

The Transition Times

Executive Director Celebrates 20 years!



On June 19, 2008, Myra Clark, executive director celebrated 20 years with The Center for Community Transitions. Friends, family, colleagues and staff gathered at Whitehead Manor to celebrate Myra's service and commitment.

Board president, Tony Orsbon offered a few words to commemorate the occasion. Myra came to the organization in 1988 when it was known as ECO. She started as the director for the ECO Center for Women and did a magnificent job, learning the techniques and skills on the job. Myra also stabilized this new program and today the center is regarded as a model program in the state.

Orsbon also shared other memories of



Myra's early days. He stated that, in her earliest days with the organization, Myra was at times a plumber, cook, carpenter, mediator, referee, politician, photographer, tour guide, real estate manager, sheriff and psychologist. She is now, after great development in her skills and position, a plumber, cook, carpenter, mediator, referee, politician, photographer, tour guide, real estate manager, sheriff and psychologist. Indeed, in addition to her leadership, she is willing to assist and perform any necessary obligation of our programs.

But most of all, Myra has been an inspiration to us, members of the Board, staff and clientele. She is dedicated, diligent, hard-working, talented and respected. Without doubt, she is an exemplary leader whose effort and talents hold all of us connected with the organization to a higher performance.

Myra, we congratulate you on your tenure with the Center for Community Transitions, and look forward to our many years of continued association.+

LifeWorks! Director Selected for Friday Fellowship!

LifeWorks! program director, Erik Ortega was recently selected for the William C. Friday Fellowship for Human Relations. The two-year Fellowship is for emerging leaders in the public, private and nonprofit sectors who are able to directly affect issues facing our community. Friday Fellows learn core competencies related to the principles and practices of integrity, intention and inclusion.

The Fellowship groups are comprised of 15-20 leaders from across North Carolina. The program is fully subsidized by the Wildacres Leadership Initiative and the Fellows bear no cost. Neither do their organizations.

Prison Reentry Grant Awarded

Generation II Prisoner Reentry Initiative (PRI) grants were awarded to 22 states. North Carolina received one of the grants and selected the Center for Community Transitions as the sub grantee for Mecklenburg County. Over the next two and a half years, the grant will serve 250 prisoners released from the state prison system providing reentry services, mentoring, case management, job training and job placement.

Printing by Inmates

This newsletter as well as our letterhead and envelopes has been printed by Corrections Enterprises. CE provides a meaningful work experience for inmates as well as quality goods and services at an exceptional value. In addition to the training and skills that the inmates learn, 5% of the profits are contributed to the Victims Compensation Fund which is used to help individuals and families after the sometimes life-altering devastation of a crime.

Our Mission

The Center for Community Transitions strengthens our community by helping people with criminal records find a healthier and more productive way of living. Our work provides employment and transition services; supports alternatives to incarceration; and restores and strengthens family bonds.

June 2008 Beach Retreat

The residents of the ECO Center for Women were treated to an all expense paid spiritual retreat by the wonderful ladies at the First Baptist Church in Indian Trail on June 6-8. I must be honest and tell you that I was not looking forward to this trip. The preparation was time consuming and sometimes frustrating and, personally, I do not like hanging out with large groups of people. I could not have been more wrong in my attitude and my thinking.

On the way to Oak Island, we stopped at Golden Corral to eat. The residents were SO excited. They were running around taking pictures and laughing....at Golden Corral!. It took me a few minutes to realize why they were so excited. Then, it dawned on me that they got to choose what they wanted to eat from the buffet. For some of the ladies it was the first time in years that they were able to eat what they wanted!

Once we entered the compound at Ft. Caswell, we were assigned rooms and as I walked into my room I realized how spoiled I am at home. The room had no television and no microwave! I was reminded this was a spiritual retreat. I can be spiritual while

%have a newfound respect for freedom and a truer understanding of courage+

watching Oprah! I went to the first nightly devotion not knowing what to expect. It was too much fun! Some of the residents had a hula hoop contest with their necks! One lady from the church laughed so hard she wet her pants. Forty plus women of all ages and backgrounds laughing hysterically...it felt good.

Because we had stuffed ourselves at Golden Corral I was not hungry when the compound served dinner at 5:30. You had to eat at certain times and you had to eat what they fixed. It, again, reminded me that I was free. So, for dinner I had a blow pop and a snack sized bag of Fritos. Needless to say, I was in line, on time, for breakfast the next morning after trying desperately to get ready without coffee!

