

OFFICERS: Fights break out occasionally, but not like on TV

Continued from 1A

Barnhart’s charges collectively have committed a scary list of crimes, ranging from drug dealing to rape, assault and murder. Barnhart doesn’t deny his job can be dangerous. Occasional fights break out. He catches inmates ferrying contraband. The 16-year veteran has become a keen observer of human behavior.

“Being observant is a huge part of the game,” he said. “Knowing the guys on your unit and their personalities. Knowing who is friends with who and who associates with who. Noticing when you see two guys together who don’t usually associate. Looking for the visual cues and keeping your ears open. When things don’t sound right or things are too quiet.”

He walks the unit periodically, doing “tier checks.” He tunes out normal noises such as the sound of flushing toilets. He’s known most of the inmates here for several years. He knows about their families, who their friends are and what they are going through.

“I approach my day like these guys are neighbors,” Barnhart said. “I treat them with respect. They treat me with respect.”

“This is a really good officer right here, he’s helped me a lot,” piped up an inmate walking by. “He’s very respectful. He never talks down to us. He treats us like adults.”

Barnhart grinned. These human interactions between guard and inmate are part of a shift in thinking by the Oregon Department of Corrections.

“We’ve seen a shift in culture and direction and leadership of the department,” he said. “The focus is on rehabilitation. The focus has differed based on the leadership we’ve had. Right now we’re in a really good place.”

Television and movies don’t truly reflect the correctional system, he said, though portraying what happens in other states where officers are on catwalks with guns or inmates are secured in cages.

“That’s not Oregon corrections, that’s not how we do business anymore,” he said. “Here there’s face-to-face interaction.”

Barnhart said new COs get training, but they learn so much more on the job. He remembers his first job in a celled unit and making plenty of mistakes. He learned about extortion and the term “paying rent.”

“It was a lot more prevalent back then. Individuals incarcerated on sex offenses will be told you need to pay rent, you need to give me a portion of your canteen to stay up on this unit or you’re going to get beat up,” Barnhart said. “I learned about the different gangs in prison and some of the dynamics. I learned about some of the manipulation techniques that get used against correctional officers. A lot of lessons I still carry with me about good security practices and not turning your back on anybody.”

P. Mays

P. Mays stood at an officer’s station in the educational building. It was spring break, so the building was empty of students. But in the classrooms, inmates washed windows and cleaned floors. Others came to get books from the upstairs law library. She cheerfully greeted each one and checked their names off a list.

She summed up her job as “making sure inmates are where



An aerial view of Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution, the Pendleton prison with 1,700 inmates and 270 correctional officers.

they’re supposed to be, doing what they’re supposed to be doing.” A simple mission with all sorts of complexities.

The 20-year veteran has worked all around the prison. As a female officer, she does everything male COs do except strip searches, though she does those in a pinch. During an incident a few years back when shots were fired in the yard, officers strip-searched all 185 inmates there. Mays did her share.

In daily life, Mays said she treats inmates respectfully, but doesn’t nurture close relationships with them.

“First and foremost, you are never friends with an inmate,” Mays said. “You want to be amiable, approachable, respectful, but you never ever get to a friendship level with an inmate because that opens the door for manipulation. There’s a very, very dark line you don’t cross.”

One part of the job is doing random pat-downs of inmates to insure they’re not passing contraband.

“I am respectful, but thorough,” Mays said. “They learn you’re not there to grope, you’re there to do a pat search and then they’re on their way.”

The searches sometimes yield contraband, everything from sugar packets from the dining room to medication, usually to be passed off in barter.

Often a shift can be blessedly uneventful, but a CO can never totally relax, she said.

“I’m constantly watching and constantly looking around,” Mays said. “You run through different scenarios in your head.”

About 400 cameras help officers keep watch.

“Every room has at least one fisheye,” she said. “They’re crystal clear. You can see hairs going up on the back of someone’s neck.”

Mays didn’t initially seek a career in corrections. Working as a waitress at age 23, the single mom got to know a regular customer who worked as a counselor at the prison. When she saw him and his friend getting out of the car, she’d have their regular order of coffee and tea ready by the time they entered. Eventually, the counselor suggested applying at the prison. Mays did.

