



VIEW FROM THE CHU

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A newsletter by the residents of Allendale Correctional Institution

ACI's Second Juneteenth Celebration

By Nathan R.

The three-day Juneteenth celebration was complemented by soulful music, rousing speeches and an ever-present reminder that “knowledge is power.” The event was a commemoration of the day on June 14, 1865, when Galveston, Texas, slaves were informed of their freedom by Union troops, nearly 2½ years after they had been officially freed by Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and two months after the end of the Civil War.

The Juneteenth celebration focused on education and the continuance of a fight for freedom. This freedom fight isn’t always external, but sometimes an internal fight against complacency and laziness. Once



Warden Newton addressing Juneteenth Celebration

freedom is attained, it must be maintained through persistent self-education and the attainment of positions of power and influence within one’s community. Speaker Michael E. highlighted this truth as he pointed toward the African-American executive staff of ACI. “You are bearing witness to black power,” he said.

Juneteenth celebrates more than the emancipation of slaves. The celebration pays tribute to those who paved the way for a better life for African-Americans and for those who will lead the community forward to greater heights. Speaker Kenneth N. listed the obstacles that African-

Americans face in achieving true equality, such as lack of opportunities in employment, education and housing. He supported his opinion by citing the disparity of wealth distribution between the white and black households. This disparity demonstrates much work remains undone.

The final speaker, former Manning and Camille Graham Warden Lisa R. Engram, a self-proclaimed small-town country girl, spoke of her unlikely rise during her 23-year SCDC tenure from Clinical Correctional Counselor to her current position as Assistant Deputy Director of Programs, Reentry and Rehabilitative Services. In her speech titled, “We must rise,” she admitted she never wanted to be a warden and that she is still a counselor at heart. However, she said that she rose within SCDC’s ranks because she saw an opportunity to create change which she couldn’t ignore.

In her speech, Engram honored those who sacrificed for her and those who taught her the vital importance of education. “I am able to do what I can because of those who came before me,” she said. “I am my ancestors. I am their grind, their hustle, their bruised knees, and their bruised egos. I am my ancestors’ wildest dreams.”

On this, the 156th year of Juneteenth’s celebration, the announcement of Juneteenth’s recognition as a national holiday made the event particularly special. Original songs from Juan L. and Bobby M. along with African spirituals from ACI’s choir and Bobby J. brought the audience to their feet time and time again.

On the final day, the event was celebrated on the institution’s large recreation field with music, pizza, and a variety of sports. The closing words of Warden McKendley Newton captured the thoughts of all the event’s speakers, leaving the audience with words to ponder: “We have come a long way and we have a long way to go. We can’t stop now—we have to continue pressing forward.”



Warden Lisa R. Engram; guest speaker at Juneteenth

Celebrating being one’s authentic self

By Scott H.

In a first of its kind event within the SCDC system, the LGBTQ+ community celebrated pride month on June 28, 2021. The Pride Celebration focused on the wish to be one’s authentic self without fear of reprisal from the community. According to Resident James: “A lot of people were afraid to come to the celebration. I think it’s ridiculous to be judged by someone else when the way I’m leading my life doesn’t affect them.”



Event organizer David commented that when he proposed a Pride celebration in the past, he received responses such as, “That will never happen.” Now when referring to the successful event, he said “Who would have thought?”

“This is only a first, baby step,” Resident Harvey said. “In the future, we might be able to have a parade across the yard. We look forward to a time when being one’s authentic self is not a crime.” This year several of the posters advertising the Pride event were immediately pulled down by disapproving inmates.

As organizer David said, “We expected silliness. That really speaks to the need to have these events.”

The Pride Celebration featured music by the Village People, The Police, Macklemore, Cyndi Lauper and Ru Paul. The whoop, thump, thump of these dance beats was interspersed throughout speeches detailing the history of the origins of the gay rights movement and the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community. Attendees created posters and an in-house parade led to awards for the most outstanding posters. According to Kim Hicks, QMHP: “It’s important that we continue to break down barriers. We’re all different in our own ways. Be true to who you are.”

