



Messenger — QUARTERLY —

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Designed by and for the incarcerated

Dedication by RHIDALE DOTSON

This is for you. You who have been struggling to be heard, felt, appreciated, and seen.

This is for us; because, as the great Malcolm X once said, “Anybody that has caught the same type of hell as me is my brother.”

Whether you are already committed to building this creative and caring community, or still trying to find your way there — you are not alone, and we refuse to let you be forgotten.

We’re doing this work in honor of the many visionary writers, poets, journalists, and artists who previously held the banner and pushed the movement to liberate our voices before us. We are building on the foundation they laid — to give us a better shot at changing these narratives, transforming our lives, and experiencing this particular form of freedom in a more

just society.

This is for all of us who still carry the pain and grief that come from past choices, mistakes, and losses. We are doing this because, by publishing the best of our most sincere written and visual expressions, we can help facilitate deeper understanding. We are living proof that there must be a more effective and moral alternative to perpetual condemnation.

This is for them — because community, family, justice, and healing demand that we do (and become) more. Now, we have no excuse. There is exponentially more to be done with the hard-earned wisdom, leadership, and insight we have gained in spite of our suffering — individually and collectively.

This is for the ones who will someday call us their ancestors. We dedicate this work to the future generations whose expectations

of protection, fulfillment, and fairness are inevitably linked to our actions today.

Last, but not least, this is for me: the irreplaceably unique, living, breathing, thinking, and feeling human being whose life and legacy can never matter less than any other’s. I will always be worth going through the struggle for.

Thank you for being worthy of our dedication. By writing, reading, sharing, and contributing to this work, you are helping build a necessary bridge to a brighter future and a new paradigm of justice. Today, you can become an architect of safer spaces and a future grounded in increased fairness. We are the united community committed to amplifying your voice and building that shared vision.

Most sincerely yours,
Mercury Mountain Media Team

What’s in a Name? by MIKE SEVERSON

Why do we name things? Mostly, we give things names to differentiate people or items from others. Sometimes, we try to be clever and play with words. What do you expect? We are writers, and words are what we do.

So, let’s dive into the meaning of our new name. We landed on Mercury Mountain Media. How about we break the name down, word for word?

“Mercury.”

For this, we delve deep into history. As you may know, Mercury was the messenger to the gods in Roman mythology. He was chosen because of his integrity, timeliness, and reliability — attributes we hope to emulate in our new endeavor.

“Mountain.”

This one was easy. We are based in the greatest, most beautiful state in this amazing country of ours. If you are lucky enough to see these towering monoliths, I invite you to finish this article, go outside, look around at these wonders of nature, and take a big breath of fresh mountain air.

“Media.”

For me, this is the most exciting part of our name! We chose media because we are coming to you in multiple forms. Messenger Quarterly is just one of the many ways we plan to inject your talents for writing and art into society, both inside and outside of prison.

In addition to this newspaper platform, we are also presenting Mosaics, our art and creative writing magazine. A mosaic is a collection of different things — rocks or pieces of glass — fitted together to make a beautiful piece of art. That is exactly what we plan to do with your short stories, poems, and artwork.

In the future, we will also be asking for your help filling a new anthology of prison writings. This anthology will feature longer-format work, including short stories and essays. Multiple platforms. So many possibilities.

And perhaps the coolest part of this entire endeavor — one we are all undertaking together — is that it is all available on the tablet you’re holding right now! With online publishing, your family can access your writing and art, and so can people all

over the world. Ahhh, the power of technology. So, switch over to the Mobi OfficeSuite app on your tablet and start telling the world what you think it needs to hear. Give us your unique points of view. Thrill us with a fantastical cliffhanger. Tell us about a great program or opportunity at your facility. Share your wisdom with us. We need your work.

However you choose to spend the rest of your day, write something down. Draw or paint a picture. Who knows where it might lead?

We here at Mercury Mountain Media welcome you into our community and can’t wait to read and see what you have to say.

As they used to say,
“See ya in the funny papers!”

Editor’s note: Submissions for the first Mercury Mountain Media anthology have now closed. We look forward to sharing future opportunities in upcoming issues.

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A Message from Prison Programs:

by **LEIGH BURROWS**

Assistant Director, Prison Programs

Dear Readers,

I want to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who contributed to this inaugural edition of *Messenger Quarterly*. Our department has undergone significant changes over the past five years, yet I always held onto the hope that we could successfully reinvent a publication created by the CDOC population and for the CDOC population. I believe that JoyBelle Phelan has achieved this vision, and I extend my sincere thanks to her and her dedicated team. It is genuinely heartwarming to see the variety and depth of meaningful pieces you have submitted. When I began my review, I intended only to skim the articles, but I quickly found myself engrossed, reading every

single submission. In a single hour, I experienced a powerful range of emotions — laughter, sorrow, and even anger — gaining a new perspective and a vivid reminder of life inside our correctional facilities. As some of you know, I have served with the department for 27 years, with the last four spent at HQ. Your words brought back the 23 years I spent in facilities, reinforcing the vital importance of remaining connected to the population. For this, I am immensely grateful.

I hope you find this magazine as engaging and moving as I have, and that you truly hear the voices of those who have contributed. Thank you once again, and please keep your submissions coming.

EDITOR’S LETTER MESSENGER QUARTERLY ISSUE #1

by **JOYBELLE PHELAN**
MMM Executive Editor

If you’ve ever watched sunlight stretch across a wall through a tiny window, you know how powerful even the smallest bit of brightness can be. I’ve lived through long seasons where the world felt gray, where my own voice felt dim or uncertain. My name is JoyBelle, and if we haven’t met yet, I want you to know this: I believe wholeheartedly in the color you carry, even on days when you can’t feel it yourself.

Storytelling helped me find that color again. I didn’t always feel like my voice

belonged. There were times when I struggled to understand where I fit, or whether my story had a place in the larger conversation.

But through writing — and through the incredible people I met inside Colorado’s prisons — I learned that our stories are more than what happened to us. They are the light we carry forward.

They are the threads that connect us to one another.

For many years, programs across the state have created space for people to write, speak, or create. Some lasted a long time; others came and

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MESSENGER — QUARTERLY —

This masthead reflects the team members who actively worked on developing this issue. Team membership extends beyond this list and will shift over time based on availability.

Contributor Development roles are currently being formed. Applications are open, and future issues will reflect those who step into these roles.

Inside Peer Leadership

William S. Coney, Editor-in-Chief

Rhidale Dotson , Community Development

Daniel Sopiwnik, Education Development

Layout & Design

Lester Reynolds, Art Direction, Noah Hamilton, Graphic Design

JoyBelle Phelan, Executive Editor

Contributor Development Team:

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Matt Haley, Angel Lopez

Buena Vista Correctional Facility

Erik Chen, John Colaw

Colorado Territorial Correctional Facility

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Travis Barnes

Denver Women’s

Cassie Rieb

Fremont Correctional Facility

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Ryan J. Krueger, Matthew J. Martinez

Gordon Schumacher, Mike Severson

Limon Correctional Facility

Phillip Carter, Antonio Farrell

Cedric Martin, George Woldt

Skyline Correctional Center

Jacob Box, Terry Gaines

Jordan Maginness, Taveuan Williams

Sterling Correctional Facility

Michael L. Montoya, Justin Moore, Brian Scranton

Special Thanks

We are deeply grateful to the Colorado Department of Corrections staff, educators and librarians across the state who support and make this work possible.

With special appreciation to the CDOC Programs and Communications team, Melissa Smith, Leigh Burrows, and Alondra Gonzalez-Garcia, whose support, guidance, and genuine commitment to this work have been instrumental in making this publication possible.

And to Captain Michael Sherwood for his ongoing support with scheduling, program logistics, and communication at Fremont Correctional Facility.

went more suddenly. Those transitions weren’t always easy. Change inside can feel abrupt, especially when a program held meaning or gave people a sense of connection. Many of us felt that. I did too.

What those seasons taught me was powerful: strong creative communities are built on communication, collaboration, and continuity. When we share the work, the responsibility, and the vision, creativity becomes more sustainable. Programs become stronger. And people inside are supported no matter which organization or facilitator comes and goes.

That is the spirit behind this first issue of Messenger Quarterly.

This is a moment of both remembrance and renewal — a way to honor the past while building a future rooted in transparency, connection, and hope.

In these pages, you will hear voices from across Colorado, including updates from DU PAI’s new director and a column from Colorado Radio for Justice. These programs are fully independent from Unbound Authors and Mercury Mountain Media, but they are part of the wider creative landscape that many of you have contributed to over the years. Including them here is intentional. It reflects a belief that no single program defines creativity inside Colorado prisons. You deserve access to many

pathways and many opportunities, and we are committed to supporting that vision.

This newspaper is not about gatekeeping. It is about a shared sky.

As Executive Editor, my job is stewardship — creating a space where your words are honored, your voice is protected, and your creativity is supported with care. I do not see this role as controlling what gets created, but rather as tending a community garden where many stories can grow at once.

I spent seven years inside. I know the feeling of pouring your heart into something and wondering if anyone on the outside will understand it. I know what it means to tell a story in a place where stories are often misunderstood, filtered, or ignored. And I know how powerful it feels when someone says, Your voice matters. Keep going. That is what Messenger Quarterly is here to do.

We are building a publication grounded in five core values:

Voice Integrity

Your writing stays in your voice. Editors are here to support clarity, not to remake your story.

Collaboration

We work alongside many partners — inside and out — because creativity grows stronger when we share the work.

Transparency

You will always know how the editorial process works and what to expect at each stage.

Community Leadership

Inside development teams guide the process. Outside volunteers support, but they do not override the insight of people on the inside.

Dignity

We honor lived experience without sensationalism or stereotypes. Your story is not entertainment — it is a contribution to collective understanding.

As you read this issue — whether in a day room, a quiet corner of the library, or on a bunk after count — I want you to remember something:

You are part of a statewide creative community.

Your voice belongs here.

Your story has weight, value, and power.

Messenger Quarterly is not the work of one program.

It is the work of all of us.

It is a beginning we create together.

With gratitude and all the glitter I can carry.

Letter from the Editor in Chief

by **WILLIAM S. CONEY**
MMM Editor in Chief

The darkest times allow us to see the flickers of light surrounding us. It was hidden starlight, shining boldly during the global pandemic, that helped me find my way. Not the stars above me in the light-polluted prison yard sky. Not the Hollywood stars glowing on overpriced, clear plastic televisions, filmed far away.

The stars I found were locked up in cells all around me, silently scattered across the state. They broke the silence and found their voices through the written word. They shared laughter and illumination in narratives, poetry, and news we would have never heard without them.

Dreams, fears, and aspirations were stuffed into envelopes like messages in a bottle. Stories of hope, humanity, humility, or rage were sent to cope with the insanity and futility of living in a cage. In my darkest hour, I found the light of the messengers. Their humor, tears, and tribulations over the years were the flickering points of light we now call community. I have never been alone since being asked to read, edit, and prepare those stories.

This incredible opportunity for an expanded community is now our responsibility. This tablet is just another empty bottle washed ashore — without you.

Because you are the Messenger. Together, we are collectively Mercury Mountain Media: a conduit for creativity, freedom, and healing. Our stories, poems, and art will create Mosaics, seen wherever the digital current takes us. The incarcerated of Colorado are now able to rewrite their narrative as we sail boldly into uncharted waters.

It is important to remember that responsibility makes us all lifeguards in a place where confiscation and liberation are interchangeable. We are messengers in a ship made of glass, sailing by the starlight, vision, and experience of our community. Hidden dangers below the surface of conscious bias will be exposed. Waters claimed by the false flags of privateers will be traversed, while the winds of political change will

push us one day, then try to pull us off course another.

