

Project at Folsom State Prison helps inmates, visually impaired

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Members of the Foothill Lions Club toured the Project for the Visually Impaired at Folsom State Prison. Left to right, past Lions District Governor and tour guide Don Ring, Foothills Lions Club members Sandy Woods, George Woods, Arnie Romanello, Al Eagle, Linda Stevens, Susan Healy-Harman and Patrick Eidman.

Members of Grass Valley's Foothill Lions Club visited the Project for the Visually Impaired at Folsom State Prison.

They met inmates, many of whom are serving life sentences, who are doing well while doing time.

"It's an amazing program," said Foothill Lions Club Past President Arnie Romanello, who has toured the prison eight times and serves on the Board of Directors for the project.

Over the past three decades, inmates working in the Folsom Project for the Visually Impaired have processed more than 4 million eyeglasses.

Glasses are donated at Lions Club drop boxes across the state and then delivered to the prison. There, inmates use special equipment to determine the eye doctor's prescription for each pair of glasses, which details how the lenses help correct near-sightedness, far-sightedness, or perhaps a stigmatism. It's a precise procedure that helps ensure the correct glasses go to the people who need them.

The glasses are cleaned, repaired, and redistributed around the world, including countries such as Uganda, Bangladesh and Vietnam.

Inmates also record books on tape and CD, input closed captioning, and create texts in Braille. Literary books, academic books and even

music books are translated into Braille. Prisoners also make visual Braille evacuation maps for buildings.

Lions Clubs across the state raise money to fund reading rooms, equipment and other project needs at Folsom Prison.

Don Ring of Wilton led the prison tour. He started the prison vision project in 1989 while serving as Lions Club district governor. Another member of his Folsom Lions Club, who was then an associate warden at Folsom Prison, suggested the idea.

“The inmates in our program must be able to read, write and type,” said Ring. “There are no sex offenders. They must exhibit good behavior. Any prospective worker must be approved by existing members of the team.”

Program start

The project started with inmates recording books on tape for the visually impaired. As it evolved, the program began to benefit inmates whose new job skills were helpful at parole board hearings.

“In fact, they have jobs waiting for them when they are paroled,” said Ring.

In the early days of the project, inmate William Cloud recorded school books for a young girl named Amelia Diaz. The second grader wrote back in Braille to Cloud, who was serving a life sentence. The inmate asked to learn Braille, and eventually became an expert.

Cloud was later pardoned by the governor, worked for a blind judge in San Diego County, and now heads a lucrative bottled drink company in Arkansas, according to Ring.

“The whole thinking process changes for the inmates involved,” Ring said.

Lions Clubs have actively supported sight-improvement programs for nearly a century.

In 1925, author and activist Helen Keller, who was blind and deaf, challenged Lions Clubs to become “Knights of the Blind.” Today, Lions Clubs fund vision testing in schools, professional eye exams and glaucoma screening, guide dog programs, homes for the blind, and the purchase of special eye equipment for hospitals and clinics.

Built in 1880, Folsom State Prison is one of California’s oldest prisons. There are 4,500 male prisoners, 2,500 guards and 600 female inmates. Among the men, 22 work in the vision project and another 160 produce 50,000 license plates each day at a different manufacturing facility. Many of the women, housed in a separate section of the prison, raise guide dogs for the blind.

As Lions Club visitors stopped to confer with inmates during their tour of the vision project, nearly every prisoner thanked them for their support.

Visitors are not allowed to take cameras or cell phones into the prison, but Lions Club members left with special images hand-created by inmates. Each visitor was asked to choose several pieces of Braille Art made with a Perkins Brailier. The drawings included puppies, sea creatures, flags and more.

Change

In 2009, the Lions Club project became an official part of the California Prison Industry Authority (CALPIA). The authority provides productive and rewarding work assignments for approximately 8,000 offenders in California each year in a variety of service, manufacturing and agricultural industries.

The authority is a self-supporting, customer-centered business that receives no funding from the state budget. CALPIA participants are returned to prison, on average, up to 38% less often than offenders released from the state prison system's general population.

Recidivism within the Lions' Folsom Project for the Visually Impaired is even lower: a total of only 2 to 3%, according to Romanello.

The respectful, non-threatening demeanor of the prisoners surprised some of the Lions guests.

"Everyone reveres Don so much that we felt welcome and safe everywhere we went, even when there were no guards obviously present," said Foothill Lions Club Treasurer Sandy Woods.

Lions Club visitors wondered about the need to avoid eye contact as they toured the license plate-making section. They needn't have worried. One woman was even gifted ear plugs by an inmate.

"I have a hearing sensitivity problem," said Susan Healy-Harman, "and one of the inmates noticed me walking through the area with my fingers in my ears. He gave me a set of brand new ear plugs."

It takes years for prisoners to master the tasks demanded of them within the vision project. For example, the already-lengthy Children's Scholastic Dictionary comprises 53 volumes in Braille.

Transcription into Braille is a labor-intensive endeavor, but a rewarding one.

"This is an opportunity earn a career," said one of the inmates, "and give back to society. We are men who have had a change of heart."

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