

Vernonia Flood Stories Part I: One Year After The Flood (continued from page 1)

But we also know that there are people out there working hard on our behalf, continuing to find resources, develop plans, give assistance, and reminding elected officials that we still need help-- to make sure that Vernonia and its recovery are not forgotten.

Over the next few months, Vernonia's Voice will look back on the last year-- on what happened, what has been done, and where we are going. We will

look at our schools, at local city government, at our businesses, at our vital services, and most of all, at our people. Because what is a community without its people?

The Flood of 2007 had many stories and many heroes. There were tragedy, loss, and heartbreak everywhere. But there were also sacrifice, courage, dedication, and, in the end, rewards. In Vernonia Flood Stories Part I: One Year After The Flood, we revisit just a few of the compelling stories of the people who were part of this event in our community.

Oregon Department of Corrections Inmates: Proud to Help

During the clean-up and recovery phase after the December, 2007 flood, many individual volunteers from numerous groups poured into Vernonia to help flood victims. But what has become one of the most compelling stories of the recovery effort is that of the Oregon Department of Corrections inmates, who were brought from their minimum-security facilities to assist a community that needed all the help it could get.

I had the privilege of visiting with three of those inmates (Kirk Cowger, Steve Richardson, and Ernest Hart) in late November, 2008, and had the opportunity to reflect with them about their experiences in Vernonia, Mist and Birkenfeld. I met Cowger, Richardson, and Hart in the cafeteria at the Mill Creek facility in Salem, where they are still serving out sentences for burglary or assault, and have anywhere from sixty-seven days to six months of prison time left.

The men were immediately friendly and talkative. They spoke easily about themselves and their experiences in prison. But mostly, we talked about what had been accomplished in Vernonia and their experiences among the citizens here. One thing was obvious-- they were very proud to have been able to help, to be of service to people in need, and to have used their skills to make a difference.

"At first, people were stand-offish; then, once they saw how everything was working, they started working together and friendships started forming," said Hart about citizens' response to inmates working in the community. "They saw we are really not any different," said Richardson.

Richardson worked in Vernonia, and helped do a lot of clean-up in homes; Cowger worked mostly in Mist and Birkenfeld on home clean ups; and Hart worked in the food service area. Richardson and Hart were part of the initial crews to arrive and, because they had previous work camp experience, they were tasked with camp set-up.

The crews worked inside residents' homes, tearing out damaged carpet, wallboard and cabinets, and removing ruined furniture, clothing and personal items. Cowger worked on a number of farms and ranches and helped clean up machinery



and shop items. "We were making about twenty trips to the dump each day," he said. Richardson worked tearing out the high school gymnasium floor, and was also on the crew that found the lost dog, Doobie, and helped return the dog to its owners.

The men talked a lot about being accepted by the commu-

nity. "People were kind of sketchy at first, then later they were asking, 'Where are you guys going, are you guys leaving?'" said Richardson. "They were asking, 'Are you coming back tomorrow?'" said Cowger. "We had people going out buying BBQ's and propane tanks so they could cook us lunch," added Cowger. Their hard work and willingness to do just about anything that needed to be done, quickly earned them the respect of the residents they were helping.

"This really opened my eyes," said Richardson. "I've learned my lesson by being here (in prison). By going out there, it showed me that I can start over and there are people who will look at me and accept me if I go the right way. I saw that people will bring me back into society."

"We were really humbled by the experience, seeing people who had lost everything," said Hart. "There were so many emotions involved. We built up friendships with people, and what was so good about it was they were interested in who we were." "We had people offering us jobs and contracts when we got out," said Cowger. "I don't think they even looked at us like inmates after the second week," Cowger added. "They were expecting us to be there."