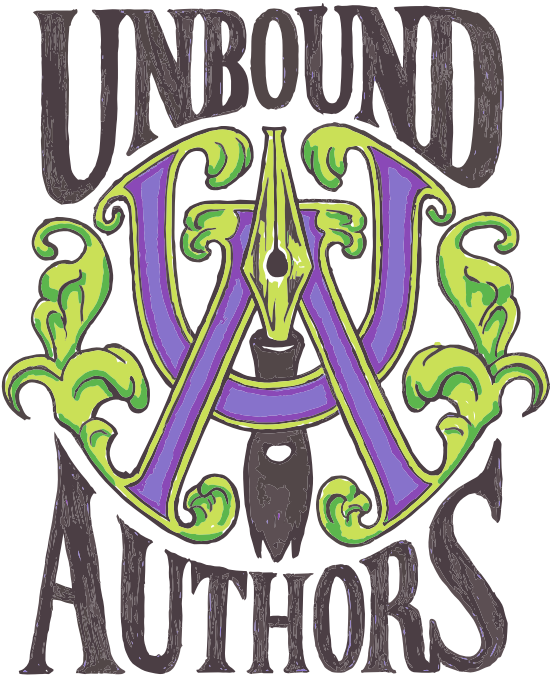
Rumors and speculation are like sea monsters for the incarcerated. Anxiety born from fear of the unknown affects so many in our community. Let’s share what we know to be true. Misinformation is the world’s edge for people preparing for parole, community corrections, or mandated programs. Our destination is plotted by simply heading for the truth — and the light.

We set sail 250 years after one messenger brought us Common Sense during a fight for freedom. He was one of this nation’s first journalists and believed:

“We have it in our power to begin the world over again.”

— Thomas Paine

And here, together, through truth and shared light, that work begins.



Colorado Radio for Justice: From Static Back to Signal

by **HERBERT ALEXANDER, RYAN CONARRO, & SETH READY**
CO-DIRECTORS OF CRJ



Many of you may remember Inside Wire: Colorado Prison Radio (IW). From 2021 to 2023, IW operated as a program of the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DUPAI). Production studios at Limon, Denver Women’s, Sterling, and Buena Vista created radio content that was broadcast across CDOC facilities via the TV system.

In the summer of 2023, the contract between CDOC and the University of Denver ended. With it, the university positions that supported the station concluded, and Inside Wire as it had existed came to an end. We know that programming across DUPAI — radio, newspaper, theater, and classes — ended abruptly. For many of you, that absence was felt. After that transition, members of the former IW team began asking what might come next. Ryan Conarro began part-

time work at Denver’s Youth on Record (YOR), teaching podcasting and audio production to young people. Conversations began among former collaborators — including Herbert Alexander and Seth Ready — about how to continue the spirit, creativity, and commitment that shaped Inside Wire. From those conversations, Colorado Radio for Justice (CRJ) emerged. Alexander, Conarro, and Ready became Co-Directors of the station, which now broadcasts online and through a mobile app (www.radioforjustice.org).

The Relaunch

CRJ relaunched its 24/7 broadcast in April 2025. The programming will feel familiar to those who remember IW: a mix of music and talk, including original CRJ shows

focused on reentry resources, criminal-legal news in Colorado, personal reentry stories, and conversations about values and system change. The station also continues to air archival Inside Wire programming, including Behind the Mic, One Tune, and Chow Time: Stories from Life in Colorado Prisons.

The work remains led or co-led by people directly impacted by the system, many of whom developed their journalism experience inside CDOC facilities. That includes Michael Clifton, Bob Eisenman, Trevor Jones, Tiffany McCoy, and JoyBelle Phelan, alongside the three Co-Directors.

Rebuilding the station took nearly a year. CRJ now operates as an independent nonprofit under the fiscal sponsorship of Youth on Record, which provides administrative and financial support. All collaborators — including the Co-Directors — currently work part-time or on a project basis while the station continues building long-term funding.

As CRJ prepared to relaunch, we made efforts to reconnect with former IW producers inside facilities to share updates and invite input. Our hope is that this next chapter continues the work that was built together

Fueled by Inside Wire’s Legacy

Even after IW went silent inside CDOC, the audio created by producers at Limon, Sterling, Denver Women’s, and Buena Vista continued to resonate beyond Colorado. Between late 2023 and spring 2024, IW productions received significant recognition, including:

- **A Silver ANTHEM Award for Human & Civil Rights**
- **Three Gold SIGNAL Awards for Chow Time and WORTHY: Colorado Reentry Stories**
- **The Solutions Journalism Network Audio Award for WORTHY**
- **A Silver New York Festivals Radio Award**
- **Two Top of the Rockies journalism awards from the Colorado Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists**

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From Shop Floor to Show Floor

by TAVEUAN WILLIAMS

Correctional industries prepares for the Natonal Western Stock Show



Before the gates open at the National Western Stock Show — before boots hit packed dirt, before banners rise and nearly 700,000 visitors flood the grounds — one man leans over a workbench, pulling a stitch tight through thick leather. His hands know the motion by muscle memory now. Cut. Thread. Pull. Repeat. Pull up a loop. Top thread through. Pull knot tight to the center. Repeat.

Around him, other men work in quiet coordination. In shops across the state, men and women do the same. Leather is shaped into saddles. Metal is welded into buckle displays. Coffee roasts in small batches. No crowds. No applause. Just the steady sounds of craftsmanship underway for an audience that does not yet know who made what they will soon admire.

This work will travel.

This year, Correctional Industries (CI) will take the floor at the National Western Stock Show not as a footnote, not as a curiosity, but as a manufacturer. The CI booth will showcase handcrafted goods produced by incarcerated workers across multiple programs: leather saddles; tack items such as headstalls and reins; custom tooled belts and pad portfolios; metal saddle candy and belt-buckle displays; roasted coffee; and a collection of upcycled license-plate art transformed into mugs, water bottles, and signage — objects once bound for scrap, now built for longevity.

The effort behind the booth is substantial. In just three months, CI Leather Products produced more than \$100,000 worth of inventory. The pace demanded long hours, problem-solving on the fly, and an

uncompromising commitment to quality under material shortages and an accelerated timeline. “We didn’t know we were doing the Stock Show until late September,” said Chris Brown, a CI supervisor who has worked with the program for 17 years and transitioned into marketing in 2022. “The guys inside found out in early October. From that point on, it was about meeting the moment without lowering the standard.” Meeting the moment meant adapting when leather shipments ran low, reworking production schedules, and redistributing labor without slowing output. When one material disappeared, another process filled the gap. The work kept moving.

CI’s presence at the Stock Show reflects a broader shift in strategy. The program once focused heavily on office furniture, a model that proved difficult to sustain. Leather craftsmanship, by contrast, occupies a niche market — one where authenticity, durability, and skill carry real value. Brown estimates a 20 percent increase in annual revenue for the leather shop from the two-week Stock Show alone, with leadership protecting as much as \$100,000 in sales during the first week.

But revenue tells only part of the story. “The more profitable the shop, the more the guys can earn,” Brown said. “That means they’re not asking their families to send money in for commissary. They’re sending money out. Even fifty dollars matters. It changes how you see yourself.”

Inside CI facilities, the work extends beyond production. Participants learn how to meet deadlines, manage time, collaborate under pressure, and share responsibility — skills that translate far beyond the shop floor. Unlike many private-sector environments, Brown describes the culture as deliberately cooperative.

“In private sectors, people guard information,” he said. “Here, they share it. Every trick of the trade. Everyone helps everyone. These guys can all run a leather shop business.”

That approach is intentional. According to CI supervisor Autumn Ehler, the skill set is both rare and transferable.

“There are very few saddle builders out there,” she said. “This is a unique opportunity. When they get out, they can make a good living in a niche market.”

What CI brings to the Stock Show is not mass production, but craftsmanship.

“This isn’t assembly-line work,” Ehler said. “It’s hand-stitched. It takes time. And it shows.”

The booth itself reflects that care. Brown spent weeks refining the layout to mirror Western tradition — an open, inviting space designed to encourage visitors to stop, examine the work, and ask questions. For CI, visibility matters.

“Most people don’t know we exist,” Brown said. “They’re surprised when they find out.”

That surprise is part of the opportunity. With hundreds of thousands of visitors expected, CI sees the Stock Show as a rare moment of public-facing education — a chance to broaden understanding of what rehabilitation can look like when people are trusted with meaningful work.

Ehler sees the exposure as a turning point.

“The CI brand is growing,” she said. “I want us to be known for quality — to be the first place people think of when they’re looking for this kind of craftsmanship.”

Visitors will come for the rodeo, the livestock, the spectacle. Some will leave with a saddle, a belt, or a coffee mug fashioned from a former license plate. What they carry with them — whether they realize it or not — is a quiet reframing of what work inside prison can look like when it is taken seriously.

For CI, success isn’t measured only in sales, though the team hopes the booth performs well. It’s measured in conversations, first impressions, and long-term relationships that may follow. In that sense, the Stock Show isn’t just a marketplace.

It is a proving ground.



The Inside Report: What We Built, What Remains

by **TREVOR JONES**

In 2019, a group of incarcerated writers and collaborators began creating what would become The Inside Report, a newspaper created by and for people inside Colorado’s correctional facilities. The idea was straightforward: create a publication that could reach facilities across the state and give residents a platform to report, reflect, and share information with one another.

At the time, the effort was supported through a contract between CDOC and the University of Denver. When the newspaper project began, about a dozen residents stepped forward to help build it. Early workshops were led by program educators, including Ashley Hamilton, Julie Rada, and Karen Levi-Lausa, who helped structure the first meetings and editorial discussions as the newsroom took shape.

CDOC staff also played a critical role in getting the project off the ground. Captain Quattlebaum, in particular, worked to make space for the newsroom inside Fremont Correctional Facility (FCF), helped troubleshoot logistics, and supported the concept internally. From the beginning, The Inside Report (IR) was made possible through collaboration between CDOC staff and the DU PAI team, who were willing to take the idea seriously.

IR reached facilities across Colorado, spanning multiple security levels. Once the call for story ideas went out, submissions came in steadily. Writers covered current events inside their facilities, recreation programs, education opportunities, human-interest features, and reviews. One Green & Blue book review even highlighted Colorado State Senator Pete Lee’s favorite novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

As the volume of submissions grew, so did the newsroom. Writers drafted features and profiles. Artists submitted work that later filled the pages of *Reverberations*, a creative arts and writing magazine that developed alongside IR. Editors spent long hours reading, sorting, revising, and preparing hundreds of pieces for publication. The alcove at Fremont became the newsroom. It was where people learned

to edit, meet deadlines, debate ideas, and take their work seriously. A shift in the newsroom came during the tenure of Editor-in-Chief Anthony Ray Valdez. During this period, residents who had been incarcerated long before the digital era worked alongside younger participants more comfortable with emerging technologies. He also opened the door for students in the Juveniles and Young Adults Convicted as Adults Program (JYACAP) to join the editorial team. The result was a cross-generational learning environment where people sharpened their writing, mentored one another, and gained experience that felt transferable beyond the facility. One of the defining moments in IR’s history came shortly after COVID, when the newsroom conducted a multi-facility interview with Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative.

The interview connected Sterling, Four Mile, Fremont, and Denver Women’s, bringing together leadership from CDOC and the University of Denver.

At FCF, the room had been set up for a multi-site broadcast. JYACAP teachers and alumni, including Eric Davis, a founding newsroom member and the first person paroled under JYACAP, sat among newer students, while the warden and her leadership team stood nearby.

When Stevenson appeared on the screen, the room grew quiet. As he spoke about narrative, justice, and the role of storytelling, one of the JYACAP teachers, normally steady and composed, began to cry. The reaction moved through the room. For many of us, it was a reminder that what we were building was bigger than a newsletter. The interview expanded our understanding of what IR could be.

We later heard the recorded interview in our cells before *Heroes Among Us*, IR Volume 3, Issue 1, went to print in June 2022. A public version also appeared on the *With(in)* podcast and aired on the closed-circuit education channel across CDOC facilities. Stevenson often speaks about the power of narrative and how stories influence public perception. His visit reinforced what IR had already

begun to demonstrate: that incarcerated journalists could participate in shaping those narratives. During this period, IR’s Executive Editor, Ryan Conarro, began developing Inside Wire, CDOC’s statewide radio network. As he prepared to transition into that role, he mentored JoyBelle Phelan, IR’s first female journalist, who was still on parole at the time, as she stepped into the Managing Editor position. The experience she gained there later informed the work she would build through Unbound Authors and Mercury Mountain Media.

Back at Fremont, the newsroom continued to expand. Captain Sherwood supported the project by removing a wall in the alcove and installing a large television screen, allowing contributors from other facilities to connect more easily. The space became a working newsroom where residents practiced journalism, collaborated across facilities, and built skills that extended beyond incarceration. Several former IR contributors now work in media, communications, and nonprofit roles in free society.

When the DU PAI–CDOC partnership concluded in 2023, IR ended along with other arts and educational programs across the system. Evan Lawlor was serving as Editor-in-Chief at the time, guiding the newsroom through its final months.

