear my mind of any distractions," Carl explained. "It's kind of like a meditation for me."

By Nathan R.

Horticulture Supervisor Yolanda Aldrich serves as the 'General' of the ACI Horticulture Program. Her team of resident workers are her boots on the ground as they labor in the gardens, greenhouse and institutional grounds. Driven by the interconnected desires to learn a marketable skill while gaining peace of mind, they depart for work before dawn and fight swarms of gnats in the summer heat to produce fresh, tasty vegetables.

The horticulture workers' goal for 2020 is to yield 10,000 pounds of produce from the vegetable gardens. This is an ambitious goal considering that only two resident workers are assigned to tend the gardens. Terry H. is assigned to the large garden and Archie H. to the small one. They both are tasked with cultivating the soil, weeding, planting and harvesting produce.

On a recent day, Terry squinted as the relentless sun crept across the sky. He wiped sweat from his brow and spoke of his motivation.

"I know a lot of guys look forward to getting fresh produce," Terry said.

"Feeding the masses is what drives me."

Topiary artists Jeffrey L. and Carl C. trim the yard's many hedges each day.

Both shared how the topiary work gives them peace of mind and a physical workout that doesn't require a single push-up. They agreed that steady work helps to pass the time. Before they realize it, another week has passed. But most importantly, Jeffrey is compelled by an intrinsic drive to do his best at whatever job is before him.

"To see the work of your hands when you know you've done your best," he said with a reflective look in his eyes, "it makes you proud of what you've done."

Christopher W. hasn't worked on the Horticulture team for long – just four months in fact. He began cutting grass, but when a spot opened in the greenhouse, he wasted no time in applying for a transfer. His work in the greenhouse has become a form of therapy for him, granting him a balanced mind and a prospective career path upon release. He grew up working in his family's garden and anticipates his fast-approaching release date, when he will return home to care for his ailing father and young daughter.

Christopher explained that his passion for this work doesn't end when he returns to the dorm at the end of his workday. "When I'm not in the greenhouse,

HORTICULTURE continued on pg. 4



ACI has a new addition on the yard. This pergola has been install over the area adjacent to the small fish pond and waterfall. A generous grant from the Church Mouse paid for the lumber and other materials and the men designed it and did the work.

HORTICULTURE continued from pg. 3

getting hands-on learning, I'm reading gardening books," he said. "There's so much to learn. It's never-ending."

Derrick C. works on grounds maintenance. He mows the institutional ground practically every week during the spring and summer. He admitted that he didn't even cut his own grass when he was a free man.

"I didn't have any work ethic when I was out there," he said. "That is one thing that I'm grateful for: this time to learn a skill that I can use when I'm released."

The work that these men do is demanding and often lacking in tangible rewards. Yet over time their motivation has become intrinsic – a feeling of self-worth, peace and a pleasant soreness that results from a long hard day's work. For

many, those things might not seem so important; but for them, it is enough.

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Yolanda Aldrich: ‘United makes us one’

By Scott H.

Wearing a black T-shirt with the message “United makes us one,” Horticulture Supervisor Yolanda Aldrich busily dispatched the floriculture workers to their far-flung tasks.

Aldrich forms the nexus of grounds maintenance, beekeeping, floriculture, sustainable living and the horticulture activities at ACI. Conforming with her T-shirt message, she expressed, “All of us together will make this program look better.”

In this COVID-19-altered world, she strives to direct workers from each dorm on separate weekdays to beautify both the inside and outside of the ACI complex. “COVID has not stopped us. The guys were right back into their routine – boosting everything back into shape.”

Aldrich’s goal is to make ACI so attractive that visitors have to ask, “Is this a prison or a college campus?” As a result of her guidance, visitors already experience a much-improved breezeway with a greater variety and quality of flowers. Beyond the beautification, she is responsible for the basic ground maintenance, such as grass cutting and waste pickup.

Aldrich studied computer technology for two years but found I.T. rather dry. She always enjoyed working in her yard, so she leaped at the job opening for Allendale’s Horticulture Supervisor, which had hours that matched her need to care for three children. “I love working in the greenhouse,” she said. And with the need to mentor numerous workers through various issues, at times she feels that studying to be a chaplain or counselor would have better prepared her for the job.

