

Penitentiary Products Benefit Local Community

By Katie Tower, Staff Reporter, Sackville Tribune-Post

Gary Jonah calls it “empathy by osmosis.” Whatever the term, the instructor of the basic skills shop at Dorchester Penitentiary believes that the inmates who come through his door are not only gaining skills to be tradesmen, they are learning how to be more compassionate individuals.

“Projects such as the Christmas toy project, repairing bicycles to donate to less fortunate families, and donating hundreds of bags of teddy bears to the annual Toys for Tots have a tremendous impact on a lot of the inmates,” says Jonah. “You can’t continuously be doing stuff for other people and not have it rub off somewhere along the line,” he explains.

The Mayor of Dorchester, Mel Goodland, agrees with Jonah and insists his village has reaped the benefits of the inmates’ projects. Most recently, the basic skills shop donated wooden baskets, birdhouses, bat houses and even flea houses for the village’s annual sandpiper festival. They were then sold during the three-day event and the money was used to offset festival costs.

“What they’re doing internally here, we’re benefiting from it,” says Goodland.

Jonah says the basic skills shop is not designed to get into commercial development, but to work on development of another kind.

“We’re not focusing on making money here,” he says. “We’re here to work on skill development, behavioural development and attitude development.”

Since 1989 the shop has focused on special needs inmates – those individuals with social/behavioural/intellectual/psychiatric/vocational needs who have previously “fallen through the cracks” of the correctional system.

“Historically, for special needs inmates, there wasn’t a lot we could do for these people,” explains Jonah. “So what’s



Dorchester Penitentiary inmate John Alderson paints a set of bleachers belonging to the village of Dorchester. The village loaned the bleachers to the basic skills shop class for a field day at the Shepody Healing Centre, which then decided to give the seats a much-needed paint job before returning them.

more critical [now] is to get those with problems to focus on developing their skills.”

Jeannie Lowerison, a Dorchester resident who also works at the penitentiary, says it’s essential for these inmates to gain skills they can use in the outside world.

“There is a place in society they have to fit in,” she says.

Jonah says he works with an average of about 16 inmates and, for the last 14 or 15 years, they have been concentrating on various community projects.

The shop recently sent a box of toys to El Salvador with one of the nurses who was going there to assist in building homes in that area; supported the village of Dorchester with its sandpiper festival; donated patio sets to support the local track and field club and local transition houses; repairs bicycles to give to less fortunate families, local schools and social services; repairs wheelchairs for the local red cross; supports the RCMP *Santa is Late* program; repairs and donates teddy bears to support the *Toys for Tots* run; and, of course, operates the Christmas toy project.

Most recently, the inmates repaired and repainted bleachers that belong to the village of Dorchester. The bleachers were borrowed for inmates to use during a ‘field day’ at the Shepody Healing Centre.

“They’re going to be in better condition than before,” says Goodland. The mayor says he is pleased with the continued cooperation between the two parties, especially recently. “There’s been a lot more cooperation in the last couple years. I find that it’s just within the last few years that we really started getting together here.”

Lowerison says the benefits of cooperation are endless – residents and tourists enjoy buying items that are locally made by the inmates and the inmates are gaining the life skills they will need when they enter the outside world.

Goodland and Jonah couldn’t agree more. “We have a prison here and it’s not leaving,” says Goodland. “So why shouldn’t we benefit from that?”

“It’s totally win-win for everyone involved,” says Jonah. ■