The work, however, did not disappear. It moved with the people who had built it and continues today through Unbound Authors and Mercury Mountain Media, founded by Phelan and Dr. Libby Catchings; Colorado Radio for Justice, co-founded by Conarro with Seth Ready and Herbert Alexander; and Impact Arts, co-founded by Sarah McKenzie and Lilly Stannard. Long-standing programs such as *Unchained Voices* and Julie Rada’s ACT Ensemble remain active in facilities, while former contributors continue writing, mentoring, and building new platforms. IR began as a newspaper in an alcove in Cañon City. It became a training ground, a newsroom, and a community. Its impact is still unfolding.

Now the next chapter belongs to those who step forward to write it.

Arkansas Valley Hosts Annual Christmas Holiday

by **ANGEL LOPEZ**

On December 5, 2025, Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility held its annual Christmas Holiday Event, hosted by Woodmen Valley Chapel for the entire facility. The event included more than 40 volunteers and 40 resident workers who helped

serve throughout the day. Three sessions were held — one in the morning, one in the afternoon, and one in the evening — with two living units attending each session. Each resident received a gift bag that included a water bottle, a spork (the same kind used in the chow hall, just in a different color), cards, and candy.



A guest speaker from North Carolina delivered a message of hope and stayed for all three sessions. It was a joyful time for many. Refreshments included apple cider, white chocolate-covered Rice Krispie treats, chocolate-covered marshmallows, and white chocolate-covered pretzel sticks. A live band performed alongside



musicians from Arkansas Valley, creating a meaningful collaboration between volunteers and residents. The facility looks forward to what 2026 will bring. Happy New Year to all the men and women inside. Live with the mindfulness that we only have today — make the best of it, and speak life.



Friday Night Lights

by LISA LESYSHEN

Every Friday night from 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., the gym at Denver Women’s Correctional Facility (DWCF) comes alive with women from every housing unit participating in the new program, Friday Night Lights. Each week features a different game or competition paired with a food item for a night of fun. Basketball and nachos. Dodgeball and chicken tenders.



Karaoke and soft pretzels. Jenga and pork sliders. The combinations are endless, which has made the event an instant hit with both residents and staff.

Captain Alexander, the program director, created Friday Night Lights to promote “the kid in all of us” and provide a safe, nonjudgmental environment where people can come together and get to know one



another. Participants can purchase a \$20 punch card that allows them to buy food during the event. Funds raised go to the Enterprise Fund, which supports new gym equipment and electronics for incentive units. After the first month, the event had raised \$4,000 and regularly draws more than 100 participants each week.

This culture-shifting program has become a welcome addition to the women’s facility, providing a positive outlet and an opportunity to compete in a wide variety of games — and enjoy food beyond the usual DOC fare.



Yoga Didn’t Save Us.

It Just Showed Us a Path Forward.

by MATTHEW HALEY

I’m skeptical of redemption stories that are too neat.” Real change is not cinematic. It’s repetitive, uncomfortable, nonlinear in most cases, and often downright boring. For many of the core team members of New Direction Yoga, change didn’t start with yoga. It began with ownership — accepting consequences and realizing that discipline, not inspiration, is what sustains change.

Yoga came later. It didn’t save us. It trained us. That distinction matters. The practices of yoga and meditation become vital in prison and other extreme environments (consider how U.S. Navy SEAL Mark Divine utilized these practices while deployed in Iraq, as described in Kokoro Yoga). When we can’t control our surroundings, the only leverage

we have left is control of our mind, our breath, and our response. Discipline is not about comfort; it’s about sovereignty. New Direction Yoga (NDY) was born in 2018 at Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility through a small group of residents seeking to build a safe space for like-minded men to practice yoga. It quickly grew in size and interest, and over time, a

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resident-led team formed to explore how yoga and meditation directly address a central struggle of incarceration: living in an environment that constantly triggers the nervous system.

In this setting, hypervigilance is adaptive. Aggression can be defensive. Stillness can feel dangerous. While institutional culture often ignores or dismisses these realities, yoga and meditation do not.

NDY is a peer-led program supported by the New Direction Yoga Foundation. Its mission is to equip facilities across Colorado with trained, connected teacher-facilitators on the inside, along with essential resources such as mats, blocks, straps, books, and continuing education. Nothing fancy. No incense. No aesthetic posturing. Just tools for practice — because practice is where discipline is built.

We partner with volunteer teachers to provide full 200-hour yoga teacher training and meditation courses inside prison. This is not recreational yoga. It involves months of study: teaching practicums, anatomy, philosophy, ethics, entrepreneurship, and daily repetition. No one does this because it’s easy. We do it because discipline creates structure where impulse, avoidance, and chaos once lived.

NDY teams facilitate daily classes, with members rotating responsibilities — teaching large classes, leading workshops, managing equipment, coordinating schedules, tracking attendance, and supporting overall operations. Over seven years, the program has expanded beyond AVCF not through marketing, but because

it works. Leadership is shared, visible, and earned. Certified residents treat one another as stakeholders in a living system.

Our leadership style blends compassionate, human-centered approaches with select military leadership principles: lead by example, know your people, accept responsibility, maintain standards, and show up. Yoga becomes the training ground where these values are practiced daily, not discussed abstractly.

NDY is inclusive by design. Classes are open to anyone, regardless of experience or mobility. We offer wheelchair-accessible classes, chair yoga, and adaptive practices, meeting people where they are. If you can breathe, you can practice. The goal isn’t performance — it’s regulation, awareness, and consistency.

NDY encourages accountability through a new lens — not as punishment, but as the daily discipline of showing up for oneself and others, especially when no one is forcing you to. Yoga doesn’t absolve harm; it trains the capacity not to repeat it. The changes are often subtle: fewer reactions, more pauses, more ownership.

Yoga didn’t save us.

It gave us a way to practice discipline and take control of ourselves when our environment offers few opportunities to do so. It teaches us how to stay present when avoidance feels easier. How to breathe through responsibility instead of running from it. With practice, suffering doesn’t disappear — it becomes productive.

From the outside, it may look like stretching. From the inside, it’s mental conditioning. Disciplined stillness and self-control are harder than giving in to impulse and chaos. Sitting with discomfort without reacting is a form of strength too few are willing to cultivate. Through repetition, men build trust in themselves — a rare thing inside prison — and become leaders and change agents while supporting one another’s healing.

NDY doesn’t ask society to lower its standards.

It asks us to raise ours.

If we expect people to return from prison more stable, less reactive, and less likely to cause harm, we must invest in tools that build discipline at the nervous-system level.

That’s not redemption.

It’s restoration.

It’s training.

And training—done daily—is how real change is earned.



Off to a Quick Start by STEFANO ILLESCAS-ROMO

Quickly gaining speed at Limon Correctional Facility is the Fitness and Sobriety Training (FAST) program. FAST is an addiction recovery support program dedicated to the overall wellness of its participants. Fitness and sobriety are the modes of transportation and transformation used to reach greater wellness. Weekly meetings provide group time for participants to discuss the ups and downs of sobriety, as well as develop skills to combat addiction and grow into more pro-social engagement with people and the environment to create a healthier community.

“CrossFit gives us a healthy outlet to manage our addictive personalities in a positive way,” says community leader

Jimmy (Ponce) Martinez. He describes the W.O.D. (Workout of the Day) exercises and how the correlation between fitness and overall health revived him into a sober lifestyle. He facilitates FAST meetings and coaches CrossFit at the RF2 gym at Limon. FAST participants also meet there three times weekly to complete W.O.D.s.

FAST members are represented in nearly every positive facility engagement, including RF2 CrossFit, Inner Strength Powerlifting, yoga, Action Change Theater (A.C.T.), Sky Inside, Restoring Honor, and Unbound Authors, as well as major departments in the facility like the kitchen, maintenance, recreation, and vocational and college programs through academics.

FAST is also collaborating with community

sober living programs, addiction recovery programs, and a variety of gyms to stay fit. Members from Fortitude Fitness, Lions Pride Fitness, and the Abundance Foundation routinely travel to Limon to sit in on groups, as well as participate in and judge team and individual workouts.

When asked how the FAST program has impacted his time, facilitator Dexter Lewis had this to say: “It feels good to be part of a team where everyone cares about the overall well-being of one another.” He added, “I love being able to spend my time productively contributing to my community.”

It does indeed — so go FAST and Godspeed.

Limon Unit 4, the Program Pod

by CEDRIC MARTIN

I am housed in Limon Correctional Facility’s program unit, living unit four, and each day I marvel at the sheer amount of learning occurring in these walls.

Each day I wake up and a wave of guilt, shame, anger and emotional pain crashes into me. I lie in bed for a bit. I take stock of where I am in my life; 43 years old, released from prison after 22 years, back in prison after 14 months of freedom, 2 years into my new 7-year sentence. For a bit longer, I wallow in a tidal pool of depression and then allow my thoughts to flow out toward the sea of reality that comprises the net sum of my possible futures.

Eventually, I crawl out of bed and perform my morning ablutions. Finally, I cross the threshold from my cell into the pod. Every day I walk out of my cell and am astounded by what I see. There are furrowed brows, hunched shoulders and intense whispers crowded around the tables in my pod. I love the vista.

You see, I am fortunate enough to be one of about 180 or so prisoners housed in this prototypical Programs Unit. I am one of those prisoners who would never, ever have considered going to an incentive unit. I have personal, philosophical objections to the stratification of privileges, creation of castes of “haves” and “have-nots,” “good” and “bad” prisoners, and, inevitably,

division amongst said prisoners. However, I am, and always have been, deeply motivated by education and knowledge. Also, this unit may be “incentive” on paper, but we don’t have access to many of the traditional “incentive” amenities like movies or video games or other gildings. What we do have, what convinced me to set aside my convictions far enough to seek admittance, is the ability to access our laptops and Google Classroom 24 hours a day.

I cannot think of a better place (in prison) from which to combat depression. Even at 4:45 a.m., when our doors are unlocked, people are exercising and showering, preparing morning coffee, preparing for the day. There are people hunched over their laptops, feverishly typing. Others are huddled together, discussing difficult points of the various classes they are enrolled in. There is a pleasant hum of synaptic energy in the air. The fog of darkness between my ears brightens. Often, I find myself drawn into a conversation, either my advice sought or my curiosity piqued.

Later, after I eat breakfast, stand in med-line and wait for my daily dose of antidepressant and go to the gym to work out, I head off to the Academic Department. It is a veritable haven of learning. There are so many students, tutors and staff

members striving. Deep wells of passion and patience, every one.

Unit 4 at Limon operates as a pilot program unit focused on education, housing many of the students enrolled in college courses. As part of that pilot, those students are permitted to carry their Chromebooks beyond the academic department to complete coursework and access class materials. Other students complete their work within the department during scheduled hours. That reality sits in tension for me. I have never been comfortable with systems that separate people into different levels of access, and I still wrestle with being on the side that benefits from it. What I can see, though, is how much this level of access supports learning, focus, and accountability. It leaves me wondering: if these tools make this kind of difference here, what might be possible as access continues to expand across other units and facilities? LCF is still a prison. Violence. Drugs. Mental illness. Trauma. Lengthy sentences. Friendships. Hardships. Miracles. Tragedy.

LCF is also a place where there is a population that is intensely focused on self-betterment. I am given hope and the melancholy is pushed away, at least for the rest of that day.

Legislation Inside Expands Statewide Engagement

by JAMIE RAY

Legislation Inside, a program operating within the Colorado Department of Corrections, launched in early 2021 with a goal of connecting incarcerated individuals and state lawmakers to share lived experiences and collaborate on policy solutions aimed at improving prison conditions and public safety. The program is currently housed within the Korey Wise Innocence Project at Colorado Law.

In 2021, elections were held in 13 correctional facilities. The program now includes 33 elected representatives across those facilities, with authorization for up to 40 representatives statewide.

Representatives meet weekly via videoconference to discuss policy proposals related to prison conditions and public safety. They engage directly with state legislators and coordinate with community organizations focused on criminal justice policy.

In 2023, Legislation Inside advanced House Bill 23-1214, which sought to establish a standardized and more transparent process for applying for sentence commutations. The bill passed both the Colorado House and Senate but was later vetoed by Governor Jared Polis.