Then, we all trekked to the beach. It was interesting to watch the residents interact with their sponsors and how they reacted to being out of their comfort zone. Some of the women had never been to the ocean and were awed by its grandeur. I'm proud to say that every one of them eventually ventured into the water!

It was a humbling experience to watch the

residents freely roam around and to listen for shouts of delight. It reminded me again to value freedom in its purest form. Some of us were beyond sunburned that weekend. However, I do not regret the temporary discomfort or the weeks of peeling and itching. I can easily rate this weekend among the top 5 positive experiences in my life. I have a newfound respect for freedom and a truer understanding of courage, thanks to the residents of the ECO Center for Women.

*By Kathy Broome, Program Director
The Eco Center for Women*



Nowhere Else to Turn

Mecklenburg Sentencing Services (MSS) provides the county court system with valuable information and sentencing recommendations, seeking alternatives to costly prison stays for eligible defendants where appropriate.

The public defenders office had no where else to turn. The state was insisting on active prison time, at least two years, for their client and exhaustive negotiations had broken down. That is when Mark Williams (not his real name) was referred to MSS. According to the public defender, Mark had long suffered from a severe mental illness; he had spent the past year at his mother's house after six years in prison. The public defender felt he needed %appropriate+punishment, not just another prison term after which he will be released to the community, no better off than he was before. As Bob Ward, Assistant Public Defender, put it, %people like Mark are really more sick than guilty+.

MSS met with Mark in jail and conducted a thorough intake interview, learning he suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and depression. Mark had gone off of his medi-

cation, met a new %friend+and committed a series of property crimes. Respected risk assessment tools normed for the NC criminal population showed that Mark had only a low to moderate issue with substance abuse but was a high risk for reoffending with out proper treatment. Combined results indicated a need for residential treatment. After hours of time spent with Mark's mother and step-father, an evaluation by a contract psychologist and research on potential community resources, a plan was formulated to present to the court. The district attorney's recommendation remained the same so the plan would have to be presented directly to the judge at a plea conference.

The plan called for Mark to serve one year in jail (which would be completed the following week), be placed on GPS monitoring for six months and reside at the new facility of Recovery Solutions.

Recovery Solutions is the newly formed county funded jail diversion program for people with severe mental illness.

%People like Mark are really more sick than guilty+
Bob Ward

The judge was pleased with the plan and adopted it, choosing an alternative sanction rather than additional prison time.

This disposition was rendered in late March of 2008. As of July 15 Mark is thriving in the Recovery Solutions program and is seen as a leader among his peers. He has been stabilized on proper medication and has plans for employment and eventual transition back into the community. Mark Williams did not escape punishment for his crimes, he received appropriate punishment which is giving

him an opportunity for a normal life and is saving the state at least \$50,000 in incarceration costs. MSS presented 142 plans to the courts last year with over 75% being adopted as presented. While the state statute that created the Office of Sentencing Services calls for information to be presented to the court, MSS is also about something greater; building people, not prisons.

*By Danny Trapp, Program Director
Mecklenburg Sentencing Services*

A Note from the director by Myra M. Clark

Yes, it is true I have been here twenty years! It seems like yesterday. I want to thank the staff and board for the celebration of my tenure in June. A lot has changed in that time, but there is still more work to do. *So- what's next?*

Our number one priority is moving the ECO Center for Women to a new site that provides more space for programs, staff offices and does not need repairs every month. The activity space for Bible study, group activities, workshops, etc, include one of the major traffic paths in the facility, so there are constant interruptions. The study room for those who are in school is the room where the main entrance is located, so there are constant interruptions there also. This building is used up and if we want to continue *building people, not prisons*- we need some room to do that.

A second priority emerged rather quickly on the scene. Our LifeWorks! program has seen a tremendous growth in requested services. On July 21st, 51 people attended our orientation and over 40 returned the next day to avail themselves of our services. This program needs more space! Many thanks to the congregation of Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church for allowing us use of their fellowship hall for the program. It was last minute and they were very responsive.