One step closer: ACI’s new Self Improvement program

By Adam S.

Recently ACI’s administration, along with CRI Board members Camille Nairn and Kent James, have been working a coalition with the residents of Barnwell dorm to establish a Self-improvement Program (SIP). This 12-week program was designed to provide residents with a steppingstone for their journey of reintegrating into society.

The Self-Improvement Team has planned mandatory classes that teach skills critical to success upon release. These courses include resume and portfolio preparation, financial planning, mission advance, job skills, interview preparation and success is not an accident.

There are also personalized classes that reflect individual needs. Residents are required to follow one of three paths in the following areas: Academic (reading, writing, math, social studies, science) Addiction recovery (AA/NA, CPSS or optional religious based addiction recovery courses) Vocational training (Guidelines from Serv Safe, preparatory job skills, etc.)

Program coordinator Preston Ellison has also made himself available to those about to reenter society. Not only does he help these men attain their birth certificates, social security cards, state IDs, and other state benefits that they are eligible for, but he also hosts a “Building Healthy Communities” class to coach men on subjects such as anger management, the dangers of social media, sensitivity in dealing with sex and gender, and personal boundaries. “These guys already have a stigma on them, so they have to be careful,” Ellison said. “Be vigilant about what you’re walking into.”

Resident Liaison and SIP Team member Eric W. spoke on the needs that brought about the program's creation. "Sometimes guys are too proud to ask for help and they think they've got it covered, but then they don't have a clue when they get out." Eric continued by stressing the importance of being prepared to leave prison and do it the right way. "Ready to go home and prepared to go home are completely different things."

A group of 32 men were the first to test this new program. Resident Keith B. spoke on his feeling for the first day. "I'm hoping for the best. I'm trying to remain optimistic," he said. "But I don't like change. Doing this means I'm one step closer to the door." This sentiment was agreed upon by most others. For some of these men, the change in their daily lives was unwelcome and deemed unnecessary. For those that needed reentry assistance, however the reentry offerings were a Godsend.

Covid Memorial Garden honors those we have lost

By Nathan R.

ACI's Covid-19 Memorial Garden captures the attention of every passerby through its crisp colorful design. The floral colors and fresh red cedar mulch grab the viewers' attention and lets them know that this patch of earth is different. A colorfully painted sign confirms the garden as a poignant reminder of the two ACI residents lost to the pandemic. The garden also serves as a place of reflection and tranquility for anyone who has lost someone dear to them.



The Character Restoration Initiative gathered donations from benefactors inspired by the undertaking to fund the memorial garden. Floriculture Program leader Matthew S. explained the choice of colors, "We chose blue to represent those who were lost, red to honor the front-line workers who have sacrificed so much, and white to signify regeneration and rebirth."

Finding peace and purpose through floriculture

By Nathan R.

Sonny R. doesn't talk a lot. In fact, his co-workers often work beside him for hours without hearing him speak. His work speaks for him. This floriculture worker finds peace in the tranquility of birdsong and his desire to build something these days rather than tearing it down.

Most mornings, Sonny can be found standing at the Horticulture gate, awaiting the distribution of tools. The institution's gardens have become something more to him than just a piece of ground that he walks by without notice. The gardens provide, at a glance, a tangible reward for his handiwork. Like all gardeners, he cannot but notice the stray weed or drooping plant and must mentally calculate the unfulfilled work.



"It's a never-ending process," Sonny said. "I find contentment knowing that there is always work to be done to improve these grounds – even more than we've already done." The appreciation of his fellow residents motivates someone I don't even know tell me how much the work we are doing means to them."

