

Quakers from Tempe provide lifeline for federal prisoners

By David M. Brown

SPECIAL FOR THE REPUBLIC

Every month, three Tempe residents enter the federal prison in north Phoenix.

Ed Kearns and Carl Wallen, residents of Friendship Village, and Mary Ann Marcus do this as part of Prisoner Visitation and Support, a national interdenominational program whose carefully selected volunteers visit federal and military prisons in the U.S.

Based in Philadelphia, the prisoner outreach is the only such program approved by both the Bureau of Prisons and the Department of Defense.

The three are members of Tempe Friends Meeting, a Quaker worship house at 318 E. 15th St., Tempe. While Quakers have a long tradition of supporting prison reform and visiting inmates, the program welcomes participants from many faiths.

Across the nation, only about 300 volunteers like Kearns, Wallen and Marcus visit 3,000 prisoners a year at 100 prisons.

The volunteers are professors, laborers, teachers, clergy, medical personnel and homemakers. Some are retired, but many are still working. Their focus is meeting with prisoners who do not receive regular visits from family and friends, who want or need human contact, are in solitary confinement or on death row or serving long sentences.

"On my first visit with prisoners, they sometimes ask why I take time from my life and drive all the way out there to see them," said Wallen, a California native and professor emeritus of education at Arizona State University who has participated in the program for 12 years.

"My answer is simply that this is what God would have me do; I feel called to do it. And I am reminded of its importance by Matthew 25:39 about 'visiting in prison,'" he added.

Kearns said he believes in the power of change.

"I believe that people can change their lives. I believe that no one is beyond the possibility of redemption," said the Kentucky native and retired DuPont research chemist. "I want to give individuals a chance to talk to someone who's not from the prison population. If visiting helps them improve their lives, even if only



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Mary Ann Marcus is among about 300 volunteers who visit federal prisoners.

Besides, Kearns added, the program allows him a chance "to give back to those less fortunate than me."

A widow of 13 years, Marcus looks at her visits as a lifeline to prisoners.

"I've always had a strong feeling that many of the people in prisons must feel quite forgotten and unconnected with the outside world," she said.

"We provide a listening ear but have no particular ax to grind," she added. "We bring them some warmth and human love, and they share with us things to laugh or cry about."

Some who visit prisons do so with a religious, political or social program they want to share.

The Quaker program is different, Executive Director Eric Corson said, explaining that volunteers "let the prisoners set the agenda for what is discussed."

The group was started in 1968 by Bob Horton and Fay Honey Knopp, who had been visiting prisoners, many of them conscientious objectors, for years.

Kearns, Wallen and Marcus each see three to four prisoners for 45 minutes to an hour every time they visit the Federal Correctional Institution in Phoenix.

"It is our belief that prisoners need someone to relate to while in prison, so that they will gain hope to do well upon release," said Corson, referring to a 2008 study that found lower recidivism rates for those served by visitation programs.

Wallen added, "I have also seen positive changes in prisoners' attitudes after I have visited them for some time. ... I am continually reminded that we all have the spark of the divine within us; it just takes some people longer for it to shine through."

Information: www.prisonervisitationio-