In 2025, the program achieved a legislative milestone with the passage of Senate Bill 25-155, which created the Legislation Inside Advisory Council. Signed into law by Governor Polis, the bill formally established the program within the Department of Corrections. It also requires bipartisan participation from state senators and representatives in Legislation Inside meetings and creates an interim committee through which incarcerated representatives



“Legislation inside member Monir Wood testifies virtually in stat capital via Jamie Ray”



may present up to three policy proposals each summer for consideration in the following legislative session.

Legislation Inside is currently drafting bylaws outlining its application process, election procedures, and methods for filling vacancies. Once finalized, those bylaws will be made



publicly available. The organization is not currently accepting applications and plans to widely publicize participation and election information when it becomes available.

Program leaders have indicated they plan to continue providing updates to Messenger Quarterly regarding their work and

Facility Reps:

- Buena Vista -
Ronald Lee Smith,
Andrew Nardello
- Territorial -
Greg Bowers,
Clinton Hall,
Jesse Wilkerson
- Fremont -
Daniel Sopiwnik,
Waylon Robitaille,
Gerek Wilderson,
Rhidale Dotson,
William Coney
- Arkansas Valley -
Bernard Jones,
Lamar Blackwell
- La Vista -
Tatiana Manondavis,
Shauntiel Goree
- DRDC -
Steve Allen,
Samuel Mullikin,
Anthony Escobedo
- Sterling -
Monir Wood
- Denver Women’s -
Lynn Lay,
Lisa Lesyshen,
Tina Black,
Paulette Joyce
- Beacon at Skyline -
Terry Gaines,
William Schwartz,
Vern Moter
- CSP -
Derik League,
David Jenner
- Trinidad -
Jesse Miller,
Norman Vasquez,
Troy Brownlow
- Centennial -
Billy Edwards,
Maurice Engelby,
Chuck Martinez
- San Carlos -
Joshua Baldwin

continues on next page

broader criminal justice policy efforts. Individuals with questions may contact their facility’s elected representative or write to Lead Facilitator David Carrillo at the Korey Wise Innocence Project,

Wolf Law Building, 401 UCB, 2450 Kittredge Loop Drive, Boulder, CO 80309.

Town Hall Addresses New Colorado Visitation Statute

by *LISA LESYSHEN*

State officials and community members discuss recent changes to visitation law at public meetings.

The Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC) hosted a series of town hall meetings to provide information about House Bill 25-1013, a visitation statute introduced during the 2025 legislative session by members of the Colorado General Assembly and advanced with input from legislators, the Colorado Department of Corrections, and community advocates. The legislation addresses social visitation and communication in correctional facilities, including contact visits, non-contact visits, family time visits, video visits, phone calls, and correspondence. During the town halls, presenters referenced statutory language stating that CDOC “shall not restrict visitation beyond what is necessary for routine facility operations or for the safety of the facility and the public.” The bill also outlines a grievance process to be used when a social visit is denied, and officials emphasized that the meetings were intended to explain the statute and its implementation. Two town hall meetings were held in July. The first took place on July 15, 2025, at the Cañon City Visitation Center. During the meetings, presenters outlined how the statute establishes parameters around visitation access while continuing to allow restrictions related to safety, staffing, and routine facility operations. Officials noted that visitation may still be limited under specific circumstances and that facilities retain responsibility for managing visits in accordance with security needs. Attendees raised a wide range of questions, many of which extended beyond visitation policy alone. Governor Polis and other representatives responded as time allowed, addressing concerns about communication access, facility operations, and how policy changes are communicated to families and the public. A virtual town hall had also been discussed as a way to broaden access, but that option was ultimately not held. The second was held on July 23, 2025, at Denver Women’s Correctional Facility (DWCF), where approximately 50 people attended. The meetings were intended for families and community stakeholders to better understand the statute and its implementation. They included state legislators, CDOC upper management, and Governor Jared Polis.

Governor Polis made brief remarks regarding the legislation and the state’s role in overseeing its implementation. Due to standard security protocols associated with the governor’s visit, DWCF was placed on lockdown, and incarcerated individuals were not present. During the meetings, presenters outlined how the statute establishes parameters around visitation access while continuing to allow restrictions related to safety, staffing, and routine facility operations. Officials noted that visitation may still be limited under specific circumstances and that facilities retain responsibility for managing visits in accordance with security needs. Attendees raised a wide range of questions, many of which extended beyond visitation policy alone. Governor Polis and other representatives responded as time allowed, addressing concerns about communication access, facility operations, and how policy changes are communicated to families and the public. A virtual town hall had also been discussed as a way to broaden access, but that option was ultimately not held. Speakers also reviewed the grievance process outlined in the statute, explaining that it is intended to provide a formal avenue for review while maintaining existing safety and operational standards within facilities. The bill focuses on communication and family connection, addressing visits, phone calls, and correspondence through mail. During the legislative process, it was discussed as a way to support maintaining family bonds and a sense of normalcy during incarceration, including for individuals in restrictive housing or under sanctions unrelated to visitation. The legislation was originally referred to as the “Right to Hug” law, but to avoid misperceptions and confusion with similarly titled legislation in other states, it was ultimately advanced under the name “Right to Family Connection and Communication.” Prior to the passage of the statute, visitation policies were largely governed by facility-level discretion and administrative rules. During the town hall, speakers explained that the new law changes how visitation is addressed in state statute by limiting when and how visits may be restricted. According to

presenters, visitation may still be temporarily limited under specific circumstances related to safety, staffing, or facility operations, but the statute outlines defined conditions rather than broad discretionary revocation. For those seeking additional information, the full text of the statute is available through Colorado’s legislative records. Incarcerated individuals may also access legislative materials through facility law libraries, including LexisNexis, which provides access to statutory language and bill information. The lives of incarcerated people and their families are closely affected by visitation policies, and the town halls reflected ongoing interest in how these policies are applied across facilities. CDOC representatives indicated that any future changes or clarifications related to visitation would be communicated through official departmental channels.

Key Provisions Referenced During the Town Hall
(Colorado Revised Statutes §17-20-130)
17-20-130. Visitation in correctional facilities -- department policies -- reporting -- legislative declaration -- definitions.
4 (A) THE FOLLOWING LIMITATIONS ARE EXPRESSLY PERMITTED AND ARE NOT CONSIDERED A DEPRIVATION OF VISITATION:
(I) THE DEPARTMENT MAY LIMIT VISITATION FOR A CONFINED PERSON WHO IS IN RESTRICTIVE HOUSING EXCEPT; THAT THE DEPARTMENT SHALL NOT LIMIT THE PERSON’S CONTACT VISITS FOR MORE THAN 30 CONSECUTIVE CALENDAR DAYS AND SHALL NOT LIMIT THE PERSON’S TELEPHONE CALLS TO FEWER THAN ONE TELEPHONE CALL EVERY FIVE CALENDAR DAYS; AND
(II) THE DEPARTMENT MAY LIMIT A CONFINED PERSON’S VISITATION AS A SANCTION IF THE PERSON HAS BEEN CONVICTED OF A CLASS 1 CODE OF PENAL DISCIPLINE VIOLATION EXCEPT; THAT THE DEPARTMENT SHALL NOT LIMIT THE PERSON’S CONTACT VISITS FOR MORE THAN THIRTY CONSECUTIVE CALENDAR DAYS.

State Legislature Introduces Bills on Sentencing Review and Prison Population Management

In February 2026, Colorado lawmakers introduced two bills related to long prison sentences and prison capacity management. SB26-115: Post-Conviction Relief for Certain Offenders. Sponsored by Senators Julie Gonzales and Mike Weissman, the bill would allow individuals who committed an offense before age 21, or who are now

60 or older, to petition a court for resentencing after serving at least 20 years. The bill does not guarantee release. Individuals would need to demonstrate that they no longer pose a public safety risk and that there is good cause to modify their sentence. SB26-036: Prison Population Management Measures. This bill proposes

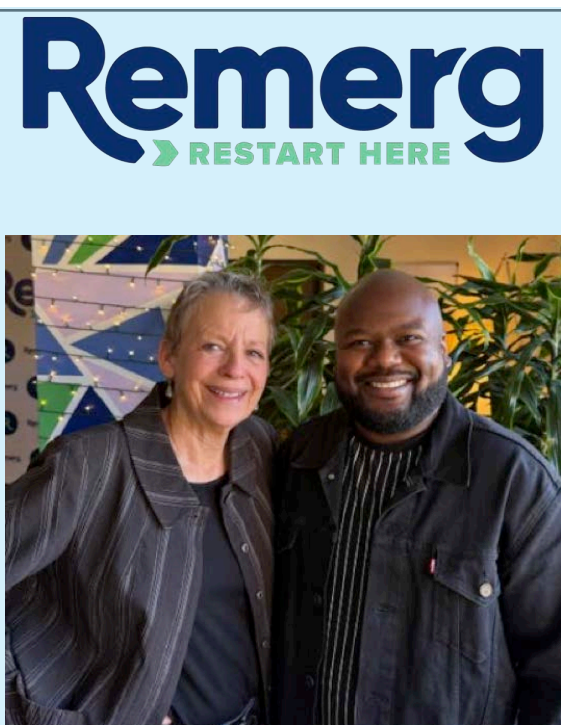
updates to Colorado’s existing prison population management law. The current law, adopted in 2018, is triggered when prison vacancy rates fall below 3 percent. Lawmakers say the new bill would clarify reporting requirements and timelines to address prison capacity concerns more effectively. The bill has been introduced and awaits committee review. As with all proposed legisla-

tion, bills must pass both chambers of the General Assembly and be signed by the governor before becoming law. Proposed legislation can change as it moves through committees and floor votes. Amendments may be added, language may be revised, or a bill may not advance. Messenger Quarterly will continue to provide updates as the process unfolds.

Reentry Update: New Edition of the Colorado Go Guide Released

A new edition of the Colorado Go Guide has been released. The Go Guide is a statewide reentry resource designed to support individuals preparing for release and those assisting them. The guide includes information on housing, employment, record sealing, parole navigation, voting rights, and community resources. Previous editions have been made available to individuals preparing for release through Colorado Department of Corrections reentry efforts. The updated edition is available for purchase for \$10. Bulk ordering information is available through the publisher.

Leadership Transition
At Remerg, a Colorado-based reentry organization, recently announced a leadership transition. Founder Carol Peeples is retiring after ten years as Executive Director. Darren Smith has been named the organization’s new Executive Director. According to Remerg’s announcement, Smith will work alongside Peeples during a transition period before assuming full leadership. Remerg provides reentry-focused programming and resource navigation in Colorado, including housing-related initiatives and community partnerships. The organization indicated the leadership change marks the beginning of its next phase of development.



Together Apart

by **JORDAN MAGINNESS**

For me, writing has always been a solemn craft, but I was part of a community; The Inside Report (IR) Writer’s Corps. There were journalistic assignments. There was a newsroom... once. I felt a sense of belonging to a network of fellow journalists and creative writers. I hadn’t been at Arrowhead very long after leaving Fremont and still felt appreciative of being able to go to the library any time I wanted. There, I eagerly anticipated a fresh copy of the new issue of IR. I couldn’t wait to see which of my writing peers made the cut and what they wrote. However, the paper hadn’t arrived yet—nor would it ever. I wondered what happened, and no one had answers... only speculation. After IR went away, I felt alone in a way I had never felt before. I had lost purpose, connection to others, and had recently lost my mother—my greatest source of love and encouragement. Her eulogy became my latest writing assignment. Losing so much all at once made it a very dark time for me. From then on, I rarely received mail.

I was caught off guard to see my name on the mail-call sheet. More bad news, I assumed. It was a JPay letter, which usually meant crisis or condolences from some relative I don’t know. However, it was from JoyBelle Phelan, whom I knew from her many contributions to IR and her frequent appearances in the newsroom. “Dear Writer...” That simple salutation bellowed acceptance from one of my most respected peers. She told me I was not alone and that I had not been forgotten—big things were in the works; hang in there. I had no clue what any of that meant, but somehow we were still connected, abstract as that may be. In prison, there are no small things. Through that simple JPay message, I could feel rays of hope illuminating the dark clouds of my grief. In my mind’s eye, I saw a hand reach through a dark gray sky, devoid of horizon, as if I were inside a Michelangelo painting. About a year later, I arrived at The Beacon at Skyline. On my third day at this wonderful place, I attended the Unbound Authors writers’ mentoring lab—and

there she was. JoyBelle had done it. She had created a space for writers of all kinds to cultivate their craft and support one another. We have engaged in writing prompts, written collective stories together, and collaborated to create quarterly poetry slams with great success. JoyBelle also shared that there could even be a newspaper in the works. Today, I sit teary-eyed, reminiscing on what became a turning point. With a tablet in my hand, I am part of a team once more. Again, I am filled with purpose and am grateful to JoyBelle for her compassion, encouragement, and persistence. I am proud to be part of this new thing—so much more than a phoenix rising through the ashes. Through Unbound Authors’ writers’ mentoring lab and Mercury Mountain Media, we are building a community of writers and editors that transcends brick-and-mortar newsrooms in its quest for inclusivity, dignity, and some pretty great journalism. Here’s to the past, present, and future!