The effort that Sonny makes each day is perhaps more impressive because of the turbulent journey that he took to get to his current state. "I was a drug addict," he said. "I woke up every morning with the single-minded determination to get drugs." His fellow residents and SCDC administration came to see him as a liability to the population. Now, because of his dedicated work ethic and the generous philanthropy that has doubled the floriculture program's budget, he is instead recognized as an asset.

One floriculture project that attracts Sonny's attention is the creation of the butterfly garden. "I love the idea of providing endangered butterflies with a habitat where they can thrive," he said. The floriculture program has set the goal of establishing ACI as a federally recognized butterfly refuge. Sonny wants to go a step further. "I want to create a caterpillar habitat in the greenhouse," he said. "This will allow us to raise caterpillars to maturity and then release the butterflies into the refuge we have created."



Sonny credits the floriculture program with giving his life a previously undiscovered meaning. "I now wake up each morning with a positive focus," he said. "I'm so appreciative to floriculture program leader Matthew S. and horticulture supervisor Yolanda Aldrich for giving me a second chance." A contemplative look overcame his face before he continued. "If they had given up on me, I have no idea where I'd be or what I'd be doing right now."

Thankfully, for Sonny and others' sakes, ACI's Character Building Unit (CBU) Program provides second chances. The CBU program has opened the door to a life filled with meaning for Sonny. Like the metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly, his life has been transformed.

ACI's Book Club explores God's transformative power

By Nathan R.

The ACI Book Club recently read the Christian book “Total Pardon” by Wil and Linda Yazzie. The story details the troubled life of Wil Yazzie, who found redemption through God’s grace after a lifetime of drug and alcohol addiction.

“The book club gives us a chance to fellowship and discuss Christian-themed books,” explained Program leader Jonathon S. “It allows us to learn how God works in people’s lives and also how He can work in our own.” In keeping with tradition, the most recent meeting began with prayer. “So many times, we underestimate the power of prayer,” said Associate Warden of Programs Yvonne Wilkins-Smith, who attends book club each week. “We have to remember that what man cannot do, God can.”

A/W Wilkins-Smith’s thoughts echoed the general theme of the book under discussion. Yazzie met a God-fearing woman through a prison pen-pal program, who led his path to redemption. This true-story account was published by Cowcatcher Publication, founded by SCDC volunteer Jodie Randisi.

Members of the book club could relate to the marital problems and substance abuse issues experienced by Wil Yazzie. Many members expressed how they had once had a void in their lives which could never be filled with drugs, alcohol or love from the wrong woman.

Wil Yazzie explained the stubborn hold of addiction: “Outwardly, I appeared to be a different person, but on the inside, I was still full of the same anger and addictive traits that had destroyed my life. I was a sinner without hope – trying to change my life through man-made traditions. That never works.”

As the meeting progressed, the book club members expressed that the void they once had within them could only be eternally filled in one way – through the love their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This sentiment was reinforced at the meeting’s end as the book club members gathered once again for prayer. They closed the meeting with the echo of Wil Yazzie’s wisdom and the love of God filling their hearts.

LLBMU graduates Class #19

By Scott H.

On June 20, 2021, the Lower-Level Behavioral Management Unit (LLBMU) graduated its 19th class. Myecha Miley, who has been with the program since its inception in December 2016, served as the Mistress of Ceremony to graduate six men.

The LLBMU was established to provide a supportive environment for Mental Health inmates and assist them in transitioning from the Restrictive Housing Unit. “Including the current graduates, the program has returned 68 men to the general population with no repeaters,” Miley said. The program consists of three phases, each of which lasts three months. The Behavioral Treatment team regulates the advancement of participants through the phases.



LLBMU Graduation Speaker
RM Randall Williams

Each of the six men related a similar story of his experience in the LLBMU. Each had come voluntarily, but reluctantly. For three months, they could only view others with greater freedom through the cell door window. They then began the phase-2 socialization program while they attended individual and group counselling sessions. As Darby J. said about the LLBMU staff: “Y’all sure love us and care about us back here.” With this support and understanding, the participants learned to change their response to frustrating or provoking situations. The success of this strategy was echoed in the words of Miley about Keeon B., “He wouldn’t socialize much when he came in, but then he became a ‘social butterfly.’

