

CAR AND BIKE SHOWS IN PRISON

By Jacob Barrett

Car shows in prison? I can imagine politicians of all persuasions rolling their eyes in self-righteous disgust. But at the Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP) members of the Lifer's Club have been holding them for more than 40 years to raise funds for non-profit organizations that provide funding assistance to at risk youth, victims of violence, and other causes that benefit society and promotes rehabilitation and restorative justice. The car shows have become a central part of the OSP programming for more than four decades.

In 2017, the Center for Hope and Safety (the Center), a non-profit that provides services for victims of domestic assault, stalking, and sex trafficking, working with members of the New Horizons Club, a club for prisoners serving more than 20 years at the Oregon State Correctional Institution (OSCI), got approval for the first ever car and bike show at OSCI, to raise money for the Center.



In September 2017 the car show was held at OSCI on the prison yard. Prisoners purchased meals and photos in an effort to raise funds for the Center. When all was said and done New Horizons raised enough funds for the Center to answer 10,126 phone calls on their hotline; more than 4,000 people walked into their advocacy center to meet with one of their highly trained advocates; and they were able to provide 3,070 nights of safety in their shelter.

In October 2017, OSCI had a change in the administration and the new incoming Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent cancelled the planned 2018 Car and Bike

Show, which the New Horizons Club was again planning to raise funds for the Center. Both the new Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent asserted the car show had no “documented rehabilitative benefits”.

This decision was a shock to both inmates and staff that help put the show together and also participated in the car show. This also shocked prisoners and staff at the Oregon State Penitentiary who had hosted a similar show for over 40 years.



The decision of the new OSCI administration demonstrated a lack of understanding and experience as to exactly what rehabilitation is. An important process in rehabilitation is “normalization”. This is part of the restorative process that expands the circle of stakeholders beyond just the government and the offenders to include situations that help heal and normalize individual’s lives beyond the crime.

are incentives attached to the donation. This is why politicians hold dinner parties to raise funds; or why many non-profit organizations will sell merchandise at a mark up to raise funds. In both cases people are more likely to contribute when they are receiving a benefit. That is simply human nature. In addition prisoners make very little in their prison job, from \$12 to \$72 on average, which is then used for calling family, hygiene supplies, canteen, and donating to social events like the car show, as well as other necessities.



The Car and Bike Show worked on similar principles. Many prisoners would donate to the Center without any incentives like a car show; however, the show itself expands its reach to prisoners who wouldn’t normally donate as well as creating a situation of “normalization”.

First, the car show offers an

opportunity for prisoners to see a hobby that can inspire prisoners to take up a hobby when they get out of prison that is positive and healthy. An experience a prisoner may not have had the opportunity before coming to prison.

Second, many of the cars and bikes being shown are the officers at OSCI. This is beneficial in a few ways:

- (a) It helps to humanize officers to many prisoners who often have been socially programmed to see staff as “enemies”. This allows prisoners to see staff as more than their uniform but as people who have lives outside the prison



- fences. I have personally watched staff, who has a deep interest in motocross use the bikes at the show to build a rapport with prisoners. Not only do prisoners hold the staff member in higher regard, it allows them to counsel prisoners when tensions might develop in the prison because prisoners remember and have a greater rapport with the officer. It becomes a tool for staff;
- (b) This also allows the officers to break from the usual prison conditions and sees prisoners as human as well, rather than an “enemy”. Seeing prisoners enjoying the day smiling and telling the officers they have a cool bike or car can have a positive effect on staff morale as well.

A car and bike show may not have as pretty sounding name as the Family First program at OSCI, however, it makes a larger contribution financially to the community. In any case, rehabilitation doesn't always come packaged in a pretty name; sometimes it is about how it helps rehabilitate harms in the community apart from the prisoner or the

prisoners family and the car and bike show made a greater contribution to the community than any other club with their fund raising.

One of the goals of the car and bike show is “normalization” (i.e. rehabilitation). The car and bike show is one of the best avenues to help accomplish that. It has worked at OSP for 40 years and proved to be a substantial help to the community. People may not understand the value of a car show at face value but when you take the time to look at the long term benefits the bigger picture of how it helps prisoners, staff, and the community as much as, if not more, than other activities and programs at OSCI.

