

Manning up

Why a retired judge mentors young offenders in Tillamook's youth prison

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Before retiring in 2013, Neal Lemery spent most of his judicial career presiding over courtrooms in Oregon's northern coastal cities. Today, he dedicates his time to mentoring young inmates, a role he said more adults should assume.

"Fatherlessness is a huge, huge epidemic," he said. "Eight-five percent of youth in prison are fatherless; 90 percent of homeless and runaways are fatherless; 85 percent of kids who have behavioral problems; 71 percent of high school dropouts; and suicides are 63 percent.

"Why are we not addressing this?" he asked.

A longtime resident of Tillamook, Lemery has visited Oregon Youth Authority's Tillamook Youth Correctional Facility, a 50-bed prison that houses youth sex offenders, at least twice a week for the past six years.

"A lot of the kids I visit," he said, "they haven't had a family member come visit for three or four years."

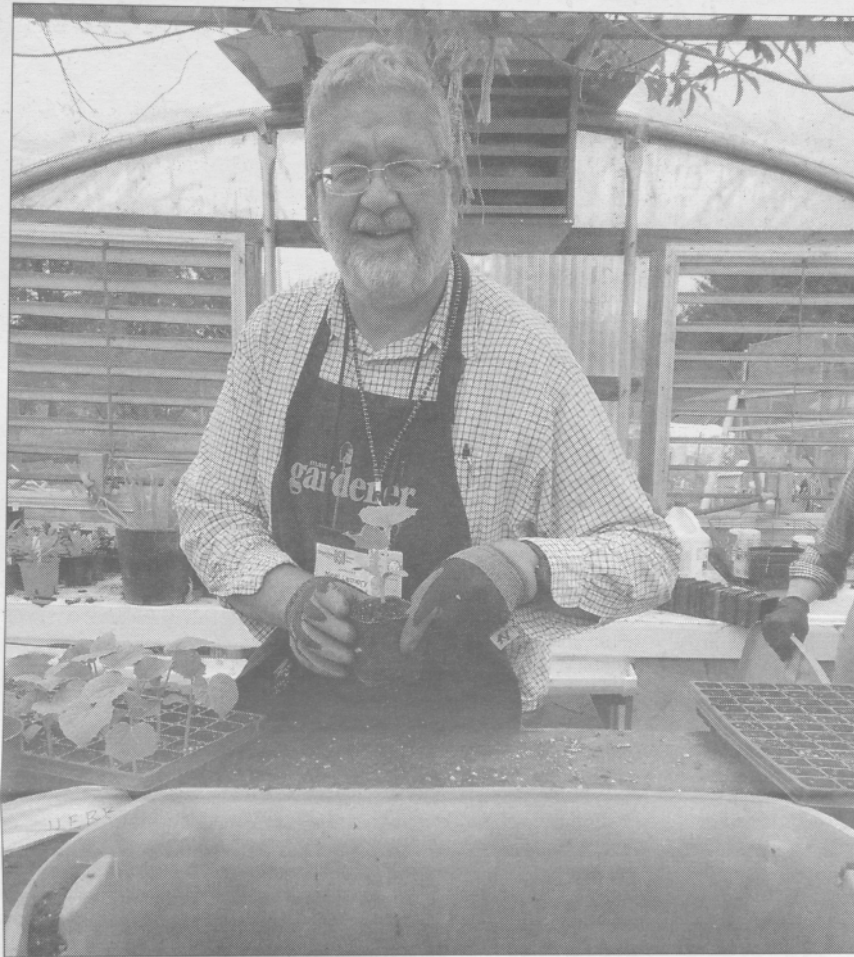
His mentorship began when a couple of his friends invited him to talk with a teenager serving time at his local youth prison. They told him the boy's father was deceased, and when his mother visited, she showed up intoxicated. Lemery's friends thought the boy could benefit from his guidance.

It wasn't long before that young man and prison staff asked Lemery if he could talk to some of the other kids, too – kids who could use some support from the outside. Now he visits about five inmates regularly and stays in touch with those he's mentored in the past who are now on parole.

"Almost all of them have lived in very abusive, dysfunctional families, and most of them have a horrible relationship with their father," he said. "They need a dad around, so I'm kind of a dad."

As of July, there were 601 youths housed in Oregon Youth Authority's close-custody prisons, and 34 percent of them were there for sex offenses. Of the adult prison population, 25 percent are serving time for sex offenses, according to the Oregon Department of Corrections' August reports.

