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Prison Inmates to Receive Prestigious Peacemaker Award

Fifteen women, all inmates, most, “lifers,” will receive the 2010 Cloke-Millen Peacemaker of the Year Award by the Southern California Mediation Association.

How is it that women, with dark pasts, serving time for murder and manslaughter, can be honored as Peacemakers?

Their story is one of personal commitment to a community in which most are destined to live out their lives. “This is an environment filled with conflict and violence. There is a dire need and want for change,” said Susan Russo, a lifer at Valley State Prison for Women in Chowchilla, CA, who believes that this will have a lasting affect on the institution.

Beginning her quest in 2007, Ms. Russo wrote over 50 handwritten letters to California Mediators requesting training for inmates. Her letters went unanswered until August of 2009 when one made it to Laurel Kaufer.

“I read the letter and was hooked, but I couldn’t do it alone. Still at my mailbox, I called my colleague Doug Noll, an expert in Restorative Justice, and read him the letter,” said Kaufer. “He was silent, then said, ‘I’m in. What next?’”

It took six months to convince authorities to permit this “pro bono” project, which began in April, 2010. Twelve weeks later, 15 inmates were fully trained Peacemakers and had conducted dozens of mediations and peace circles within the prison. “Instead of running from conflict, I now run to it,” says Peacemaker, Anna Humiston

“The secret,” said Kaufer, “is to build skills slowly with continued accountability throughout the process.” Every Wednesday for 10 weeks, Kaufer drove the 500 mile round-trip, between her home in Woodland Hills to the prison in Chowchilla. Noll, in Clovis, provided their base of operations.

“These women have transformed. They began shut down, skeptical. They’re now empowered and making peace within the prison,” said Noll. “This program may make a real, systemic difference within a community.” “I already see the difference in the Prison, as other inmates now model the Peacemakers,” said participant Betty Mills.

Noll and Kaufer are committed to making this project self-sustaining. Through the next phases, they will also be preparing members of the initial groups to be trainers and mentors. There is currently a waiting list of inmates that will take them beyond 2010, and hope to have 75 peacemakers fully trained by the end of the year, with the program fully embedded in the institution by mid-2011.

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