During the third phase, the six graduates focused on their coping skills to prevent relapse. They participated in education classes, a drill team and religious activities. When questioned about their future, each one of the graduates quickly and decisively answered that he would like to stay at ACI. This set up a climactic moment in the ceremony when A/W Wilkins-Smith announced that each graduate would be entering the general population. With a whoop and the tossing of mortar boards, the graduates affirmed their joy at the gratification of their desires.



Dr. Chris Kunkle, Director of Behavioral Health

During the ceremony, Dr. Chris Kunkle, Deputy Director of Behavioral Health, said that before entering the LLBMU program, “the six graduates had 70 disciplinarys between them. Over the last six months: none.” As these same six graduates look forward to reentering the general population, the success of the LLBMU can perhaps be measured by the mantra voiced by Keeon B.: “The greatest discovery is that a person can change the future by changing his attitude.”

ACI seeks recognition as a National Wildlife Federation Habitat

By Nathan R.

The Floriculture program at ACI has applied to become a National Wildlife Federation Habitat in providing breeding grounds for Monarch butterflies to use in their yearly migration from North America and Canada to central Mexico. The institution already has met the requirements for certification as part of the Monarch Waystation Program.

The floriculture program has made the beautification of ACI's grounds a top priority. That goal is being realized with every blooming flower. However, the program's goals don't stop there as the participants realize they have an obligation to the environment as well. Hence, the program has cultivated pollinator-friendly gardens to offer endangered butterflies a habitat where they can gather nectar, pollinate and nest.



The new Butterfly Garden

Floriculture has used the services of the Clemson Extension Service to analyze soil samples. The results will optimize soil enrichment for pollinator plants. "It's important that floriculture students have the knowledge that they will need to excel when they're released," Floriculture program leader Matthew S. said. "We hope that this will be just the first step in a fruitful partnership with Clemson Extension.

Butterflies are not only a beautiful addition to any garden. They also are the

exclusive pollinators for certain plants. Cultivation habits that attract pollinators benefit both ACI and surrounding farms. ACI volunteers Bill and Julie Peace offered to provide an insect house. Caterpillars will grow to maturity in the insect house. After metamorphosis, the program will release butterflies into the newly erected habitats.

The Character Restoration Initiative and generous benefactors are funding the certification effort. The Floriculture program believes ACI's CBU program will soon reach another milestone in its storied history upon recognition as and a National Wildlife Federation Habitat.

Muttmates and Meowmates shows fortitude during the Covid pandemic

By Jonathan S. and Matthew R.

The Muttmates/Meowmates animal program at Allendale Correctional Institution is in its eighth successful year. The program, in collaboration with the Animal Advocates of Barnwell and with the support of a grant from St. Luke's of Hilton Head Church Mouse, gives carefully screened and selected inmates the opportunity to foster homeless dogs and cats.

This win-win arrangement reinforces positive character traits such as responsibility, attentiveness, patience, and compassion. Participants learn marketable job skills including grooming, dog-training and pet sitting that can be used in the ever-growing pet-care industry. Most importantly, they learn about unconditional love.



The dogs and cats socialize, learn basic obedience, and often even learn how to perform tricks that make them highly adoptable. More than 500 former mutt/meowmates have found “fur-ever” homes. The animal caretakers are very proud of the adoption rate. They are also proud to have received two national recognitions.

During the Covid pandemic, the volunteers have been unable to enter the compound to exchange the animals.

Adapting to these limitations, the number of dogs and cats living at ACI has been halved, but the core of the program remains strong. All the animal handlers look forward to an expansion of the program after the volunteers’ return.

Photos by Adam S.