2020 News ~ October to December

Week of October 13, 2020...

Chester Certified Peer Specialists Create Custom Masks

The SCI Chester Certified Peer Specialists (CPS) and CPS Supervisor Wanda Manson created these custom-made masks for all the CPS to wear.

The mask color matches the CPS shirts. The “four hands of different colors coming together” is a design created by the CPS workers at Chester several years ago.

This is just one more tool to help identify CPS workers to all other inmates that may be in need of CPS services.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Waymart Leadership Holds Town Hall with Inmates

A town hall meeting was held at SCI Waymart on Oct. 6 with inmates and facility leadership. Fifteen inmates representing their housing units participated in the event. Topics discussed were: flu shots and incentives; issues with video visits; more yard time; use of weight room; exercise equipment on units; dental services; secure process center delays; eating in the inmate dining rooms; religious services; and lack of cable variety.
Questions and concerns were answered by staff to include Superintendent George Miller, unit managers Tiffanie Kaye, Tim McDermott, Tony Spears, David Chapel, and Michael Skutack, Deputy Superintendent for Facilities Management James Cirelli, CCPM David Gorman, Major Jeffrey Gibson, Rabbi Joseph Kolakowski and Infectious Disease Nurse Helen Wenk.

Waymart Celebrates SECA with Sweet Treat

To mark the end of the State Employee Combined Appeal (SECA) campaign, SCI Waymart thanked staff for their support with choices of chocolate, vanilla or Neapolitan ice cream and toppings of whipped cream, cherries, chocolate syrup and strawberry syrup. It was offered on all three shifts on Sept. 29 and 30.

Chester Teacher Supports Inmate in Bid to Take GED Test Before Release

By SCI Chester Principal Taneisha Spall

Throughout the years in the field of education, educators and administrators will often reflect on a handful of students who have remained etched in our minds and hearts for their tenacity, grit and demonstration of the power of education. One such student, Carlos, will undoubtedly be one of those students for Carolyn Martin, ABE/GED teacher at SCI Chester.

AnneMarie Swanlek, western field liaison, for the Division of Correction Education, is also in charge of statewide General Education Development (GED) testing for 25
state correctional institutions in Pennsylvania. Both Carlos’ teacher, Carolyn Martin, and I (Principal Taneisha Spall) had reached out to Swanlek asking for an exemption from our policy for GED testing in corrections. A student should have a 9th-grade reading and math level before they can take the GED-Ready practice test. They then must pass that test before they are permitted to take the official GED test. If they fail, then we recommend that they wait for a minimum of 30 to 60 days to retest so that the student can use the study guide of areas they are deficient. Carlos had already passed reasoning through language arts, science and social studies, but failed his GED-Ready math test two times before he passed, then failed the official math test. Martin sent Swanlek a passionate appeal to let him try again before he was released:

I have been working with inmate [Carlos] since November 2018. When he first entered my class, [Carlos] struggled with focusing due to his Attention Deficit Disorder diagnosis. In August 2019, [Carlos] suffered some significant losses, became very depressed and stopped coming to class. From September to October 2019, he spent 45 days in the RHU when he got a misconduct after getting into a physical altercation with another inmate. Security mistakenly identified a different inmate as the culprit, and [Carlos] could have easily gotten away with his actions. However, when he saw that an innocent inmate was going to suffer for his behavior, he confessed to Security that he was the culprit and took the consequences.

After fulfilling his RHU time, [Carlos] returned to class immediately in October 2019, determined to succeed. He began taking GED-Ready tests in the fall and soldiered on until he had completed all his tests except the Official Math which he missed by four points in August, 2020. He was incredibly disappointed with his score, but was able to identify immediately where he had erred. He said that he had spent too much time on certain questions as well he had entertained test anxiety. His knowledge that this was the final test that he had to pass before his release intensified his anxiety. He was aware that the 60-day mandatory waiting period to retest would extend beyond his October 7, 2020, release date.

Upon his release, [Carlos] will be going to a halfway house and after demonstrating his ability to function successfully within society. Once established, he wants to pursue college. He is foregoing his desire to be within easy access of his eight-year-old daughter, because he sees the need to sacrifice immediacy for long-term stability. This is significant because he adores his daughter, and they have a strong relationship.