The Mecklenburg County Criminal Justice Task Force will be meeting through September to take a look at the criminal justice system and make recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners. There is a need for many improvements, from prevention to court processes, to jail overcrowding and reentry. Please hold the members of the committee in your thoughts as they take

on a tough assignment. We cannot build or prosecute our way out of the current crime situation in Charlotte. We must look for ways to help people reach their potential in their families, neighborhoods and our community at large.

Please take time to read the other articles in this newsletter. I think you will find them thought provoking and inspiring. We welcome others who would like to join us in *building people, not prisons*.

Peace,

Myra

Paying It Forward

The Aftercare program has changed its name and is now called LifeWorks! The new name better reflects the programs goal; to provide people with criminal records the conditions, resources and tools needed to reach their professional and personal goals+

Our workshops are centered on providing life skills training infused within employment preparation. The new name also represents our philosophy that when you are being the person you said you wanted to beō Life-Works!

Sometimes it is hard to really know the impact of our day to day work, but I recently had the opportunity to find out.

Rafael Gomez, 24 years old, was released from prison March 17, 2008 after serving a year for armed robbery. He enrolled in the Aftercare program (LifeWorks!) on June 2, 2008 after failing to find employment on his own. Rafael is new to our area and stated that ~~pe~~ people do not want to hire felons+

Rafael completed our employment preparation workshop and left the office with his resume developed and several job leads. He also left our office with his head held higher and feeling more confident about his chances of finding employment.

Four days later, he found employment with a construction contractors company as a gen-

eral laborer. Rafael explained his criminal conviction and what he has done since to turn his life around. The employer thanked him for his honesty and sincerity in explaining his criminal record.

Rafael is now a manager with his own sites to supervise. He recently came back to our office and told me that he needed 16 individuals with construction experience for those sites. Rafael wants to give the same opportunity he was given to other graduates. His employer has stated that he would have no problem hiring anyone who has completed our *Employment Readiness Workshop*.

By Erik Ortega, Program Director
LifeWorks!



Recent LifeWorks! Class

Until Next Time...Thanks!

The Families Doing Time program works hard to serve both those who are incarcerated as well as their loved ones.

The following letter was written by an inmate who completed our Family Ties Parenting class at the Mecklenburg County Jail.

"Ms. Willoughby, first and foremost I want to thank you. As I was lying in bed unable to sleep from the thoughts stirred up...from class, I forced myself to get up and write. I've only known you for 1 ½ weeks but you've brought me to tears without realizing it. The first day, you said something like "behavior is monitored when someone first walks through the door". Whatever the saying was, it made me think back to my childhood. The biggest memory that comes to mind is one night [my father] came home and threw all the food my mother had prepared in the garbage and she had to sneak my sister and I an apple and orange into our bedroom so we wouldn't be hungry. I guess overall I can elaborate on my childhood for days – not days, but years - of all the negativity. I guess what I'm trying to say overall is that the things I've learned since being in jail are valuable. I've learned that I've been a terrible dad based on things I've learned from my childhood. I know how to be a parent now. I know the proper way to live. I've been a terrible husband and person. Just know that your class has touched me already. Hopefully I can handle my emotions and learn how to channel my childhood into a plus. There's so much to say, but until next time, THANKS!"

As I was lying in bed unable to sleep from the thoughts stirred upō .+

By Sandra Willoughby, Program Director
Families Doing Time

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The Center for
Community Transitions



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Volunteer your time and/or lend your expertise

**Help us make
a difference!**

The Center for Community Transitions welcomes volunteers who are willing to share their skills with our clients. Opportunities are designed to accommodate your schedule and can include activities such as providing lunch for workshop clients, teaching a class, becoming a mentor or conducting a life-skills workshop such as computer skills or household budgeting. These are just a few of the opportunities available.

To learn more about how you can help, please contact Kelly Perez at 704-374-0762, ext 13 or kperez@centerforcommunitytransitions.org

Online Giving

Make a donation without writing a check! The Center for Community Transitions offers secure online giving through our website where you can click on the  Donate Now+button and give a gift to support our programs and services.

Making a difference beyond your lifetime!

If you are creating or changing your will, please consider a legacy gift to The Center for Community Transitions. You can make a difference to an organization that has been strengthening families and our community for over 34 years by leaving a gift that will last beyond your lifetime For more information on legacy giving, please contact Susanne Griffing at 704-374-0762, ext. 17 or sgriffing@centerforcommunitytransitions.org.

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