“It’s been a good career,” she said.

Mays now has leadership roles. She’s a field training officer, an investigator for the prison’s Sexual Abuse Response Team, a CPR instructor, a member of wellness and safety committees and a men-

tor to new officers.

She met her husband at EOCL. Her spouse works for Oregon Corrections Enterprises as a production coordinator in the prison’s garment factory.

“It’s nice to be married to somebody who understands the job,” she said.

This work isn’t for everyone, Mays said. Some new COs quickly realize they aren’t cut out for it. The statistics are discouraging. COs have a life expectancy that is 18 years below average. Many wrestle with depression, anxiety or PTSD.

“If you get in here and realize, hey, this isn’t my thing, own it and go find something that is better for you,” Mays said.

Dave Galle

Correctional officer Dave Galle spent much of the day providing security for hearings inside the disciplinary segregation unit. Afterwards, he sat down at a computer to fill out reports.

The officer loves the job now, he said, but his early years brought stress. He spent the first four years on graveyard shift. His stint on the segregation unit, a noisy place for inmates with major disciplinary problems, was wearing.

“It takes a toll,” he said. “It changes you as a person.”

However, something eventually changed in his philosophy that helped him cope.

“I had to learn personally to let that stuff go,” he said. “After I got past that, I loved working here.”

Good communication skills and the ability to be fair and levelheaded are among the biggest tools in a CO’s toolbox, he said. In his 14 years, he has honed his approach.

“If you cannot communicate you cannot succeed here,” he said. “I think I have good rapport with the inmates. I treat them fairly. I’m real with them. I try not to single people out. I’m not here to try to make someone’s day miserable.”

He has stopped wondering about inmates’ particular crimes.

“It’s just so irrelevant,” Galle said. “Our job is to address their behavior while they’re here, not to know what they did before they got here.”

There are things he wishes he could get out of his brain. The inmate that smeared feces on his cell walls. Another who ate a bunch of spoons that had to be surgically removed. Later, the same man opened his incision with a staple he had removed from a book.

There are so many of these strange and disturbing scenes lodged in his

memory.

The officers are trained to recognize mental illness.

“We dive a lot into mental illnesses and how to deal with them,” Galle said. “A lot of people in here have issues. We learn how to address them. For a guy with a mental illness, certain approaches aren’t going to work with him. You have to find different ways to connect.”

Galle said most of the inmates are non-violent.

“They don’t want to add time to their sentence,” he said. “They want to get out of here and go home. They are human beings.”

Violence is always a possibility, though, and it can happen in a flash. One day in the chow hall, 12 inmates clashed, white against black. Galle grabbed one of them and took him to the floor. Another inmate jumped on his back and launched himself into the fray.

“I watched the video afterwards,” he said. “You see me just vanish.”

With the help of pepper spray, the culprits were subdued and taken to segregation.

One particularly dangerous chore comes when officers enter a cell to extract an inmate or investigate after an inmate covers his cell window.

“If a window or a camera is covered because they don’t want us to see, then we have to go in,” Galle said. “It’s cause for alarm. You don’t want anybody to die.”

L.W. Hughes

Officer L.W. Hughes started down the long, quiet hallway of Unit A2. It was time for the 11:30 count. All 32 pale green cell doors were locked. Hughes stopped at the window in each cell door and peered in.

Inside the double cells inmates sat on their bunks. If Hughes noticed one missing, he made a note. Most likely, those inmates were at the garment factory or other prison workplace that counts in place.

Hughes finished and sat down at the officer’s station. This was his quiet time. He took a sip from his Seattle Seahawks commuter mug and sat back. He normally uses the lull to brush his teeth, and prepare for the rest of the day before unlocking the cell doors after the count is cleared by the officer-in-charge who tallies unit and workplace numbers.

Hughes is a cheerful, glass-half-full kind of guy. He hired on with the Oregon Department of Corrections after a railroad job didn’t work out. EOCL is his third prison.