...This is Now

by **RYAN J. KRUEGER**

“We’re finally getting our voice back!” “This is what we’ve been waiting for.” So many thoughts raced through my mind, excitement flashed, and anticipation grew. The Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC) had once again approved the statewide publication of both a newspaper and creative arts magazine. Once my heart stopped racing and my breathing slowed, skepticism and doubt began to creep in. “Are we really doing this again?” “Why?” “It didn’t end well the first time.” “How will this be any different?” If you were a resident of CDOC before 2023 you understand. You likely perused a copy of The Inside Report, or thumbed through an issue of Reverberations. You may have been a contributor; submitting an article, poem, or a piece of art. If you’re new to the department, you may not have heard about them. Or, if you’re like me, you had the privilege of working on them. Whatever the case, you know this has been

tried before. In 2019, the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI), launched The Inside Report, the department’s first-ever, statewide, prison-run newspaper. Reverberations, a creative arts magazine, soon followed. For the first time, residents of CDOC had an opportunity unlike any I’ve seen in my nearly 20 years in prison. We had platforms, vehicles by which to tell our stories, share our art, and let our voices be heard. Many saw an opportunity to affect change in the system, at a time when change was in vogue. Of course, like every program, DU PAI had a shelf-life. In July 2023, just five years after it began, DU PAI abruptly ceased to exist; and when it did, both newspaper and magazine went dark. Everyone had an opinion about why DU PAI ultimately failed. In my opinion, the organization did some really good things while it was around, and two of those things were The

Inside Report and Reverberations. As a submissions representative for Reverberations, one of my responsibilities was to distribute the latest editions of both publications. Hot off the presses, everyone wanted to be the first to read them. There were never enough copies. For many, it was the novelty of reading something different, written by one of our own. For some, it was the connection felt by reading an article, or checking out the latest artwork, by someone you knew. For others, it was the pride of seeing their work in print, their name neatly typed in their byline, or their signature scrawled at the bottom of their art. For a few, it was the privilege of witnessing, first hand, the joy others took in the result of all the hard work done to produce them. When they vanished, the opportunities they provided across the system vanished with them. That was then...This is now. What we hold in our hands is not just the old made continues on next page

new again. Different program, different leadership, different philosophy. Different times, different teams, different goals. This is not DU PAI 2.0. It’s time to forge a new path forward. One informed by both the successes and the failures of the past, but which leads long into the future.

So how do we make sure success and sustainability last? The answer is simple. Here, Community is our watch word. You may recognize names and faces of those whose work you read here, or perhaps find a particular piece of artwork familiar. You may have heard a poem read aloud before

you find it here in print. You should, these pages are filled by those living among us, whose passion for storytelling has once again found a home. This platform is all of ours, to make of it what we will.

In coming months we’ll be looking to you, our community, to help make this a success. Do you have a story aching to be told? We want it. Is there a poem burning within? We need it. Have you sketched or painted a world of beauty? Show us. This is your opportunity to make your voice heard. What will you use yours to say? We can’t wait to hear from you!

Over the last few years, we’ve had to revert to the old ways; some combination of offender-led art and creative writing classes. We’ve kept feeling our way through the darkness in hopes we might one day find our way back to the light. If you’re reading this, our first offering is now in print and on digital. If you’re reading this, we made it; you’re holding light in your hands. If you’re reading this, allow me to be one of the first to welcome you to Mercury Mountain Media.



Colorado-Based Behavioral Health & Peer Recovery Services

Founded by formerly incarcerated leaders who understand the barriers to treatment firsthand, Ascend Recovery Solutions is a Colorado-based behavioral health organization committed to helping individuals break free from substance use and mental health challenges through structured, evidence-based outpatient care. Licensed at the ASAM Level 1 standard, Ascend provides therapy, peer support, skills training, and individualized recovery planning tailored to each client’s unique needs. The organization is built on the belief that recovery is possible for everyone when services are accessible, accountable, and rooted in clinical integrity.

Serving communities across Colorado, Ascend partners with Medicaid and regional care networks to remove barriers to treatment and ensure high-quality services are available to those who need them most. The team includes qualified behavioral health professionals and peer support specialists who combine lived experience with professional expertise to guide clients toward stability, resilience, and long-term



recovery. Every service is delivered with a focus on compliance, ethical care, and measurable progress.

At its core, Ascend Recovery Solutions exists to restore hope and strengthen communities. By supporting individuals in achieving sobriety, improving mental health, and rebuilding their lives, the organization plays an active role in reducing the long-term social and economic impacts of addiction. Ascend is committed not only to individual transformation, but to creating a healthier, more empowered future for Colorado families as a whole.

Recovery is possible. Hope is practical. Care is accessible.

Contact:719-464-3784

Web: ascendrecoverycolorado.com

Make (Time) Beautiful by BRANDON JACKSON

An Interview with Hector Castillo



If it wasn’t obvious from the freshly watered grass and array of flowers planted throughout the yard, you wouldn’t have to look further than the detailed murals across the facility to know that Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility

(AVCF) is not the typical prison experience. Don’t get me wrong – prison is prison. But I, for one, find it refreshing and even liberating to look around and see beauty beneath the ashes, so to speak.

There are many talented artists here at AVCF, and I was blessed to sit down and talk with one of the best, Mr. Hector Castillo. In this candid conversation, we discussed his passion for art, his unwavering optimism, and his desire to make time beautiful.

Thank you, Hector, for agreeing to sit down and talk with me about your art and writing. To start, tell me about your book *Make (Time) Beautiful* and what inspired you to write it.

Make (Time) Beautiful is a book about taking control of what little you have – or can – in prison and being productive with your time. Some cultures that surround us are not beautiful or beneficial to oneself or others. This book highlights my insights into prison and how I’ve seen it work for others and me. I bring it to market as a service to people desiring less crime, more humanity, and a productive living environment.

How did you go from being an introverted person serving a life sentence to someone whose art hangs in galleries and whose books are sold worldwide?

Thank you for that question. I think, for me, I had to become ready to be seen. I began putting myself out there more. At the same time, it took someone noticing me and helping take me to higher heights.

There isn’t a real formula other than challenging yourself to step out of your comfort zone. There’s no cookie-cutter template – just resilience and the willingness to study your own successes and failures.

Although I’m an introvert, I eventually told myself, “Let me give this a try. I’m going to learn and create as I go.” I aligned myself with what I believed in and stepped out there and started creating.

What are some of the biggest obstacles you had to overcome to get your work out to the public?

One of the biggest obstacles for an incarcerated individual is finding and connecting with people willing to explore and present our talent to others. When we can connect with such people, it can create

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valuable shifts in perspective. I am very grateful for those who have been willing to help make those connections. You’ve obviously been painting for a while. What made you want to write a book?

In prison, it’s no surprise to my peers that I enjoy math. I like equations and seeking solutions.

Through journaling and paying attention to commonalities, I noticed what has worked, what has failed, and what has the potential to work for both prisoners and staff. As an avid gamer – patient, strategic, and someone who values simplicity – I thought to myself, “Let me survey the environment and inquire about people’s thoughts.”

When I began outlining chapters based on

those commonalities – while still including the nuances – I realized it needed to be more personal. I wanted to add a little about me as an artist and a young man growing up in prison. That’s how Make (Time) Beautiful came to be.

What is your favorite piece of work and why?

That’s a tough question. I like them all because each one holds a part of me – the emotion, the creativity, the imagination.

But one piece I’m especially proud of is Growing Up in My Cell. It grew on me over time. I created it to capture what a prison incentive unit single cell looks like in Colorado, and I believe it has the potential to help others understand what that environment feels like – and perhaps

even inspire change.

Thank you again for taking the time to sit down with me, and I wish you much luck on your future projects.

Thank you for having me. God bless.



For Better or for Worse

I invested untold hours of my life in DU PAI – the newspaper, the journalism classes, the art classes, the musicals, the writing classes – for nearly three years. Throughout my time with them, I experienced some of my greatest highs and worst lows, not just of my incarceration, but of my life.

Probably one of my scariest experiences happened during the musical Godspell. I joined because I love acting. I did a ton of it in high school. However, I cannot, cannot sing. After auditions, the director told me that not only had I earned a supporting lead, but the character happened to sing the biggest number in the whole show. Solo.

I almost quit.

That musical quickly became one of the best experiences of my incarceration. It introduced me to a slew of people I never would have imagined befriending. It also showed me how a hierarchy could work well for people in prison.

I don’t know of an organization without some form of hierarchy. As much as DOC policy would like to prevent it, inmates inevitably develop some kind of control structure at work, school, or other activities. We cannot all have equal decision-making power; someone has to be in charge.

Sometimes, that person in charge sucks.

I’ve had bad bosses in the past, but never an abusive one. Long before the musicals, one DU PAI group put an abusive inmate in charge of me. Every morning before walking into the office, I had to convince myself I wanted the job. Then, every day, he – my boss and mentor – yelled at me. My work life was miserable.

Here’s the thing about prison: you don’t go to the cops to complain about another inmate. Full stop. You figure out how to handle it.

I couldn’t, so I quit.

I came back for other programs, albeit sourly. That decision ultimately led me into leadership positions of my own, like with Unbound Authors. After taking all the DU PAI courses, I now teach creative writing and edit for Mercury Mountain Media.

I take all the lessons learned from the lows and the positivity from the highs and hope to bundle them into shaping future experiences for our incarcerated community.

by **RAYMOND FREDERICKS**



NEWS BRIEF

CDOC Announces Partnership with Recidiviz and Launch of “Opportunities” App

On February 12, 2026, the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDC) announced a multi-year partnership with Recidiviz, a nonprofit technology organization that works with correctional agencies to improve data systems.

The partnership begins with the launch of a new tablet application called Opportunities, which is now available on resident tablets. According to CDC, the app provides a digital catalog of available programs, eligibility requirements, and information about which programs allow individuals to earn time off their sentences.

CDC stated that the tool was developed with input from currently incarcerated individuals across multiple facilities and is

intended to improve access to information. Future phases of the partnership may include additional digital tools, such as interactive sentence calculators and expanded reentry planning features.

What This Means for Residents Right Now

- The Opportunities app provides information about programs and earned time eligibility.
- It does not change sentencing laws.
- It does not automatically reduce sentences.
- It does not change parole approval requirements.

The press release did not announce new sentencing policies or automatic release changes. Any changes to sentencing laws, earned time rules, or parole policy would require

action by the Colorado legislature or CDC leadership.

Residents are encouraged to review information directly on their tablets and to rely on official policy updates rather than secondhand interpretations of headlines.

About Recidiviz

Recidiviz is a nonprofit organization that partners with correctional systems in multiple states to improve how criminal justice data is organized and used. In other states, its tools have been used to support data tracking related to supervision, earned time, and population analysis. Outcomes vary by state and depend on local laws and policies.

Colorado is newly entering this partnership.

The Time and The Pages Turn Faster

by **ERIK CHEN**

I sat up at the sound of the familiar BEEP-BEEP-BEEP alarm, the one we all know a little too well. 3:00 AM. In the several moments it took to collect myself enough to silence the world’s most obnoxious noise, I piecemealed my reality back together. Getting up hours before the sun dawns is its own brand of suck, but doing it in prison is like life blowing out your birthday candles. Every. Effing. Year.

When you reach the age of 35, you aren’t really old yet, but your body definitely doesn’t function like it did when you were a kid. I seem to remember, however vaguely, literally rolling out of bed as a child, already bounding about with the boundless energy your dog has when you come home. In my early twenties, there was no amount of cheap liquor drunk the night before that could phase me when the daylight hit me dead in the face the next morning. But trying to rouse my body as it approached midlife was just a teensy bit more onerous task.

I did what I always did in those early hours. After silently cursing the world and wallowing briefly in self-pity, I wiped the

sleep from my eyes, stood with the grace of a baby giraffe, ran the warm water in my combo sink and toilet, and groggily spooned a bit of instant coffee into my plastic tumbler. The coffee didn’t hit the same way it always had, but it had more or less become a necessity to face the day.