Since he failed the test in August, [Carlos] has been coming to my class at least once a day (sometimes twice a day) to get one on one assistance, and he has been working on the areas in which the GED test report indicated he was weak. He also has been working with a tutor on the block to prepare for
the test. He is determined to “cover all his bases” and is investing in all the help offered to him.

I am requesting that you waive the 60-day mandatory waiting period for retesting and allow [Carlos] to be tested the last week of September along with other students being tested at SCI Chester. My request is based upon the following merits that I see in [Carlos]:

· has demonstrated tenacity in his pursuit of his diploma

· has negotiated his ADD, bereavement, RHU time and test anxiety

· has managed to pass all his tests (except math) with points beyond the required 145

· is focusing on his deficient areas and is investing significant time and energy in preparation to retest

· has invested in the additional one on one support offered to him

· has utilized the GED test report as a tool to hone in on his deficiencies

· has demonstrated character not only in taking responsibility for his actions that led to his RHU time but also showed initiative in returning to class immediately after his time served

· has a vision and step-by-step plan for success and is willing to make sacrifices to succeed

· has the strong support of his mother and daughter who are cheering him on to success

Upon his release, [Carlos] will have a myriad of responsibilities, decisions, deadlines, halfway house rules, transportation and financial issues etc. to navigate. I believe that taking a GED test to pursue those last four points has the potential to fall by the wayside in the midst of the stress of meeting all the other requirements of Parole.

The GED is pertinent to his getting a long-term job that will provide the financial support needed to sustain [Carlos]. The GED is also a prerequisite for his going to college and pursuing his educational goals. Most importantly, I believe that earning the GED is the defining watershed moment that will significantly influence the level of confidence with which [Carlos] will face the world and successfully navigate to stability and permanent freedom. Those four points needed to pass the GED test, hang in the balance. I believe that
one final opportunity to exit the prison doors with a GED could be the pivotal point in [Carlos’] life.

Martin’s plea was accepted by Swanlek, and the 60-day waiting period was waived for Carlos.

September 30, 2020 at 1 p.m., Carlos arrived with confidence to take and pass the GED Math. As I proctored his exam, it was evident that he was utilizing the test taking skills and techniques as well as the recalling the math content he learned from both his teacher and tutors. 120 minutes later, he was finished. While we waited for the Remote Managing Access (GED processing) to complete, Carlos shared his next steps upon release as well as discussed why earning his GED was so critical to his future success for him and his daughter. At 3:35 p.m., the RMA finally cleared and we sprinted to my office to retrieve his score for standing count was only 10 minutes away and Carlos could not stand to wait until the next day for me to provide him his score. Seeing 146 appear on the screen and the green yes for credentialed, I belted out, “You passed [Carlos]! You did it!” He asked me to repeat it and when I did, he became silent and fell into the chair in my office. In this moment, I saw the years of setbacks, disappointment, and feeling that you were not good enough, dissipate. He earned his GED and his future is ahead of him.

He could not wait to share the news and informed Martin, who, like many corrections educators, dedicate so much time and energy to students. This is the fruits of her labor. Swanlek also emailed, “I knew what day and time he was taking the math test and when I checked his results and saw that he had passed and earned his GED, I emailed the education staff at SCI Chester and told them, you cannot see me, but I am doing my happy dance, tell [Carlos] congratulations!”

Carlos and many incarcerated students who earn their GEDs despite adversity and obstacles are the reason that as corrections educators, we are committed to the work that we do on a daily basis.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

**Chester Inmates Support Local Veterans Organization**

SCI Chester inmates donated $500 to support UESF’s homeless veterans program.

Established in 1983, UESF focused exclusively on providing emergency utility assistance for our first 26 years. This financial aid, delivered through utility grants, helped families facing utility shut-offs remain in their homes. The program continues today.
The veterans program focuses on veterans’ needs and helps vets and their families with housing and other assistance needs. Every dollar provided is matched by utility partners, doubling the impact.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Highway Named in Memory of Camp Hill Officer

A portion of road in Lower Paxton Township was named in honor of an SCI Camp Hill officer who died in the line of duty on Oct. 2018.

