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Offenders Find Something Positive with McNeil Island Fire Department

When Greg Miller took over as Fire Chief seven years ago at McNeil Island Corrections Center he inherited a rough-looking bunch.

“They had hair past their shoulders, frayed pants, worn-out shoes,” said Miller, who had been a firefighter in Yelm. “I wanted to instill a sense of professionalism.”

Besides looking sharper with pressed uniforms and clean haircuts, McNeil Island firefighters have earned a

reputation for being positive influences in the prison. Members can't have recently committed a major infraction or have a sentence for a violent or sex crime. They are rewarded with additional freedoms and responsibilities including leaving the island to fight fires.



The department has responded to between 700 and 1,000 calls since 2006, ranging from structural fires, First Aid, hazardous materials, car accidents and more.

Offenders say that the trust they are given motivates them to carry themselves to a higher standard.

“Other correctional officers around the prison know that we belong to the crew, and if we step out of line the captains are going to know about it,” offender Dion Coleman said. “We’ve got to remember that we may be responsible for someone’s life someday.”



Offenders Find Something Positive with McNeil Island Fire Department

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Miller says he trusts these firefighters as much as he did any crew he worked with outside the prison.

"I trust the crew with my life," Miller said. "I have to know that every one of them is going to pull me out of a fire if that situation arises."

Miller manages a crew of 10 offenders who work 24-hour shifts. Offender Scott Oswald asked to be transferred from Stafford Creek Corrections Center so he could join McNeil Island's fire department.

"It's very physically demanding, and we train for the most extreme conditions. There are some guys who try out and can't even pass the physical exam," Oswald said. "I don't want someone fighting fires next to me who is going to quit on me right in the middle of a blaze."

Offenders say they now understand why firefighters have such a tight bond.

"We all come from different environments, we all have different motivations and sometimes we have differences but we have to learn to work them out and trust each other," Coleman said. "You have to be able to trust that the guy next to you is going to pull you out of a sticky situation. That is what builds camaraderie and brotherhood."

Offenders now laugh when they watch firefighters in the movies and on television.

"In the movies, firefighters can always see everything around them, and they can talk to each other just like they were walking down a hall," offender Terry Munsell said. "But in a real fire, you can't see anything and you can't hear anything."

Being a firefighter doesn't mean being a cowboy, either.

"You don't just go in gung ho, kicking in doors, seeing how much you can destroy," Munsell said with a laugh. "Before you kick a door down, see if it's unlocked."

Offender Todd Carlson says that even if his experience at McNeil Island doesn't lead to a firefighting career after he's released he doesn't see it as a waste at all.

"What's the worst that could happen? I save somebody's life?" Carlson said.

Above all, offenders say being part of the fire department has made the best out of a bad situation.

"My family was disappointed when I went to prison, but they like this," Oswald said. "My daughter tells people that her daddy is a firefighter now, not just a prisoner."

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DOC Officers in Spokane Help Arrest Gang Members in Sweep

The DOC Spokane Gang Unit assisted in the arrest of 28 gang members on July 16 in an 18-month investigation that ended with the seizure of one pound of cocaine, two stolen handguns, \$25,000 cash and a large amount of Ecstasy pills. The defendants were involved in a conspiracy to possess, sell and manufacture cocaine, methamphetamine and Ecstasy.

Agencies from all levels of government were involved to form a team of 175 officers.

“The success of this operation is an example of what can be accomplished when agencies work collaboratively to reach the goal of reducing crime in our neighborhoods,” says Todd Wiggs, Community Corrections Supervisor.

The DOC employees who aided in the operation included Melissa Clark, Renee Cooper, PJ Dennis, Jack Durkin, John Hernandez, Pat Green, Monroe Hartung, Jon Hibdon, Joe Letourneau, Danny Turner, and Todd Wiggs.

Some of the offenders arrested in Operation Hybris had active DOC warrants while others were arrested on a federal or state warrant.

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Michigan College Graduate Surprised, Happy to be with Washington DOC

It was a year ago this summer when Lisa Smith, then a senior at Central Michigan University, came to Washington for a weeklong internship with DOC. She came looking for a little adventure and a nice trip, nothing more.

Instead, she got hooked, and the only cure was to move to the Northwest and work for DOC.

“I didn’t think I’d actually move to Washington,” said Smith, a Community Corrections Officer who works out of the Seattle Community Justice Center. “I didn’t know anybody here besides the people I met at DOC. But I just thought it was a really cool place to work, and here I am.”



Smith came as part of Campus Crusade, an annual weeklong internship that lets college students from across the county experience what it’s like to work at DOC. Smith’s internship included a tour of McNeil Island Corrections Center, an overview of sex-offender treatment and much more. But what really piqued her interest was a ride-along with CCOs in downtown Seattle.

