

# Art gives inmates incentive to stay out of trouble

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
STAFF WRITER

The decor through most of Two Rivers Correctional Institution is bleak.

Long, bare corridors made of cement floors flanked by off-white walls stretch endlessly through the prison.

In the medical area, it's different. Purple-hued mountains decorate one wall, while a mixture of greens, browns and oranges form a forest on another. In the day room, the walls are covered floor to ceiling with a busy underwater scene. In a changing area for staff, the men's restroom is a riot of orange and black for the Oregon State Beavers, while the women's bathroom is all about the University of Oregon Ducks.

Most of it is the handiwork of George Albert Venecia.

"It's nice to be able to look at something besides the wall and each other," he said.

Venecia would know — he's been staring at prison walls for 12 and a half years since he was convicted of charges of sodomy and sex abuse. He still has another 12 and a half to go, which is probably why his favorite things to paint are nature scenes. Inside TRCI, "nature" generally means the patch of sky inmates can see when they exercise in the yard.

Many inmates at the prison outside Umatilla are gifted artists. Detailed colored pencil drawings by inmates line a visitor room, and right now the institution is auctioning off wood and metal pieces created by inmates to benefit the Agape House.

Venecia said he didn't start painting until he landed in prison, something TRCI spokesperson Sherry Iles said is common.

"So many times I say 'This is amazing!' and they say, 'Yeah, I didn't start until I came in here,'" she said,



A piece of metal art created by an inmate sits on display for a silent auction in a staff break room at TRCI. At right is a wooden candle holder, also up for auction.



Inmate George Albert Venecia demonstrates how he creates texture in one of his drawings using a pen cap.

pointing to a wall of intricate colored pencil drawings in an area for visitors. "For me, if I take photos of what they've done, I give it to them for their portfolio for when they get out, for work

opportunities."

Venecia is one of TRCI's residents who wants to make a career out of art someday. While his specialty is paint, others work with wood or metal or fabric.

In TRCI's administration building right now, a collection of artwork is up for silent auction among staff to benefit the Agape House's food bank. The art is mostly created by inmates in the

facilities plant, who fabricate everything from metal lockers to book shelves and in their spare time are allowed to use scraps for artwork.

In the administration building, a small motorcycle made of plumbing parts sits on a decorative wooden dresser. Nearby, scraps of metal weave themselves into an American flag picture frame while delicately carved walking sticks — unrecognizable as former mop handles — sit on the floor. There are colorful blankets made by members of TRCI's crocheting class.

"It's really relaxing for them, and they do some amazing stuff," Iles said.

She said in the past inmates have gotten permission to sell art or publish novels available outside the institution. Venecia has gotten such permission for his artwork.

Few of the men inside the prison are given the privilege of using paint and a paintbrush. Venecia said only those with a long track



record of being a model inmate are allowed to work on projects like the murals he paints, which gives him incentive to keep on the right track.

"I was trying to teach the other inmates how to paint, but it's hard for them to, shall we say, stay out of trouble, so I kept losing people," he said.

Staff in the infirmary praise his talent, and said it's hard to keep him for their projects as staff from other areas of the prison try to borrow him for their office or other spaces. In one office, Venecia painted a set of lace curtains on the wall for a staff member who was sad she couldn't have real curtains for safety reasons.

It's not just TRCI employees Venecia does projects for. He works in his cell, manipulating colored pencils with his fingers, erasers, pen caps and even toilet paper to create a paint-like effect. Sometimes he does projects for other inmates, or for family members (he was working on a portrait for his cousin Monday). He said he has been working lately on some T-shirt designs for a former TRCI inmate who wrote him and said they were having trouble finding work on the outside and wanted to start their own company selling shirts.

"I told him, I'll send you some stuff. Don't get into trouble. Don't come back," Venecia said.

## Athena mayor to run for seat on county commission

By **PHIL WRIGHT**  
STAFF WRITER

Athena Mayor John Shafer announced he is challenging incumbent Larry Givens of Umatilla in the race for Umatilla County commissioner.

Shafer in a media announcement said he is running on the motto, "Relationships are primary." He said commissioners need to get to all parts of the county and was critical the county is underserving residents in the Milton-Freewater area. The county has an office there, he said, but he was not sure how often people visit it. He promised to hold office hours in Milton-Freewater one day a week.

He also advocated for the county to create a priority list for the budget and was critical of the county's chief financial officer having too much say.

Shafer's announcement first appeared in the Valley Herald newspaper, after which he officially filed for candidacy.

Givens filed in October to seek a fourth term. He agreed relationship building is key to effective leadership as a county commissioner and said he has built relationships and connections that benefit his constituents.

Commissioners are based in the county courthouse in Pendleton, but Givens used to hold regular office hours in Milton-Freewater. He said he backed off that last year because he felt there was not much need for it.

Givens also said the county's budget process

*"When you are in charge of the citizens' dollars, you have to make those go as far as they can."*

Larry Givens, Umatilla County Commissioner

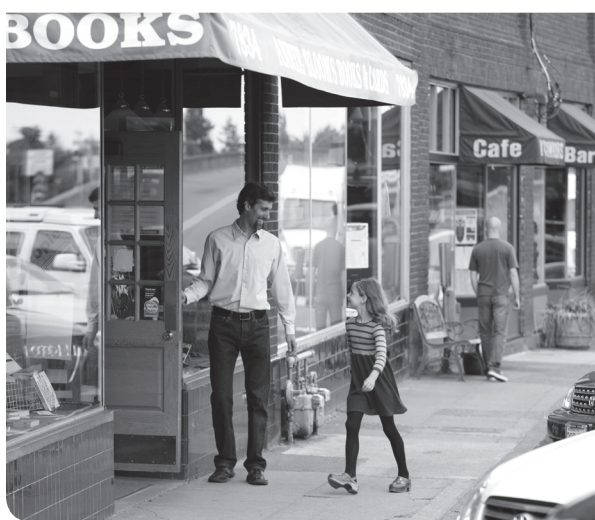
allows department heads the freedom to prioritize their needs, then the county's budget committee makes recommendations and the chief financial officer weighs in. But the commissioners make the final determination.

"When you are in charge of the citizens' dollars, you have to make those go as far as they can," Givens said.

Umatilla County has three commissioners, all are at-large. Commissioners serve four-year terms. Each position has an annual salary of \$90,852 a year plus benefits.

Shafer is a communications sergeant with the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office. If he were to prevail, he would have to quit that job. The county charter prohibits a county employee from serving on the board.

Qualified candidates for the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners have until March 6 to file.



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