I pulled on some socks because sleeping with socks on felt weird, and because the concrete floor was cold, and because I was getting ready to go to work. Laundry duty was a simple job, one I actually enjoyed since it was a small but essential service I could provide to my peers. There was also the not-so-small perk of working virtually by myself for a few hours in the morning, and that type of solitude can be sorely missed when you’re living communally with some 116 other guys, or quite a few more in other units.

Throwing laundry into washing machines at 3:30 in the morning was just how I started many of my days, and like was most often the case, I was back in the cellblock around 8:00 AM. I was never physically sore from the work, but the hours took their toll at times. My body

would feel heavy from fatigue, and occasionally an unintended morning nap was unavoidable. But I toughed it out that day like the little soldier I thought I was, and I commiserated with my friends like a grown-up.

There are tragic stories in everybody’s background, enough that knowing them all would make any man weep uncontrollably. That was especially true listening to people who were incarcerated share their personal histories and struggles. As much as I could allow my heart to hear, I started to develop compassion for individuals from all walks of life. My closest friends were unlike any of the friends I had before coming to prison, and I wouldn’t have had it any other way.

During the hours I wasn’t chatting with them, which I usually was, I found myself enjoying writing. Like, genuinely enjoying it. And before long, I began helping edit my peers’ work too. It was nice to have a positive, constructive activity to indulge in. And wouldn’t you know, it’s the reason you’re reading this now. Thank you.

From Isolation to Connection: IR to UA and Beyond

by **MATTHEW R. BONNER**

I recall how distant and isolated other DOC facilities felt to me in my first decade in prison. It was frustrating – and progress-hindering – not knowing what opportunities and experiences residents were living in other parts of Colorado. Then IR (Inside Report) happened. IR truly changed my experience – and my life.

I remember the progression of feelings when I explored the first issue. The moment I held it in my hands, I felt curiosity mixed with ebullience. Nerves that had seemed pinched for years began to relax as I skimmed the contents. Headlines and photos vied for my attention. What was laid out before me felt not only interesting, but important. That first issue made me feel valued – like my experiences, and the experiences of others like me, mattered. Gratitude, peacefulness, and hope rang true. A new paradigm had arrived, and as I said, my life was changed.

My life shifted in several ways.

First, the very first article I read introduced me to RF2 (Redemption Road Fitness Foundation) CrossFit. That program has captivated much of my attention over the past few years, helping me transcend personal and cultural obstacles. Through its pillars – accountability, community, and mentorship – I began honing in on my life’s purpose and pursuing a career development track through CrossFit

credentialing, qualifying me to help others improve their health and well-being.

Second, IR enabled connection. I was able to learn about initiatives and people doing meaningful work – inside and outside – and reach out to them about shared interests. In doing so, I began to feel human again. The networking and agency I was entrusted with became a salve for my mental health after years of simply enduring time. The ripple effects of that newspaper are hard to measure; many positive attributes alive in DOC culture today were either seeded by IR or nourished through it.

Third, IR convinced me of the value of print media behind the walls. It recorded history, cultivated connection, provided cultural enrichment, and invited relatability and diversity – all necessary for emotional, mental, and social health. Like any good newspaper, it informed readers so they could become better decision-makers in their personal and civic lives.

Because of IR, I became involved in journalism. I was selected as IR Bureau Chief for the Beacon at Skyline. That opportunity was unfortunately short-lived when the partnership between DOC and Denver University Prison Arts Initiative concluded. But the spark within me remained lit. Since then, studying, reading, writing, and developing experience in journalism have become focal points of my

life, with hopes of deeper involvement in the future.

Today, our community at the Beacon at Rifle is one of thirteen facilities fortunate to have Unbound Authors’ Writer’s Mentoring Lab. With Stephanie – one of UA’s dedicated volunteers – we are able to sharpen our craft through coaching and feedback. With journalism being one of my primary interests, I am working toward launching a newsletter for our facility: Our Community Times. It will serve as a scaled-down, localized version of what IR once did and what Messenger Quarterly now offers statewide.

The newsletter will highlight resident and staff achievements, announce events and opportunities, and provide space for poetry, creative writing, art, and photography. Developing those skills will prepare contributors to one day submit to Messenger Quarterly.

With the spirit of sharing our thoughts – dreams and nightmares, celebrations and struggles – we as writers and readers can contribute to one another’s lives. We give each other context, texture, color, and shade. Despite our differences, by aligning where we are the same, however far apart we may be, we can meet in the town square of print media and travel to places unknown, unimagined, and beyond.

My Time as a Bureau Chief for The Inside Report

by **CARLOS MARQUEZ**



It was a warm and sunny afternoon in May 2018 when Justin Box approached me with a request to help gather articles for the next edition of *The Inside Report*. At the time, I had a corner cell on the third tier in the incentive unit at Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility, with an unbelievable view of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. I looked over the list of topics and thought about who might be interested.

I knew several strong writers, so I went and talked to them about IR and showed them a copy of the first edition. They were impressed and agreed to help. This was my first experience serving

as a facilitator for IR. I gathered over twenty-two articles and photos, collected signed releases, and sent everything to Anthony Valdez, the Editor-in-Chief of IR. Anthony was excited. Four authors from AVCF were published in that edition.

I remember receiving bundles of newspapers and delivering them to every unit and POD at AVCF. I even brought copies to the administrative building for staff. IR was a hit. Soon, I no longer had to ask for submissions — articles were coming in from Units 1 through 6.

At that point, my focus shifted to

supporting the writers. It became almost a full-time job. The volume of submissions meant we had to type handwritten articles on electric typewriters because access to desktop computers was limited. Before sending pieces forward, I would do a cursory edit. The Fremont Correctional Facility editorial team handled the heavier editing work.

I also communicated with authors about the status of their articles and relayed any follow-up requests. I vividly remember one request to interview Mario Rios, an AVCF artist whose work IR wanted to feature. The publication made space to highlight talented artists across Colorado Department of Corrections facilities. It was rewarding to see Mario recognized.

In 2021, I moved to the Denver Reception and Diagnostic Center (DRDC) and was asked to serve as Bureau Chief there. I picked up where I had left off at AVCF, quickly immersing myself in getting to know the writers. I encouraged them to help give DRDC a voice by submitting articles, and many stepped forward.

Serving as a Bureau Chief at two facilities was an honor. It allowed me to help bring attention to voices that are often unseen and unheard. I will always be proud of the work the IR team did and the footprint that the DU Prison Arts Initiative left behind. I believe we made life inside just a little better by bringing people together through the arts.

Thank you.

A Return With Purpose

by **MATTHEW J. MARTINEZ**



I first met JoyBelle Phelan in the education hallway of Fremont Correctional Facility. She was on parole and employed under contract to manage a prison newspaper. My coworker told me I had to meet her, because JoyBelle was working and interacting with us — unescorted. It was something he’d never seen; normally parolees come back to prison on revocation. What kind of person volunteers to come back to prison after having been incarcerated twice, and why?

“Returning to prison was humiliating.

When I left the first time in January of 2015 to go to community corrections, I looked good on paper ... like it would be an easy slam-dunk success,” she said. A lack of community support and isolation led her back to her criminal behavior. “I reoffended within a little more than a year, and so I returned to La Vista roughly 18 months later.” Seeing staff’s shock upon her return helped her realize she had stuff to work on, and for her, writing was the way to do it.

Limited options inside forced JoyBelle to turn to self-help books. She also

kept a journal and finally sat down to process her life and her part in it. “Writing is a way to really get honest with yourself, talk through the things you need to talk through, learn and grow,” she said. In an old writing program from Denver University’s Prison Arts Initiative, she was able to share with others. And for the first time in her life, she received support and encouragement celebrating her writing.

Realizing her effect on others, JoyBelle made real connections with people, becoming part of a community. These were the same people who “supported me as I was learning about myself and evolving into, in many ways, the person I am right now,” she said.

When the time came to go home and let go, “it was heartbreaking to leave them behind,” she said. Inherently, prisoners have very little, but they have each other. And when a friend leaves for home, as happy as we are for them, there’s still a loss both people have to process. Parolees grapple with survivor’s guilt, while those with more time get left behind.

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Connections run deep inside, “The connections built inside are deep,” she said. “Shared lived experience creates bonds that don’t simply dissolve upon release. When you’ve grown alongside people during some of the hardest chapters of your life, that connection carries a different weight. Navigating life outside while remaining connected to that community can be complex.”

With her community in mind, JoyBelle quickly came back to prison again — this time working for DU PAI and Breakthrough. There were many rules about who she could talk to as a volunteer, but for her it was worth it. “I think it is imperative for currently incarcerated people to see formerly incarcerated people doing well, being whatever version of success they are being,” she said. “Because everyone who is currently incarcerated needs to see that your choices, your number, your conviction, do not define you — that you, as a human being, have the opportunity to evolve and grow and transform.”

Recognizing her manifest growth and seeing an opportunity in JoyBelle, DOC approved her work with incarcerated people unescorted, supporting her passion for writing and building community. While working for DU PAI, JoyBelle developed professional relationships with staff that would later prove important after DU PAI and DOC mutually concluded their partnership. The end of the contract discontinued DU PAI’s The Inside Report, yet DOC still saw benefit in publishing a prison newspaper.

When asked to comment on their support of Unbound Authors’ Messenger Quarterly, the Department responded, “Prison Programs is very pleased to engage with Unbound Authors and our population to develop and publish a newspaper that represents the population and the issues that are important and relevant to them,” said Leigh Burrows, Assistant Director of Prison Programs. “We are excited to see how this project develops and look forward

to participating in and supporting the growth of professional, ethics-based journalism.”

Many people inside seek fair and simple solutions to the complex issues facing the Department — at the very least, relief and direction from anxiety-causing misinformation and speculation. Messenger Quarterly allows for a cooperative environment between the Department and incarcerated people through solutions-based journalism.

Piece by piece, JoyBelle built the infrastructure for a new prison newspaper. First, she led a dedicated team of outside volunteers to offer writing labs inside facilities. Next, she was granted access to the Lantern app on our tablets, allowing for statewide submissions and an incarcerated editorial team to process articles for publishing.

While working for IR, JoyBelle observed that “there was a very small number of people doing a huge amount of work with very limited infrastructure,” she said. DU PAI operated under a formal contract with the Department of Corrections, which provided financial support for its programming. Unbound Authors operates differently. It is run entirely by volunteers statewide.

The Department does provide support in other ways. “They’ve given us access to the Graphic Design class at YOS, which is going to be doing layout. We’re not having to pay for that. So I don’t want to say they’re not investing, because they are,” she said. “There’s a lot of support. In a lot of ways.”

In addition to in-kind support, the Department has provided access to Lantern and Google Classroom platforms and approved Unbound Authors’ work across thirteen facilities statewide — support that makes the continuation of a prison newspaper possible. Established working relationships also helped open the door for additional arts programming, including the formalization of Unchained Voices and

expanded access for collecting and exhibiting artwork through CDOC-approved channels.

“I wouldn’t bet against Belle,” said William Coney, the former senior editor of IR and current Editor-in-Chief of Messenger Quarterly.

When asked why she chose storytelling as her vehicle for criminal justice reform, JoyBelle said, “I truly hate it when well-meaning people come into the carceral space and say something like ‘we’re humanizing the men and women behind bars.’ I call bullshit. They are not. People who are in prison are still human,” she said. “Storytelling allows people to speak for themselves. It also gives the broader public a clearer understanding of how correctional systems operate and how public resources are used. I also firmly believe, as Glenn Martin likes to say, the people closest to a problem are also closest to the solution, but furthest from power and resources.” If people are interested in what happens inside prisons, who better to tell the story than someone who has lived inside?

Today, multiple volunteers drive hours across the state to facilitate writing labs, Libby and others provide feedback and mentoring, and JoyBelle regularly drives two to four hours just to step inside a facility and coordinate publication and infrastructure. “It’s worth every single minute of that time,” she said. Because when people see the work continue, she hopes they see not just that a newspaper exists — but that someone is still willing to show up and cares.



A Beacon of Awareness

by **ALEXANDER JASMINE**

Staff and residents at The Beacon at Skyline devised a Breast Cancer Awareness event to honor those afflicted by the debilitating disease. Sixty-two participants — over half of the facility — engaged in the gathering and donated \$175 to the Susan G. Komen Foundation on Oct. 22, 2025.