“I’ve been here (at the DOC) about 13 years — 15 if you count overtime,” he quipped.

Hughes embraces Oregon DOC’s evolving stance of COs modeling behavior for inmates.

“People are actually watching you,” he said. “I need to be someone who is not judging them. We need to have the vision of things getting better.”

He thinks of his colleagues as a second family. The officers develop strong bonds after spending so much time in the trenches together.

In Hughes unit, the loudspeaker hummed to life.

“Insulin line west. Insulin line west.”

“Insulin line,” Hughes said into his microphone. He unlocked some cell doors and three men emerged. They headed out to get their insulin shots.

Hughes said inmates generally respond positively when shown respect. He’s only had to break up a few fights, and most of the perpetrators apologized later.

Not to say there aren’t tough moments. He cut down an inmate who tried to hang himself. The inmate survived.

The loudspeaker announced chow time and Hughes again grabbed his mic.

“Chow time,” he said.

He unlocked the cell doors and a mass exodus ensued. The men, wearing jeans, tan belts, navy tees and an array of tats, headed to the chow hall. They hung together in racially delineated groupings.

That’s part of the inmate culture, Hughes said. He sees it every day in the day room as inmates watch television.

“The TV room tells it all. Everything’s segregated. You can only sit where your people sit.”

The inmate culture, with all its unwritten rules, orders inmate life and COs can’t control everything. Hughes holds the reins loosely.

“I’m coming into their home for eight hours,” he said. “I’m their landlord.”

Daily grind

While television and movies portray prison life in dramatic fashion, all four officers said their world is often calm, even boring some days, though the chance of instant chaos lurks.

“Movies take the worst of the worst. They take something that might happen once a month and combine that with nine other things that happen once a month into one program,” Galle said. “A lot of times it can be really boring to work here, but it can go from boring to holy crap in a split second.”

Officers must transition at the end of the day to home. They can’t simply switch off their brains, but they must hop from one box to another. From one world to the next.

Barnhart decompresses during his long drive home to Walla Walla. Hughes unwinds on his drive home. His wife and children give him 20 minutes alone when he arrives.

Mays and her husband discuss their days at the prison then deliberately move on. They walk their dogs at the park or go out for frozen yogurt.

“You can’t forget to have a life,” she said.

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INITIATIVES: Sanctuary state status, grocery tax ban could go to voters

Continued from 1A

pregnancy. The proposal also would allow a woman with a health condition that would place her in danger of death to obtain an abortion.

Brooks resident Marilyn Shannon, one of the initiative’s chief sponsors, said she expects the measure to make it on the ballot.

• End the sanctuary state: Stop Oregon Sanctuaries Initiative Petition 22 would repeal the state’s 31-year-old sanctuary law.

The law prohibits the use of state and local resources to enforce federal immigration law when a person’s only crime is being in the country illegally.

Petitioners for the proposal have submitted 110,445 signatures. Only 88,184 of those need to be

verified to the measure to be included on the ballot.

DOJ is investigating complaints that voters were misled into the signing the petition. About 39 people filed the complaints, said Debra Royal, chief of staff for Secretary of State Dennis Richardson.

• Three-fifths vote for raising revenue:

“A Tax is a Tax Amendment” Initiative 31 also is under investigation for allegations that signatures were obtained fraudulently.

Despite that, the Secretary of State’s Office has qualified the measure for the ballot.

The measure would amend the Oregon Constitution to require a three-fifths vote of the House and Senate for raising revenue, including assessing fees and

ending tax credits.

A woman named Connea Derber filed a complaint with the Secretary of State’s Office and the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries alleging that a representative of Ballot Access LLC had fraudulently signed signature sheets and proposed improper per signature-compensation, Willamette Week first reported. Ballot Access denied wrongdoing.

• Tax-free food: “Yes! Keep Our Groceries Tax-Free!” Initiative Petition 37, has also qualified for the ballot.

The constitutional amendment would prohibit local and state taxes on all foods for consumption, except for alcohol, tobacco and marijuana. Personal hygiene products were excluded from the measure.

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