Route 39 from Dover Road to Forrest Hills Drive will now be known as the Mark Gaspich Memorial Highway. A dedication ceremony was held by Pennsylvania State Rep. Andrew Lewis Sept. 26 to celebrate Gaspich’s life and community spirit. He also served as a member of the Linglestown Fire Company No. 1 – Station 35.
Wetzel Named Bloomsburg University Alumni Association Volunteer of the Year

Bloomsburg University News Release

Pennsylvania’s Secretary of Corrections, John Wetzel ’98, was honored by the Bloomsburg University Alumni Association as its Volunteer of the Year on Oct. 10 during a virtual celebration.

“I congratulate Secretary Wetzel and each of the honorees for their dedication and support of this great institution,” said BU President Bashar Hanna. “What they do on behalf of our students and the impact they are making on future generations of families cannot be measured. My congratulations again to these alumni leaders on the well-deserved recognition.”

Wetzel was named as the William T. Derricott ’66 Volunteer of the Year, which recognizes alumni who, through their volunteer contribution of time and talent on behalf of the BU Alumni Association, supports the mission of Bloomsburg University and exemplifies the esprit de corps of Bloomsburg University to those around them.

In addition to serving on the Council of Trustees, Wetzel is an advocate for numerous programs and initiatives. These include the BU Anchor Program, the “It’s On Us” Grant Program, new trustee appointments, and the annual PASSHE Advocacy Day, where students travel to Harrisburg to speak with legislators about funding and issues important to the State System and higher education.

He has also served as the co-chair of the head football coach search committee and participated in the Middle States Accreditation review. Wetzel also works to make sure the PA Department of Corrections promotes jobs and internships to BU students interested in pursuing a career in corrections.

“John is a role model for all of us,” Hanna added. “He’s both the consummate professional and a warm-hearted person. He is always here for BU, and I couldn’t think of a more worthy person who represents the Husky spirit.”

Along with honoring Wetzel, the BU Alumni Association awarded Elizabeth Miller ’17 and Lamar Oglesby ’07 the 2020 Maroon and Gold Excellence Award. The Maroon and Gold Excellence Award recognizes alumni who have graduated within the past
15 years and have met one or more criteria for the Distinguished Service Award and have demonstrated outstanding potential for further contributions.

Bill Bent ’83 and Paul Clifford ’96 were named the 2020 recipients of the Distinguished Service Award. The Distinguished Service Award recognizes alumni who have excelled in at least one of the following areas: significant accomplishments in their profession, outstanding service to Bloomsburg University and/or the Alumni Association, and contributions to humanity.

“The annual Alumni Awards Celebration provides the Bloomsburg University Alumni Association with an opportunity to recognize some of our most accomplished and engaged alumni,” explained Director of Alumni Engagement, Nathan Conroy ’06. “It was exciting to recognize five outstanding alumni who have each made an impact through their service to Bloomsburg University while excelling in their respective careers and contributing to their communities.”

Video from the ceremony: https://vimeo.com/467710570

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Huntingdon Helps Expand Veteran “X”

By Christopher Banks, Corrections Counselor

Veterans look at things and do things for different reasons than those who have never served. They will watch or participate in a Veterans’ Day or Memorial Day parade knowing about the sacrifice involved. They will join a Veteran organization or group to have a continued connection to their prior service. That special connection is based on the comradery shared by millions of Veterans nationwide. This comradery is from their shared experiences; not all Veterans served during war time. Not all have been deployed. Even fewer have served in direct combat. Regardless of their branch, the time in which they served, their combat experience, or their MOS (Military Occupational Specialty), most, if not all, Veterans have a high level of respect with other Veterans and enjoy sharing with them. Just ask any Marine about the “Crucible” and you will see their eyes light up. Ask any Ranger if they went to “Jump School” and they will likely place their hand on their knee or their back. Ask any Veteran about their favorite NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer) and they will have a rank and name to provide. It’s not just their past service that connects a lot of Veterans though. They also share the hardships of life, like needing medical and mental health care at a Veterans Administration (VA) hospital or medical center. Struggles with substance abuse or homelessness are too common among Veterans.