“When our heart is truly one with community, we’re able to empower the powerless, strengthen the weak, and give hope to the hopeless,” Cancer Awareness Facilitator Pierre Watkins (Faheem) said. “To me, this human solidarity is how we conquer all hardships.”

A diverse assortment of residents built teamwork at dawn as they set up the event. Beacon participants stretched on the basketball court among inspirational words scattered in vivid hues of chalk. This kaleidoscopic mural of chalk art had been created on the very same court the day prior by residents themselves.

The run/walk event consisted of one-,

three-, five-, or ten-mile options, with laps tracked on a whiteboard. Some dashed down the rocky Skyline track while others sauntered alongside their comrades as the event kicked off.

From 8:00 to 10:30 a.m., Beacon’s own resident DJ rocked the decks using two antiquated CD players.

Maj. Fustini, Cpt. Hawkins, and a handful of lieutenants stepped to the beat alongside residents under a cloudless sky. Standing together against cancer dissolved the social constructs that propagate the green-versus-blue mindset pervasive in Colorado prisons.

“I felt uplifted to see people united for a common cause,”

Beacon resident Perry Hotz said. The community later convened in the Lighthouse Café for an informative seminar about cancer, peppered with staggering statistics. Some participants shared personal experiences of battling cancer and the tumultuous toll it can take



on family and livelihood.

The population signed two cards filled with well wishes for former Beacon resident Hamilton Sullivan’s father, who is currently fighting cancer in a chemotherapy wing of a Texas hospital. A respectful silence consumed the traditionally noisy café as residents



Betty Crocker Behind the Walls

by **DEB NICHOLLS**

I am showing my age here, but people call me Betty Crocker all the time because when I see cooking shows — or even Dairy Queen commercials — I try to recreate the recipe. In Colorado prisons, there are very limited amounts and types of food (canteen) available to buy or that I have access to. Canteen has to be ordered a week in advance, and sometimes items are out of stock, so they have to be reordered. All purchased canteen items come once a week. I go to the gym, wait in line with my ID, and wait for my bag of food.

I really like to cook and experiment with microwave cooking. I have accumulated over 100 recipes. One of my favorite ways to celebrate holidays or graduations is with food. Special dishes for special times. Sharing meals is a great way to connect with people, and connection is important for human beings no matter where you are.

Every Thanksgiving I put on a cake contest. This year was the 13th Annual Thanksgiving Day Cake Contest. Six people are selected out of 200 women. I choose participants based on compatibility (it’s not always easy finding six women who get along), who can afford it (cakes can cost upwards of \$30.00), who is a good cook, and proximity (living in the same housing unit). Any participant from the previous year gets first dibs to be a contestant each year.

I make the guest list and invitations a month before the contest to give guests ample time to order and avoid any canteen issues. I make it extra special by creating really cool invitations (this year was a paper acorn) and table decorations. I usually make a table runner by gluing scraps of white paper from old mail together to make a banner long enough to cross the tables, then paint or draw specific holiday items on it, such as leaves or acorns. This year I painted a big turkey wall poster, too. It was adorable.

Each person is required to bring a cake and an extra bowl. I help everyone make their cakes on Wednesday (if they need me to). It lets the cakes set overnight and

takes the pressure off the holiday. We go to the facility holiday meal at lunch, then in the evening, when everyone starts to get hungry again (around 6:00 p.m.), we meet at the decorated table and display the six beautiful cakes.

This always draws a crowd because not many people even consider trying to make a cake in prison — let alone six different kinds. I let people gaze and drool, then send them on their way so we can begin.

Each cake is cut into six pieces and exchanged until everyone has an entire cake made up of six different flavors. Then we dig in. I used to have an actual prize for the winner, but I stopped to keep costs down. Turns out, just having all that wonderful cake makes us all winners. WINNING!!

The tasting doesn’t take long — usually a bite of each one — then we are all full again. The favorites are selected by each of us, discussed, and praised. Bonus: everyone has leftovers for the holiday weekend!

One of the most favorite cake winners is my cappuccino chocolate almond cheesecake. I have won with this recipe many times. I get asked to make it constantly — that’s how I know it’s a huge favorite! I am happy to share the recipe for any Betty Crockers out there. (Betty Crocker was one of the first home cooking gurus — old school cookbooks, before Martha Stewart — even though I probably have more in common with Martha. LOL.)

Cappuccino Chocolate Almond Cheesecake

Ingredients

1 bag creamer

10 (2 oz) cream cheeses

2 Duplex cookies

6 Hershey bars with almonds

15 blue sugars

2 tablespoons lemonade mix

½ cup thick cappuccino (about 2 inches of powder mixed with 1 tablespoon water)

Materials

3 bowls

1 spork

Cup to melt chocolate

Directions

Separate the cookies in half. In one bowl, put all and only the chocolate cookie wafers. The cookie middle frosting can remain on either side of the wafer. Add ¼ cup warm water and stir until it forms a brownie-like batter. Microwave 3 minutes. Remove and, while hot, lay 3 of the Hershey bars on top. Set aside and let melt. This is the cake crust.

In another bowl, mix all cream cheese, creamer, 15 blue sugars, and lemonade mix until fully incorporated. Do not add any liquid. Separate 1/3 of the mixture into a third bowl, add cappuccino, and stir together.

When the crust cools, put the cappuccino layer on top of the melted chocolate. Then use the leftover vanilla wafers from the Duplex cookies and lay them two layers thick on top of the cappuccino filling. Pour the remaining cream cheese filling on top of the vanilla wafers. The layers should be: chocolate cookie crust, melted Hershey’s, cappuccino cream cheese layer, vanilla wafers, regular cream cheese filling.

With the remaining Hershey bars, remove the almonds and melt only the chocolate in a cup in the microwave (about 2 minutes or until melty and shiny). Make sure to remove all the almonds before microwaving. Drizzle the melted chocolate over the top of the cake, working fast to cover the entire surface. Sprinkle the almonds on top. Set aside until the next day. Yum!!

This cake can be shared with up to eight people — but you’re not going to want to share it at all! The chocolate, cappuccino, and white layers look delightful on a plate.

Sometimes I lay a piece of plastic in the bowl with edges draping over the sides and build the cake on top of that (or wax paper if you’ve got it). This makes it easier to cut when you’re ready. You just lift the cake out of the bowl for easy access.

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Being in prison makes me so creative because simple things, like cutting a cake, can be so difficult in here. Have you ever tried to cut and serve a piece of cake with a spork? I hope you have not had to. It’s

messy — but this cake is worth some mess. This cake goes great with a cup of espresso. Just kidding — no espresso in prison! LOL. And no, strong instant coffee is not espresso. Actually, a cup of hot black

ground coffee complements this cake perfectly and might even help you feel like you’re somewhere else. Like a fine restaurant.

What Makes Art-Based Programs Rehabilitative?

by **TREVON WILLIAMS**



In Response to “Decorative Justice” by Leonidas K. Cheliotis

In my humble opinion, I agree with most people that art is subjective and interpretive. That is, interaction with art of any kind is unique to the individual experiencing it.

In the prison landscape, art takes on various forms: pencil-drawn, colored, painted, movement-based or meditative, handcrafted, written down, or spoken aloud. What ties these together is the outside appreciation for art, which develops through observation, “Let me see your art.” More specifically, it is the impact of the decision to create something that then becomes beneficial to others.

Additionally, art in its many forms is intentional, as in, I am doing or participating in this “thing” for this “reason.” This aspect is subjective and open to interpretation, with no right or wrong.



Rehabilitation, in relation to art-based programs, can be difficult to measure because, like art, rehabilitation itself is subjective. Everyone who participates in these programs is at a different stage in life and in their overall need for improvement. So how does one determine what is truly transformational?

While there is clear interest in these programs as a whole, the individual and unique buy-in to the creative process is what matters most. I view rehabilitation as something compounded over time. The more someone participates in programs designed to assist in restoration, the more likely self-improvement becomes.

Currently, I am participating in two programs worth mentioning: Action Change Theater and Sky Inside. We learn elements of stage acting and production, the meditative and therapeutic nature of interpretive dance movement, and engage in crucial conversations centered around prison reform and organizations aimed at amplifying the voices and art of the currently or formerly incarcerated. Since joining both programs, our ensemble has performed a play, *The Last Café*, and a dance performance for an audience that included facility staff and administration, members of various art-based programs, the Executive Director of CDOC, and members of the incarcerated population.

It is worth noting that most programs offered through DOC rarely gain this level of audience. To be part of something that garners such attention highlights the potential for art-based programs to be viewed as rehabilitative. This avenue allows our collective art to be seen and appreciated, standing

in direct opposition to the choices that led us to prison in the first place.

While participation in these programs is unique and personal, my reasons for joining are to cultivate a greater sense of community, collaboration, and cooperation, creating avenues to increase my chances of success both in prison and beyond these walls. I aim to contribute to a broader vision of improving the prison landscape. It is a privilege to participate in something that restores a sense of humanity, a space to struggle against what is uncomfortable yet possible, all while being taught and encouraged by people who are not paid to do so and whose sole interest lies in our personal success.

Again, these reasons are specific to me and therefore subjective. The beauty lies in showing up and maintaining oneself through the creative process. That is what yields restoration. It develops consistency and generates positive influence among peers. Struggling alongside others who think and present themselves differently, and sharing personal views without criticism or ridicule, helps shift perspectives and shows what is possible within this chaotic world of miscommunication and misunderstanding.



The Voice

by **KAREEM EL DAMANHOURY**
Associate Professor University of Denver's Department of Media, Film, and Journalism; Executive Director DU Prison Arts Initiative



It was 2 a.m., and the laughs were about to come to a halt. Ten-year-old me was playing a game with my brother and cousins at our grandma’s house: I dare you to fall perfectly like a statue onto the mattress laid on the ground. When it was my turn, I fell—and lost my voice for a few minutes that, for me, felt like an eternity.



I have since come to deeply value having a voice and being able to express myself. That silly game gone wrong may have even played a role in me becoming a journalist who gravitates toward stories that amplify the voices of mis- and underrepresented communities.

Many years later, I was moved by the story of Abron Arrington, about whom I produced a mini-documentary for Rocky Mountain PBS. We sat for hours as he finally got to speak about his 30 years behind bars—the languages he had learned, the books he had read, the degrees he had earned, the inventions he had patented (yup, that’s right—he invented a flood mitigation system in prison!), and his goals and aspirations post-release.

So when I saw the job call for the University of Denver’s Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI), it did not take me long to apply. I wanted to be part of a community of incarcerated storytellers, journalists, and artists, as well as a network of allies who advocate for arts programming as a mode of expression behind bars.

I was hired as DU PAI director in October 2024, fully aligned with its vision and mission—but without a clear understanding of why it had gone dormant. I have since undergone extensive and humbling informal training, learning from numerous inspiring folks in the community (won’t name names so I don’t forget anyone—but you know who you are). One thing stood out clearly: many of DU PAI’s partners across Colorado facilities felt abandoned and without a voice when DU PAI’s work stopped rather abruptly. And for that, I sincerely apologize.

But apologies are hollow if not followed by corrective action.

So here’s a sneak peek at the current iteration of DU PAI—its current projects and collaborative approach.

First, DU PAI is partnering with community organizations on numerous projects: writing labs with Unbound Authors; visual arts classes with Impact Arts; a play and an oral history project in Limon with ACT Ensemble; mural workshops at youth centers with DU’s Vicki Myhren Gallery and RedLine; and an audio documentary on the legal designation “habitual” with Colorado Radio for Justice. Through such collaborations, the community network grows stronger, and arts programming becomes more sustainable—even if a person or organization were to vanish tomorrow.

Second, DU PAI has launched the “Art Saves Lives” speaker series, intended to amplify the voices of formerly incarcerated artists and nurture conversations with the local community. The first event in April 2025 featured poet and activist Taj Ashaheed and was moderated by DU writing professor and Unbound Authors co-founder Libby Catchings. Taj dropped some truth bombs, performed three of his poems, and answered questions from the local community. The second event in November hosted musician and success coach Bob Eisenman, moderated by DU ethnomusicology professor Aleysia Whitmore. Bob delivered a powerful performance with his band,

discussed music as a mode of expression in prison, and chatted with dozens in attendance. Through these discussions, the incarceration experience becomes less foreign, formerly incarcerated people become more humanized, and the transformative role of arts programming becomes clear.