Among the tasks that Aldrich ably directs is the vegetable garden behind the



kitchen. Although the COVID-19 quarantine reduced the garden’s yield this year, residents have been enjoying plenty of corn-on-the-cob, squash, zucchini and bell peppers. Aldrich hopes to increase the harvest of broccoli and add cauliflower and mustard greens to next year’s crop. In addition to vegetables, the horticulture program has a fig tree and three plum trees. She hopes to add some additional fruit trees such as apple trees in the future.

In order to provide for these program additions, horticulture sells greenhouse-grown flowering plants and shrubs to SCDC employees. This income, as well as the recycling of aluminum cans and cardboard, puts money into the horticulture coffers. Along with volunteer Wes Bommer, she oversees the apiculture program, which yielded 60 jars of honey at last harvest with at least one more harvest planned for this year.

Aldrich is grateful for the workers for their contributions to the yard beautification. Her workers, in turn, express their appreciation for her. She enjoys educating the residents in sustainable farming practices.

“I’m doing time with you,” she said. “Fifteen more years to go and then I will know what to do [in my garden].”

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Snapshots from around ACI



Various artists in Hampton Unit created this mural to show unity at ACI despite the turmoil in our society.



The stand for the new aquarium includes a shelf that's perfect for displaying pottery made by ACI artists.

[View from the CHU](#)



Alcoholics Anonymous / Narcotics Anonymous continues to meet to support one another.



Fall Festival was held Oct. 27-31. CRI purchased cookies and coffee and the Hospitality Committee put it together. Goodie bags were prepared and handed out to inmates.



Advanced Artists of Allendale continue being creative.

Game on! A special ‘thank you’ to volunteers

By Adam S.

A thunderous roar of laughter erupted from the midst of a large group of men surrounding a small table. The noise encouraged others to discover what the commotion was all about.

The volume intensified as more and more spectators gathered around. Then – complete silence as yet another Jenga block was being surgically removed by one of the four men that sat center stage. Another booming cheer emerged from the large group as the men successfully placed the block on top of the unbalanced tower.

Onlookers continued to both commend and jeer the competitors as block after block was removed and the tower grew taller still. Suddenly, a visible pain ran across the face of Adam E. as the tower crumbled to pieces in his hands. This followed by the loudest eruption of laughter yet from those that surrounded the table.

During moments like these, the stresses, problems and worries that plague these men are briefly forgotten,



“The Indian Feather,” a 1,000-piece puzzle, was among those donated. The men in Bamberg unit completed it in three days.



and only joy and fellowship remain.

“Bringing Jenga in really brought a lot of camaraderie to the dorm,” said IRC representative Erik K. “It’s really great to see the smiles on everyone’s faces.”

Recently ACI was blessed with several new board games donated by Book Club volunteers Julia Peace, Meredith Kronz, Linda Green and Sharon Nelson. These games were dispersed to each dorm with plans to swap on a regular basis, so everyone has a chance to experience them all.

“Games are a huge part of a lot of these guy’s lives; it’s how they pass the time,” said resident Willie C., “so to have these new ones is truly a blessing.”

Whether it be at a 9 a.m. session of Catan, a 10-hour marathon of Risk, constant bouts of chess, checkers, dominos, Sorry and, in the case of this reporter, nightly games of Scrabble, these games really help the population here feel some semblance of humanity.

An enormous thank you goes out to Ms. Peace and her fellow volunteers for thinking of us during these most trying of times. With newly donated titles such as: Trouble, Jenga, Battleship, Uno, Connect 4, Stratego and many others, the good times are guaranteed to continue on.

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In Blessed Memory of James S.

By Phil L.

I met James about six months ago.

A giant of a man - stood around six foot-two or so.

When you saw him on the rock

He greeted you with a smile.

He never hesitated to speak

So we would sit and talk a while.

The whole time I knew James,

And as long as he was able

You could always find him reading,

his Bible at a table.

We took walks on the Rec. Field,

Even though we were a bit slow.

Whenever I would ask,

He was always ready to go.

I'll think of James

Now and again.

I'll miss him a lot,

For he was my dear friend.

I close for now with a prayer and a nod,

For James, who now walks and talks with God.