Veterans as a whole have had a hard year. The parades, ceremonies and fundraisers they usually help with or partake in were greatly cancelled. Groups and organizations have closed their doors or have a very limited capacity. Then when you consider those Veterans who have had the other struggles in their lives, it has been unrelenting. Shelters have been closed to keep them from becoming
incubators for the virus. “Non-essential” medical and mental health appointments were canceled or postponed. Support groups were canceled, only to open back up in a limited capacity or in a virtual form. For many, a Veterans specific support group is a lifeline. These groups allow them to have a sense of purpose or a sense of comradery they cannot find elsewhere. They are no judgement zones that allow them to share in that special connection with other Veterans. Perhaps most importantly, they help connect those Veterans to important and vital services available to them.

One such Veteran-specific support group is called Veteran “X.” This group is specifically designed to help Veterans who have mental or physical health concerns, suffer from substance abuse and/or struggle with homelessness. Veteran “X” is not a new group; Thomas E. Pratt, a peer specialist at the Hampton VA Medical Center in Hampton Virginia, founded it in 2009. Since its founding, more than 3,000 voluntary participants have enrolled at the Hampton VA Medical Center alone. It has expanded to include a Veteran “Hope” program (female-only version). It has also grown to include dozens of other VA facilities from the Carolinas, to Pennsylvania, and as far out west as Colorado. Pennsylvania, specifically Western Pennsylvania, has become a popular location for this group. There are currently more Veteran “X” groups in Western and Central Pennsylvania than any other part of the country. Though these groups are greatly restricted right now, there is an optimism about new goings on.

From Sept. 28-30, there was a new group of facilitators being trained by Veteran “X” Master Trainer Cary Adkins. This group of men and women is hoping to expand Veteran “X” to a relatively new area of the state.

Within the walls and fences of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PA DOC), this year, on Jan. 7, State Correctional Institution (SCI) Huntingdon became the first certified Veteran “X” group within a correctional setting. They were certified by none other than Program Founder Thomas Pratt, Master Trainer Cary Adkins and Group Facilitator Sherri McGhee-Brenneman. The facility sent five staff to be trained in the summer of 2019. They then spent the next six months diligently working with Veteran “X” master trainers and the Veteran “X” Implementation Team to make it work within a correctional setting. During that time, the SCI Huntingdon facilitators learned a plethora of valuable lessons. They were able to share those lessons with these newly-trained group facilitators during their recent training. Veteran “X” Facilitators Kevin Eckenrod and Christopher Banks were able assist virtually. They shared their struggles and successes, along with answering questions for the new facilitators. The training also brought another exciting opportunity. Sherrie McGhee-Brenneman, a group facilitator and social worker at the James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center, and Christopher Banks, a group facilitator and veterans coordinator at SCI Huntingdon, were both honored during the training. They were both certified as Veteran “X” master trainers, only the third and fourth in the country, respectively. With these newly-trained
facilitators and newly-certified master trainers, there is a great opportunity to expand the Veteran “X” group over the next year and beyond.

Though this year has been full of unrelenting struggles, there is hope. Hope that the next year will be better than the last. That Veterans who struggle will be able to overcome their mental or physical ailments. Hope that Veterans will be able share in their normal activities and able to again share their special connection. If the men and women who were recently trained and certified have anything to do with it, that hope will become a reality.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

**Laurel Highlands Works Together to Support Food Banks**

The staff and inmates at SCI Laurel Highlands came together to support their local food banks.

There have been many people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and everyone, including the inmates, at Laurel Highlands stepped up to the plate. Pastor Peter Kaltenbaugh—of the Meyersdale Church of the Brethren and the Casselman Valley Food Bank—was a guest at a recent Fireside Chat. He expressed his appreciation and was presented with the checks from the Phoenix group and the staff.

They were able to make a monetary donation of $1,285.81 to the Casselman Valley Food Bank and $1,285.00 to the Berlin Food Bank. Staff also brought in food donations that were also donated to the cause.