Last but not least, DU PAI has partnered with Unbound Authors to revive the newspaper by journalists behind bars. I am currently teaching a 20-week storytelling and reporting class in La Vista, Arkansas Valley, Fremont, Sterling, and Delta (Did I mention that I love working with these journalists? Folks in the class will know what I am talking about!). The top articles from the course will be submitted to Messenger Quarterly for consideration. Some selected pieces will also compete in the second annual American Penal Press contest for multiple awards (and DU PAI will cover any submission costs). Additionally, I will serve as the newspaper’s external journalism advisor and do my best to help in any way I can. Under JoyBelle Phelan’s leadership, I am excited to see Messenger Quarterly come to life as the voice of these amazing journalists.

And if there’s one thing I can leave you with about the need for such a voice, it cannot be said better than by the late Congressman John Lewis:

“Now more than ever before, we need the press to be a headlight and not a taillight.”



Mobi Docs... In a Nutshell

by MICHAEL L. MONTOKA

How to Create, Save, and Submit Documents in Lantern

Have you ever wondered why the line keeps blinking on a blank page? Or spent all morning typing a great piece only to realize it wasn't saved properly? Good news — those days are over. In just a few short steps, you can confidently create, save, and submit a document to a Lantern classroom using the Document app in Mobi OfficeSuite.

At Mercury Mountain Media, we want to help everyone share their experiences using the tools available on their tablet. Learning new technology can feel intimidating at first, but submitting documents is easier than it looks — and we're here to help.

Here's How

1. Launch Your Word Processor

From the home screen of your tablet, tap the app titled OfficeSuite Pro.

2. Create a New Document

Tap the blue Document icon at the top of the screen.

Choose a template, or tap the blue plus (+) icon labeled Blank to start a new document.

3. Format Your Document

On the Home menu, you'll see formatting options that control how your text looks.

You can adjust:

- Font style
- Font size
- Font color

Sample format:

Times New Roman, size 11, black

You can also bold, italicize, underline, or highlight words — useful when you want to spotlight something important.

4. Begin Typing

Tap the blinking line at the top left of the page.

This blinking line is your cursor — it shows where your text will appear.

When the on-screen keyboard opens, begin typing.

Be sure to clearly label your work with:

- A title
- Your name at the top of the document.

Word-wrapping will happen automatically when you reach the end of a line.

5. Review Your Document

- Tap the Review menu option.
- Select Check Spelling to run the spell checker.
- Make edits as needed.
- Tap Word Count to see the length of your document and adjust if necessary.

6. Save Your Document

- Tap the File menu.
- Select Save As.
- Tap the default file name and rename it to something easy to recognize later.

File names can include:

- Spaces
- Periods
- Underscores
- Avoid using hyphens in file names.

Hyphens can cause problems when files

are shared or backed up. Some systems read hyphens differently (for example, as punctuation or subtraction symbols), which can create errors.

Preferred file name:

How_To_Save.docx

Risky file name:

How-To-Save.docx

Tap Save to finalize.

7. Submit Your Assignment in Lantern

- Tap the Lantern app.
- Navigate to your assignment page and review submission details.
- Tap Submit Assignment at the bottom of the page.
- Select Device.
- Locate your saved document and select it.
- Tap Submit in the top-right corner of the screen.

You've Got This

At Mercury Mountain Media, we want to help you share your voice, illustrate your views, and captivate audiences. Technology is simply the vehicle — your ideas are what matter most.

We're confident in your ability to create meaningful work. So go ahead: write, save with ease, and submit your piece to Lantern.

We're cheering you on.



WHO CARES?



Care can come from anywhere—people inside, people outside, and the connections between them. Tell us what it looks like where you are.

For Messenger Quarterly (Journalism & Reporting:)

- Stories about people who show up or make a difference
- Interviews with peers, mentors, educators, or volunteers
- Reporting on programs, communities, or changes inside

Questions of access, support, and what care looks like in real life

For Mosaics (Creative Work & Expression:)

- Personal reflections on care, support, or survival
- Poetry, stories, or vignettes about connection
- Moments when someone had your back—or didn't
- Visual art exploring community, identity, or resilience



Care can be support, struggle, community, or even its absence. All perspectives are welcome.

More Than a Newspaper

by **TIMOTHY WAKEFIELD**

For two years, I had the honor and pleasure of serving as the Bureau Chief for the Territorial Correctional Facility division of The Inside Report. My personal experience with the newspaper was one of growth. I felt like a pioneer — it was unprecedented to have a newspaper in prison, and because of that there were

many challenges. I was motivated to learn and think on my feet. The development of the newspaper took a lot of time; things moved very slowly, if at all. I had to exercise even more patience and understanding than is normally required in the prison setting. The newspaper gave me an opportunity

to exhibit and exercise my natural leadership ability. It was through this work that I made tremendous strides in my personal and interpersonal growth. When The Inside Report was cut from Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC) programming, I had to rely on the resilience I built through my experience as Bureau Chief to continue living as a positive member of this community.

Interpersonally, the newspaper gave me the

impetus to reach out and connect with peers I would not ordinarily associate with, and vice versa. People from various cultures and creeds came to me for help getting their expressions of self published. The newspaper was a conduit for people to rely on each other to gain knowledge. I helped many people write and rewrite articles and opinion pieces. When they were published, we shared in the sense of accomplishment and pride.

I was also influential in establishing a memorial section where we honored incarcerated people who had passed away. Remembering the dead has always been part of every functioning society. This section helped create community support and care.

I am very proud of my work with DU PAI and The Inside Report. I served the community well. There were times when publication decisions were shaped by institutional considerations, and not every piece made it to print. That reality could be frustrating. Moving forward, I hope future publications continue striving for thoughtful balance — honoring institutional guidelines while ensuring that authentic voices are heard.

Editor’s Note: Messenger Quarterly will be reintroducing a Memorial section to honor incarcerated individuals who have passed. If you would like to submit a remembrance — including the person’s name, facility, and a brief reflection — please send it through the normal submission process and clearly mark it “Memorial.” We believe remembering those we’ve lost is part of building community.



What a Prison Newspaper Gave Me

by **BOB EISENMAN**

There’s a strange thing that happens when you’re locked in a cage long enough. The world decides it knows who you are. A file tells your story. A rumor fills in the blanks. A headline freezes you into something flat and convenient. For years, the public version of me lived in paperwork. I didn’t have a way to argue back or show the rest of who I was.

Writing was never the plan. I didn’t grow up dreaming of being a writer. If anything, I avoided it. I didn’t want to sit with myself long enough to put words on a page. But prison has a way of cornering you with your own thoughts, and eventually that pressure pushes you somewhere unexpected. For me, it pushed me toward a notebook I hadn’t planned to pick up. I wrote because I needed to make sense of the noise in my head. I wrote badly

before I wrote better. Then something even stranger happened. A new Colorado prison newspaper launched where I was housed, and somehow I found myself joining the staff. I remember thinking I had no business being part of something like that. But the first meetings felt electric. People tossed around ideas, argued over headlines, and tried to capture the day-to-day realities of a place most of the outside world never sees. I realized very quickly that we weren’t just creating a newsletter. We were creating a mirror. We were proving we still had voices, minds, and curiosity — even inside razor wire. Being part of that newspaper changed me. It made me see how powerful it is when incarcerated people tell their own stories. We weren’t waiting for permission. We weren’t letting someone else translate our lives for us. We were



continues on next page

documenting the truth as we lived it, with all its frustration, tenderness, and dark humor. It wasn't polished, but it was alive. For the first time in a long time, I felt alive with it.	even if it's on a tablet. Some will skim it. Others will feel that same unexpected pull I felt. They'll read something familiar. They'll feel seen. They'll wonder if maybe they have something worth writing too.	decided who they are.
This is why writing inside carceral settings matters. It gives people a way to exist again as full human beings, not case numbers. It reminds us that the mind does not belong to the state. Our creativity does not belong to the state. Our ability to question and imagine does not belong to the state. There is a reason so many correctional systems have shut down newspapers and creative programs. When people write, they become harder to dehumanize.	A prison newspaper creates connection in a place designed for separation. It acknowledges that inside every facility there are thinkers, artists, skeptics, teachers, comedians, and people with sharp insights about a world that often pretends they don't exist. It helps people remember they have the right to reflect, question, imagine, and hope.	I don't believe writing alone saves people, but I believe it opens a door. It gives people a reason to stay awake to their own lives. It helps them imagine a future that feels worth walking toward. Colorado needs this paper. The people inside need it even more. A newspaper can be a lifeline, a mirror, a spark — or a simple reminder that someone out there is listening.
So when I hear that a statewide newspaper is returning to Colorado's prisons in a new form	More than anything, a newspaper is an invitation. It tells people their stories matter. It tells them the system hasn't fully succeeded in flattening them. When someone writes — even if it's just a few sentences — they reclaim a small corner of their humanity. They take back the narrative from a world that has already	If this publication becomes anything close to what it could be, it won't just inform. It will reignite something. It will remind people that they are still here. It will remind them that their minds still belong to them. It will remind them that their stories still matter. And sometimes that reminder is enough to keep a person going one more day.
I don't think of it as just another publication. I think of the men and women who will hold Issue 1 in their hands —		<i>Editor's Note: Bob served as Writing Development Coordinator for The Inside Report.</i>

Our Voices Have Sound Again

by **ANTONIO FARRELL** & **PHILLIP CARTER**

Antonio: Aye P...

Phillip: What's up, bro?

Antonio: What do you think about this prison newspaper and magazine coming back?

Phillip: Honestly? It makes me feel like freedom.

Antonio: What you mean, freedom?

Phillip: In my head, freedom is living, breathing, autonomy. Being able to act in a space of purpose — working toward meaningful outcomes — even when other freedoms aren't available to you.

Antonio: I like that. I feel that. We're so restricted here that even our voices feel suffocated. This opportunity lets us breathe again — so our voice has sound.

Phillip: Exactly. It gives us an outlet. So much of what we want to say either can't be said — or if it is said, it doesn't always get heard. This gives it somewhere to land.

Antonio: I can't wait to connect with others across the state who are locked up like us. But I'm also excited about the outside world having access to our voices — to see firsthand who we truly are and the people we've become.

Phillip: We were talking about this in class the other day. Someone brought up how when we're sentenced, they write a presentence confinement report — a PSI — and that document basically captures us at our worst moment. But they never write another one. We're frozen in time by that version of ourselves. In reality, a lot of us spend our days becoming something different. This gives us a voice to show that.

Antonio: I know exactly what you mean. I came to prison when I was 17. I'm 46 now. I am not the same person. Every part of who I am is

different. So many of us have been involved in higher education programs, peer mentoring, class facilitation, Prison Arts, and more. We've got college professors teaching in here. I was just in a dance ensemble with Sky Inside Productions in front of volunteers and State Senators. That growth is real.

Phillip: And yet the public narrative doesn't show that. Prisons are constantly portrayed as housing the "worst of the worst," like redemption and reconciliation don't exist back here. But that's not the full story.

Antonio: Speaking of redemption — so many of us fight to reconcile with ourselves, with our faith, with our families. We work hard toward the day we can reconcile with society. Because of who we've worked to become, this opportunity lets the outside world see a small but necessary glimpse of our shared humanity.

Phillip: It also highlights the talent behind these fences. The artwork. The poetry. The spoken word that gives you chills. I've seen pieces that belong in galleries in New York or California. Brilliant minds are back here. This newspaper and magazine give us the vehicle to share that. Credit to JoyBelle and to everyone who helped make Mercury Mountain Media possible.

Antonio: I agree. The talent in here expresses sorrow, growth, and transformation. It shows the character of who people are today — not just who they were. Mercury Mountain Media gives us a chance to show that we're working to be part of the solution — not the problem.

Phillip: That's the freedom I'm talking about. Not going home — but freedom to express who we are now, not who we were then.

MESSENGER — QUARTERLY —



Transitional Housing | Paying It Forward

Hope Homes is a Colorado-based transitional housing organization founded by a formerly incarcerated leader committed to building structured, accountable, and supportive living environments.

Each Hope Homes residence operates as a self-supporting, drug-free, positive peer community designed to support long-term success. Residents benefit from mentorship opportunities including entrepreneurship guidance, credit repair education, first-home mentorship, and health-focused coaching.

Hope Homes maintains clear program requirements, including abstinence from drugs and alcohol, employment or income within a set timeframe, and adherence to house guidelines.

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