

Inmates Have Huge Impact in Time of Need

By Scott Laird

As Vernonia was in the midst of recovering from the Flood of 2007, a public meeting was held on December 15, twelve days after the disaster. Many of the different outside organizations that had come to assist the community were represented and introduced at the meeting.

“They really stepped up and went above and beyond what we expected. Some of them became real leaders and crew bosses.”

“We sent them off with a ceremony,” said interim City Administrator Aldie Howard. “There were tears everywhere. They were just great.” Howard presented each inmate with a letter of recognition and thanks from the citizens of Vernonia, expressing our gratitude and wishing them each a successful future.



The initial crews came from the Mill Creek, Columbia River, South Fork and Multnomah County facilities. They included almost 200 inmates, guards and a mobile kitchen that provided three meals a day not only for the work crews, but for any one else who was hungry including community volunteers, emergency personnel and city staff.

“This has been a great experience for us,” said Chane Griggs of the Department of Corrections.

Griggs explained that Oregon is at the forefront in sending prison inmate crews for emergency response, and disaster relief. “It’s a great resource. We do firefighting in the summer, but this is the first time we responded to a community emergency in this way. I think a lot of other states will be looking at this idea, since this has been so successful.”

These included the Red Cross, FEMA, the Department of Health, ODOT, state politicians, and even a representative from Governor Kulongoski’s office. But by far the largest ovation was reserved for the representatives from the Oregon Department of Corrections.

Anyone who was in Vernonia during the first few weeks of the flood recovery had only rave reviews of the inmate crews who were brought in to assist with the clean up efforts. The inmates could be seen everywhere you looked, loading and unloading supplies, chopping firewood, stocking shelves as the Food Bank reopened, sorting garbage, and mostly cleaning up debris that residents had hauled from their homes to the street. Everyone had great things to say about their efforts.

“I can’t say enough about those guys,” said Bob Stacklie, who was working at the Vernonia Cares Food Bank.

Inmates that were sent out on the crews came from minimum security facilities, are considered low risk, and are close to their release date. “We sent plenty



of supervision,” said Griggs. “These are all prisoners who have earned this right to be on these crews. It’s a real perk for them.” Griggs explained that all prisoners, must by law, either work or be in programs like education or parenting classes for forty hours each week. The outdoor work crews are the most sought after positions.

One of many great stories that involved the inmate crews, was the story of Doobie, the lost pug. Doobie had been missing for seven days when an inmate crew noticed a small dog running around loose. Later they

saw posters for the lost dog, and were able to reunite Doobie with her owners. “If it wasn’t for them, we wouldn’t have got her back,” said owner Julie Mickey. The inmates didn’t even ask about the reward that had been offered for Doobie’s safe return.



“We are very proud of our Department,” said Griggs. “It was a great opportunity to show the work that we can do.”

Lincoln Grade School Volunteers- Out of Sight, But Not Out of Mind

By Scott Laird



When the flood hit Vernonia December 3, there were limited spaces available that could be used as recovery centers. One location that has gotten extensive use is the old Lincoln Grade School which has been sitting empty on the hill overlooking town for the last few years. Though it was not centrally located nor as visible as the other relief centers in town, Lincoln grade school became a focal point for flood victims recovery efforts.

amount of donations quickly outgrew the two floors, and large tents were brought in just to house all the furniture. The clothing operation filled the school.

“I did this in ‘96,” Synda said. “And this far surpasses what we received then.”

The Salvation Army was eventually asked to come in and help manage the distribution project that the Vernonia Volunteers has established. For the first few weeks it took a minimum of twenty people to sort, clean, and run the center.



The Lincoln school was initially set up as an overnight shelter on the first day of flooding. It provided shelter and food for fifty-two people who were stranded on the east side of town. Synda Allen opened the building and helped establish the shelter that first night.

Because there was no kitchen facility that was operational in the building, those sheltered there were moved to the permanent location at Cedar Ridge the next day. And that’s when things really got busy at the old school.

Current owner Bud Dow graciously kept the building open, and allowed it to be used as a much needed distribution center for clothing and furniture. And then the donations began pouring in. Synda Allen, Mona Peyton and Lee Seibert worked tirelessly to organize, sort and display the literally tons of clothing that began arriving almost immediately. “It was just such a wonderful outpouring,” said Synda, as she gave me a tour of the clothing facility. The

“Those folks up there on the hill just did an outstanding job,” said Interim City Administrator Aldie Howard. “They worked so hard. They deserve as much recognition as anyone.”

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