From left: Clerk Typist 2 Penny Ogline, Superintendent Melissa Hainsworth, Pastor Peter Kaltenbaugh, Officer Wyatt, Deputy Superintendent for Facilities Management Robert Snyder.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~
Waymart Recognizes CO for Saving a Choking Inmate

SCI Waymart would like to recognize and commend Corrections Officer Heather Smith for her heroic act that took place on Oct. 1 for an inmate choking on a substance. She assisted in dislodging the substance.

Her quick and professional action prevented the incident from becoming very serious. In fact, she may have saved this person’s life. Her dedication during the incident was outstanding.

Pictured from left: Superintendent George Miller, CO Heather Smith and Deputy Superintendent for Facilities Management James Cirelli.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Waymart Recognizes Employees of the Quarter

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, SCI Waymart wasn’t able to honor its employees of the quarter until just this month. The wait was worth it though as the facility honored a pair of very deserving candidates.

The Employee of the Quarter for January-March is CO Chad Schuman.

Schuman is an Iraq war veteran who has served honorably in the U.S. Army. He is an asset to SCI Waymart working in the high-stress environment of the RHU and DTU for the last seven years.
Recently when on vacation in Sandbridge Beach, Virginia he was relaxing on the beach with his family when he saw several men pulling a lifeless body from the Ocean. Schuman responded to the medical emergency by immediately running to the man. Relying on his training, he moved the man to a safe place and began CPR which he continued until a pulse was present. He continued to deliver aid until a lifeguard arrived and took over care. Schuman’s quick and decisive actions in all likelihood saved a man’s life. His actions on the beach that day reflect great credit upon himself and the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections.

The Employee of the Quarter for April-June is Cosmetology Instructor Tami McCollum.

*Pictured from left: Superintendent George Miller, Cosmetology Instructor Tami McCollum, Principal Michelle Lipko and CCPM Dave Gorman*

McCollum was nominated for multiple reasons. Her actions and work ethic make her an exceptional employee, role model to inmate and compassionate colleague.

The position of cosmetology instructor encompasses far more than teaching a course. McCollum’s position entails teaching a state certification course in cosmetology, overseeing the shoeshine workers, scheduling haircuts for all offenders, submitting weekly tool reports, submitting requests for supplies, equipment, and instruments and submitting notarized quarterly hours to the State Cosmetology Board for licensing. In addition to scheduling the general population to receive haircuts every 28 days, she schedules for inmates in the Infirmary, FTC, ICU, and the RHU.

Most recently, McCollum has been instrumental in the reopening of the Cosmetology School, which was closed temporarily due to COVID-19. Prior to ordering the newly mandated supplies, she carefully analyzed their efficacy and cost. She is frugal, pragmatic and thorough in her problem solving. McCollum is able to work well with administration, maintenance, education and security staff.

She never complains and often goes beyond what she is required to do. For example, when the school reopened, she volunteered to work 6 days a week so
that SCI Waymart could be current with haircuts. Additionally, she often spends her prep period in the Infirmary or RHU to ensure that those inmates receive haircuts.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

**DATS Reconnects with Successful QBC Grad**

A Quehanna Boot Camp drug and alcohol treatment specialist happened to run into a QBC graduate at a Walmart recently and learned about his success since in reentry.

He was graduated in Nov. 2019 and is working for Walmart as a Maintenance Manager covering five Walmart locations. He said QBC was a life and marriage saver for him.

He is from Philly, but relocated to Clarion with his wife and children, adding that they just had their fourth child. He reports going to the YMCA and working out daily and that the Y is letting him start up a youth hockey team. He looks forward to being a mentor for those kids.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

**Waymart Welcomes Three New Pups and Receives Update on Recent Grads**

As of Oct. 9, the three Labrador retrievers SCI Waymart grew to know so well—Zee, Zyla and Zeeta—have moved on to their new placements. One of the dogs is going to an Outpatient Drug and Alcohol Treatment Facility to be a therapy dog and another to a little girl with special needs. After speaking to the director of New Hope Assistance Dogs, she is going to try and place Zyla with a Special Forces Veteran who is currently seeking a support dog for post-traumatic stress disorder.
Now to introduce the new pups! Waymart received three black Labs, and you can differentiate them by the color of their collars: Aries is red, Libra is purple and Gemini is pink.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Coal Township Receives Letter from Reentrant’s Family

SCI Coal Township received a nice surprise recently in the form of a letter from the father of a former inmate. In the letter, the father thanks Coal Township for their work in helping his son turn his life around. Here is the letter with identifying information from the address and signature line removed:
In the News...