Of the male inmates in Oregon's youth prisons, 46 percent had a documented history of being abused or neglected, and 62 percent had parents with a history of drug



Neal Lemery volunteers in the greenhouse at Tillamook Youth Correctional Facility as part of the master gardening program. "The plants look great," Lemery writes in a blog post about the garden, "but we've really been growing healthy young men."

or alcohol abuse, according to the agency's 2014 Youth Biopsychosocial Summary.

Lemery said that for many, the proclivity to commit a sex offense was taught to them by their abuser, and with the counseling and education they receive in prison, they can and often do make a conscious decision to change their behavior. And for those without any support coming from outside the prison, a mentor can play an impactful role.

While there are also predatory sex offenders in Oregon's youth prisons, who will reoffend, Lemery said that's not the case with most of the kids he's mentored.

"It's not like they're hard-wired to go out and rape and pillage," he said. "Your

judgment center in your brain doesn't really mature until you're 23 or 24 years old, and a lot of these kids, it happened when they were 13 or 14."

He said there's a dire need for more mentorship with at-risk and incarcerated youths. In 2014, he self-published a book, "Mentoring Boys to Men: Climbing Their Own Mountains," which he hopes will inspire others to become mentors.

The book contains short stories from his time spent with youths he's mentored. For some readers, it might be an uncomfortable read. Many of the young men told him horrendous tales of childhood abuse, stories that he admits sparked his own desire to

How to help

There are many opportunities to mentor youths within Oregon Youth Authority facilities. **Page 10**

Travels with Joseph

An excerpt from Neal Lemery's blog post about a youth parolee. **Page 10**

"take out and shoot" their predators. But he listens to them tell their stories and reassures them they had no control over the situation – a simple affirmation that some are hearing for the first time.

"Don't expect people to thank you," he writes. "You will see lives changed. You will see some amazing things and some astonishing, encouraging growth. You will recognize that you've had something to do with that."

Lemery volunteers as a teacher's aide in the master gardening program at the detention center. He also frequently visits the boys and young men he mentors to sip coffee and talk about schoolwork, books, sports and the news, but always to listen without judgment and offer encouragement, he said. Sometimes he brings along his guitar, playing folk, rock and jazz. He even paid for one young inmate's guitar lessons. He and his wife, Karen Keltz, donate to the Christmas fund and bring in birthday cakes, and when his mentees are paroled, he's there to pick them up at 6 a.m. and take them to breakfast, the beach and then on to Portland, Salem, Bend or wherever they have family or a halfway house waiting.

"I've had a couple guys just put up in homeless shelters and fleabag motels – awful places – but some places, like Salem and Eugene, have really good halfway houses," he said.

Lemery stays in touch with the young men long after they're released, inviting them to his home for the holidays, always welcoming them like family.

"They need that family support, that connection, knowing 'someone cares about me,'" he said. "The most important thing I can do is send them a birthday card – no one else does, so that's what we do."

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work skills but remain in prison at a cost to taxpayers. Oregon Youth Authority budgets \$263 per day for each inmate in its youth correctional facilities.

Since retiring in 2013, Lemery openly voices his opinion on Oregon's sentencing laws. As a judge, he dealt with it by spending more time in traffic and family courts than criminal court, he said.

In the mid-1990s, Lemery experienced

the legal system from the other side of the bench. He and his wife fostered two teenage brothers who were sent to them from an abusive home. The couple had raised the boys for about two years when the youngest, 15 at the time, was sent to prison for 2½ years.

Lemery said he went through a range of emotions, from guilt and shame for having a "kid in prison" to resentment and anger.

"You don't have much control, and

someone else sets the rules about how you get to visit," he said. "Dealing with an institution and bureaucracy, and then your kid's not at home either, so there's a whole bunch of mixed feelings and emotions."

He said the boy's 16-year-old brother, who was already dealing with trauma, was devastated when his younger brother was sentenced to prison.

"Family of people in prison need to be supported and listened to and heard," Imani

said. "I also wanted, through this process, to give them an opportunity to reflect on their experiences in writing, and talk with one another about those experiences."

The two-hour performance will be followed by a question-and-answer session, and then a reception with snacks and beverages provided. Donations will be accepted to help cover the costs of production.