

# Inmate actors tell Christmas story at TRCI

By KATHY ANEY  
STAFF WRITER

This was no Sunday school nativity play.

Yet, it wasn't so far off. The cast included Joseph, Mary, shepherds and baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes. There was a manger, a star and a donkey. If one squinted, the room almost looked like a church fellowship hall.

In reality, inmates performed this nativity story inside the multipurpose room at Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla. Underneath their robes, the actors wore their prison blues, stamped with "INMATE," in fluorescent orange.

Just before 6 p.m., audience members all clad in similar prison garb arrived for the play. A shepherd at the door distributed programs and directed the men to a table with maple bars and apple fritters. As the room filled, the hubbub of conversation grew louder.

Shane Hall, the inmate who wrote "Christ is Born Prophecy Fulfilled," warmed up the audience with Christmas tunes. The former pastor strummed an electric guitar bought at the prison commissary and launched into "There's a New Kid in Town." Other band members played acoustic guitar, bass guitar and drums. Off to one side, Joseph Opyd played electric piano. Doing double duty as actor and pia-



Staff photo by Kathy Aney  
**Joseph and Mary, played by Roberto Baney and Elena Ropalo, sit with baby Jesus during a nativity play performed inside the Two Rivers Correctional Institution.**

nist, Opyd wore his costume for the role of Angel Gabriel, a white tunic, shiny silver belt and a halo set firmly on his head.

As they performed, the instrumentals entwined with Hall's Oklahoma-accented baritone.

"How about a little 'Silent Night,' boys?" he called out.

The band dialed down their volume for the old favorite, sang all the verses and then segued into "O Holy Night" and then "Mary, Did You Know?" By the latter, audience chatter had stopped. The men

started singing along, not in perfect tune, but it mattered not. Eyes glistened. About two-thirds of them stood.

It was time for the main event. The idea for the play had come to Hall as he lay on his bunk. He got up, sat at the metal desk in his cell and started writing. Forty-five minutes later, he says, he was finished.

The play stars some prophets — Moses, David, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Micah and Zechariah — foretelling the birth of Jesus. This is important, Hall and several of the actors said during



Staff photo by Kathy Aney  
**Inmate Shane Hall, who wrote and directed a nativity play that was performed last week inside the Two Rivers Correctional Institution, warms up the crowd with Christmas music.**

a conversation before the play, because some of these prophets were a lot like them. They had done things they weren't proud of in their earlier lives.

"Moses was a murderer, King David committed adultery," Hall said. "They were just like us. They were men who have done sorry things."

"A lot of people God chose to tell his story were the lowlifes," said Michael

Dodge, who played Moses in Hall's play.

Dodge said he never read the Bible on the outside. He considered himself a Christian, but didn't really know what that meant. Then, sitting in county jail, he started praying.

"Hitting rock bottom, you have nobody else to turn to but God," Dodge said. "God definitely revealed himself to me."

Dodge eventually started

attending Daysprings Ministry services at Two Rivers, where his faith took hold and he met Hall and others, including Michael Yann, who played Zechariah, and Jose Avila-Flores, a shepherd in the play. When Hall asked them to be in the production, none was comfortable, but all said yes.

Following a Christian lifestyle inside a prison isn't so easy, the men say, so they depend on each other.

"Different pasts and circumstances led us here," Avila-Flores said. "We have found a community. We have found hope behind these walls."

The play unspooled, with Hall speaking between each scene. The cast included one non-inmate. Elena Ropalo, a Tri-Cities real estate agent who volunteers at the prison, played Mary.

The play included almost no props, just some scrolls, a donkey head made from cardboard and the swaddling clothes for baby Jesus. The makeshift theater lacked a curtain, lights, a green room or even a stage. Yet somehow the message came through.

For Hall, it was all about those prophets who foretold Jesus' birth, those guys who made good despite their rough beginnings.

"It doesn't matter about our sordid pasts," Hall told the audience. "It matters what we do going forward. You are so much better than those doggone blue shirts."

# Fellowship aplenty at Hermiston's community Christmas dinner

By JESSICA POLLARD  
STAFF WRITER

It can be hard to measure how the Community Fellowship Christmas and Thanksgiving meals impact Hermiston each holiday season.

"I still haven't done the numbers from Thanksgiving," said Community Fellowship Dinner secretary Makayla Humphreys.

"It's been very smooth today," she added during the Christmas meal, which takes place each year at the high school. "Somehow, everything always works out."

The dinner served at least 250 people last Christmas. Organizers at the Community Fellowship Dinner organization, which has operated completely on donations in Hermiston since the 1980s, don't know just yet how many people were served this holiday.

But what cannot be quantified can still be showcased through the stories of guests and volunteers that come from everywhere each year to enjoy and distribute the spread: ham, veggies, gravy, mashed potatoes— and of course, the pie.

It was Judith Raysor's first time at the Christmas meal, but her fourth year living in Hermiston.

"I like what I see here," she said. "And it shouldn't just be for Christmas. We should celebrate just to celebrate."

Raysor was born in Florida, left for New York City to go to college and raised three children as a single mother before a stint in North Dakota. It may be surprising that she found her-



Staff photo by Kathy Aney  
**Santa and Mrs. Clause (aka Stanley and Linda Anderson, of Irrigon) visit with guests at the Community Fellowship Dinner on Christmas Day at Hermiston High School.**

self on the dry side of Oregon, but her son asked her to move to Hermiston to help raise her grandchildren.

"God changed everything after that," she said.

Raysor got a job providing in-home care for an elderly woman in Umatilla, but the house was sold in August of 2018.

From then, she had nowhere to call home. It would be six months before Raysor could secure an apartment in the area.

"Everything I got, people gave me," she said. "Anybody can be homeless."

Now, she spends most days working at Desert Rose Ministries. She said Desert Rose served dinner to 60 people on Dec. 19.

For her, the holiday isn't just about food or presents.

"It's not about me getting a gift," she said. "It's about the love."

Raysor said that come Thursday, she'll be back at

Desert Rose learning the stories of people who come by for direction, services or just a warm cup of coffee.

Jeannette and Bob O'Brien were enjoying the Community Fellowship Dinner early Wednesday afternoon.

The pair said after life in the military, they settled down in Hermiston 20 years ago to retire as affordably as possible.

"Wherever you hang your hat is home," Bob said.

Their closest family members are 3,000 miles away, so it's only natural that they come to enjoy dinner and meet up with friends at the annual holiday dinners.

"They are very generous with the takeouts," Jeannette added.

Dave Hickox said he didn't have any plans besides volunteering at the dinner this year, rationing out generous portions of pie for the guests.

# TRCI hires Blewett as superintendent

By JESSICA POLLARD  
STAFF WRITER

Oregon Department of Corrections Director Colette Peters announced last week that Tyler Blewett is superintendent at Two Rivers Correctional Institution.

His appointment to superintendent follows a move into the interim leadership role in June, after former superintendent Troy Bowser went on administrative leave during an investigation and resigned in September.

According to the DOC,

Blewett began his career with Oregon DOC as a correctional officer at the Snake River Correctional Institution in Malheur County in 2007, eventually becoming a captain.

He moved on from the security ranks at SRCI to take a plant manager role at the Umatilla prison before being named acting superintendent this summer.

Blewett helped implement and continue multiple programs at TRCI, including the Peer-to-Peer Lead Mentorship Program.



Blewett

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