“Seeing the kind of interaction there is between officers and offenders was really eye-opening for a young college student,” said Smith, who rode along with a Neighborhood Corrections Initiative unit. “I was surprised how much the officers knew about the offenders and cared about them. I could tell they really wanted to help them succeed, which I thought was really cool.”

It was a unique experience for Smith, who grew up in small towns in Indiana and Michigan.

“I’d never been around poor people or homeless people or prisoners or anything like that before,” she said. “I wanted to challenge myself and put myself in a position that would be different than what I was used to.” Toward the end of Campus Crusade, she joked with Acting Field Administrator Donta Harper about working for DOC. By September she was asking for real.

“I remember thinking, is she serious?” Harper recalled. “I thought she would be a good officer, but I wasn’t sure if she’d actually move out here on her own, not knowing anybody in the Northwest. I don’t know if I would have had the courage at that age to make a move like that, but she did.”

In February, two months after Smith earned her bachelor’s degree, Harper offered her a CCO position. She left Michigan on March 6 and started working four days later. Smith says her coworkers have made the move easier.



Michigan College Graduate Surprised, Happy to be with Washington DOC *Continued*

"They helped me pick a place to live," she said. "Everybody here has been really supportive."

Misi Liulamaga, Smith's Community Corrections Supervisor, says he's glad she moved halfway across the country to work for DOC.

"I've been really impressed with her," Liulamaga said. "She learns so fast, and she's so easy to work with. She's the kind of person we look for in a CCO."

This year's Campus Crusade brought 22 more college students to Washington. Smith has enjoyed speaking with them about DOC but admits it's "kind of weird."

"There will be times when it feels like I'm just visiting again as a college student," she said. "Then I realize, wait – I actually work here now."

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Thanks to Better Use of Crisis Negotiators, Use of Force Decreases

Next time you have a crisis, you should consider calling Devon Schrum.

In addition to her role as the Statewide Grievance Program Manager at DOC headquarters, she is credited with promoting the agency's use of Crisis Negotiators. She is the current president of the Western States Hostage Negotiators' Association, which has more than 800 members in Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Montana, Northern California, Hawaii and Canada.

When Schrum was elected president of the multi-agency association three years ago it marked the first time that a DOC member took the top position.

"What she's done to improve our crisis-negotiation program is really impressive," Deputy Director Dan Pacholke said. "We're fortunate to have her at the agency."



Schrum has noticed a fundamental shift in crisis negotiations in prisons in recent years. The most common use of crisis negotiators is as a first step before any pre-planned use of force. These often involve offenders who have barricaded themselves in their cell or are threatening to harm themselves or others.

"It used to be that those situations meant an automatic use force to remove an offender from their cell," Schrum said. "Crisis negotiators weren't recognized for their potential benefits." They are excellent communicators and skilled at de-escalating offenders in crisis.

Now, Schrum says, prisons are more likely to call on negotiators before using force, which is cited as a major reason for the decline in staff injuries. In about 70 percent of the times when a negotiator is used there is no need for use of force. "Washington was one of the first states to move toward using negotiators before using force," Schrum said. "That's something I'm really proud of."

The Connecticut native has lived in Olympia since she was 4 years old and attended North Thurston High School. She recently earned a bachelor's of science degree in human services and management. She now plans to earn a master's degree in either psychology or public administration.

Schrum started at DOC in 1996 as a temporary Clerk Typist 3 at McNeil Island Corrections Center. A year later she became a Correctional Officer and then a Sergeant at Washington Corrections Center for Women. She eventually became a Grievance Coordinator and in 2006 was promoted to the Statewide Grievance Program Manager.

Of all the roles she's played with DOC, her favorite remains crisis negotiations. "I think it's really interesting work," Schrum said. "I like it because it helps both staff and offenders."

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Olympia Staff Members Use Lunch Break to Clean Up Popular Trail

Staff members of the Main and Metro field offices in Thurston County picked up a truckload of garbage along the Chehalis Western Trail, a popular area that was littered with glass, cigarette butts, cardboard and even needles.

Kaye Adkins, supervisor in the Olympia Metro Field Office, asked for staff members in her office to help during lunch on a recent Friday. More than a dozen employees pitched in.

“Kaye thought it would be a good thing to do for the local community,” Office Assistant Jessi Herrin said. “I wasn’t sure I would like it at first – I figured it would be gross. But it was fun, and the trail looks so much better.”

Besides getting a little lunchtime exercise, Herrin said it’s good for teambuilding. “It’s nice to see people come together like that,” Herrin said. “I’d definitely do it again.”



Pictured, from left, are Jessi Herrin, Marie Anderson, Jose Cortez, Fred Wiggins, Joe VanBuskirk, Rochelle Hughes, Perry Thompson, Andy Scroggs, Kurt Smith, Kaye Adkins, Sue Ritter, Kristin Wissler.
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