Milton Hershey School Spotlight: Kenneth Eason ’83

Milton Hershey School published the following feature on SCI Chester Superintendent and MHS Graduate Kenneth Eason:

As a young boy, Kenneth Eason ’83 did not exude self-esteem. Growing up in north Philadelphia, Eason was bullied as a child and struggled with the passing of his father. His mother knew that he deserved more than the crime and violence in their neighborhood. She wanted more for her son and started talking to a colleague about Milton Hershey School.
A few months later, Ken and his mother visited the school and realized it was a great opportunity. At 10 years old, he enrolled at MHS and immediately inherited 10 brothers and a set of houseparents Mr. and Mrs. Miller from student home Revere.

“I remember my first day of enrollment like it was yesterday,” Ken said. “I immediately realized that this school was going to change my life for the better.”

Ken reminisces on the mentoring moments with his houseparents, the long hikes they took as a student home, and his enjoyment of the outdoors.

As a low-income child living in Philadelphia, Eason had not participated in extra-curricular activities before.

“One day, I saw a bunch of students playing street hockey outside and I looked at my house mom to see if I could join,” Ken said. “She encouraged me to go play. After that, I got involved with hockey and ice skating.”

Ken enjoyed his time at MHS and was very involved. He sang in the choir, ran in track and field, and participated on the football and baseball teams.

Mr. Schelhorn, an MHS teacher and coach, was a great influence on Ken’s life. He encouraged him to always do his best and those words of encouragement followed Ken throughout his life.
“My football coach, Mr. Schelhorn, pushed me and said things that were so impactful on my life,” Ken said. “I took his words and remembered them when I needed reassurance in my adult years.”

In the spring of 1983, Ken graduated from MHS, and at the last-minute, decided to attend Shippensburg University. After three semesters, he realized that he was missing the discipline provided by MHS and enlisted in the United States Air Force.

After his service, Ken worked a few temporary jobs until he realized he was searching for something more. He needed the same structure provided by MHS back in his life.

“One day, I decided to walk into State Representative, Roxanne Jones’ office, and introduce myself,” Ken said. “I told her I was looking for a career and needed her help.”

At that time, the State Correctional Institution was hiring. Ken started his career as a Corrections Officer at State Correctional Institution – Graterford (SCIG).

During Ken’s orientation, the administrative staff addressed the training class. There was a Superintendent that spoke about his commitment to the role and goals he set forth for himself. This speech resonated with Ken and reminded him of his childhood.

The Superintendent shared his experience of rising from a Lieutenant to becoming a Superintendent. As he ended his speech, he addressed the class with, “Who here is going to take my job?” Ken raised his hand and set his sights on becoming a Superintendent.
After eight years as a Corrections Officer, 13 months as a Sergeant, 16 years as a Lieutenant, two years as Major, 16 months as Deputy; he was recently promoted to Superintendent of State Correctional Institution – Chester (SCIC).

As a servant leader, Ken is involved in the day-to-day operations of his facility and takes it upon himself to get to know the inmates and help them fulfill better lives.

“I learned from MHS that a better life is out there for all of us,” Ken said. “I have a passion for helping others and that’s what brought me here.”

Ken is a passionate alumnus and tries to visit MHS whenever he is in the area. He has created an initiative to help inmates’ family members learn about MHS and encourages their children to pursue the opportunities. He refers students to the Enrollment Management & Family Relations office and hopes they can fulfill better lives.

When looking back at his life, Ken believes that his self-esteem, discipline, and motivation stems from MHS.

“I believe in myself because of MHS and the encouragement I received from everyone around me: coaches, teachers, principals, houseparents, and classmates,” Ken said.

In his words, “MHS didn’t just change my life—it saved my life.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~