The men told me stories about inmates practically begging the crew bosses to let them stay on jobs a few hours longer so they could finish a room and make it habitable for a victim, of handing out extra bag lunches to people in need, and being able to help people stay in their homes rather than leave-- and in return, people buying crews pizza and soda. A real sense of camaraderie developed. The men also talked about being able to use previous construction skills to really accomplish a lot of work, and assist residents with repairs they were trying to do themselves. "We were able to go in with a crew of ten and get done in a couple of hours what would have taken people weeks to do," said Cowger. "We had guys with skills that were really useful."

I asked whether they had experienced any negative responses or reactions to working in the community. "No, none," was the immediate response of all three men. "Considering the circumstances they were in and we are in, it was all positive," said Hart.

When asked about the personal impact of spending time in Vernonia, Cowger said he will look at volunteer work differently. "You can see how volunteer work can make a difference." "This is the first time I've ever experienced anything like that," said Hart. "This opened my eyes in different areas of life."

"We're retired now, we'd like to let you know that," joked Hart while discussing their sentences, and future plans when they get out of the correctional facility. Cowger has worked in heating and air conditioning installation, and hopes to return to that business. Richardson hopes to find for-

estry work, after spending time in the woods while in the prison system. Hart, whose parents are deaf, plans to get certified in sign language interpretation, and also has experience in welding.

All three talk about returning to Vernonia to visit friends they made and residents they helped. "I think about one guy, Pizza Larry we called him, all the time," said Richardson. "He was just so nice. I want to drive back up there to see that guy." "They made me feel good about who I am as a person," said Hart.

Hart took the opportunity to say hello from all the inmate crews to the residents of the Vernonia area, and to wish everyone a Merry Christmas. "Vernonia comes up every week around here," said Richardson. "The people up there are still in our thoughts and prayers," said Hart.

Kerrie Constance: This is Resiliency

On Monday, December 3, Kerri Constance woke up to water quickly surrounding her home outside of Vernonia on Sheely Creek Road. It was a rude awakening, and from there, things only got worse.

Constance and her husband, Wes, and their elderly friend, Elsie Taylor, live in one of the areas on the Upper Nehalem River that floods first, and the worst. Kerrie was Elsie's caretaker-- they were also business partners in "Pretty Gifts and Things," a shop in Vernonia.

Kerrie immediately began trying to gather belongings, and quickly headed out in a boat that was brought over by neighbor Ernie Smith. Kerrie, Elsie and Wes spent the day with the Smith family, because the road out was already blocked by high water. "I knew we would be safe there, because their house (the Smiths') was four feet above the high water level from the 1996 flood," said Constance.

"We were sitting around playing cards, eating sandwiches and drinking coffee in the afternoon, when I noticed water coming up through the heating vent in the floor," said Constance, explaining when things starting getting scary. They had Elsie in a recliner and kept lifting her up onto boxes to keep her out of the water. Everyone else sat up on the backs of couches and chairs. They spent the evening and night that way, feet dangling in the cold water. They had lost power, so it was totally dark. At 2:30 AM, something floating in the water hit the house so hard, it twisted it off its foundation. "The windows started exploding, then a crack went up the wall. We were all just praying the house wouldn't be shoved out into the current, and head downstream," said Constance.

With nowhere to go, the neighbors just waited out the night. "By 6:30am, the water had receded enough that the military could get in and rescue us, and they took us over to the fire hall. On the way out, I looked back-- our house had been taken off its foundation, done a quarter-turn, and moved down by our workshop," remembered Constance. It had been a terrifying ordeal for all involved.

In the days following the flood, Kerrie and Wes went to stay with friend Alice Zimmerman. Elsie went to stay with

family in Forest Grove. Looters went through their property, taking metal and anything else that could be pried loose. On December 12, Wes had a heart attack. Four days later, he came home, but had to be rushed back that same evening and had emergency surgery for a blood clot in his intestine. When he returned home, he again had to be rushed back to St. Vincent's Hospital, this time with internal bleeding. He has finally been able to stay

home, but is scheduled for major back surgery in December. (continued on page 17)



Ernest Hart, Kirk Cowger, and Steve Richardson at the Mill Creek Correctional Facility



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