

Anonymous donor helps pay bill for prisoners to go to college behind bars

By [Susan Goldsmith, The Oregonian](#)

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SALEM -- At Chemeketa Community College, they call him The Investor.

He's a Salem businessman, but he wishes to remain anonymous.

Nancy Green, director of corrections education for Chemeketa, took the man's call that day in 2007.

"He said he wanted to help and asked me to write up a plan," Green said. "I said to myself, 'Yeah, right. This is not going to happen.'"

But it did.

In the past two years, The Investor has donated \$294,000 so that kidnappers, bank robbers and other felons at three state prisons can go to college behind bars.

His latest gift, just in time for Christmas this year, is \$15,000 for women inmates at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville to buy books for themselves.

Oregon's educational offerings for prisoners have been limited largely to GED classes and vocational training since 1994. That's the year Congress stopped Pell grants for college tuition for prisoners, effectively shutting down every prison college program in the country.

More than four in 10 Oregon inmates go to prison without even a high school education. Nationally, the average is more than six in 10. Giving prisoners education while they're incarcerated is a key factor in preventing them from coming back once they're out.

One of the rare prison education programs in the United States is at a maximum security prison in New York, where Bard College, a small private liberal arts school, gives free college courses to inmates.

The Investor saw a "60 Minutes" story about Bard's program on television in 2007 and was deeply moved. He thought about it for a few days and decided to try to do the same thing in Oregon. That's when he called Green.

"He believes government can't do everything and private citizens need to step up," Green said. "He also believes people deserve a second chance because all of us have made mistakes in our lives."

No criminal history

The Investor has no personal experience with prisons. He has no criminal history, nor does anyone in his family, Green said. "As he sees it, this is a good investment in our community."

Max Williams, director of the state's Department of Corrections, agrees.

"At a time when public agencies and Oregonians are reeling from the effects of the current economic environment," he said, "it is even more impressive to know that one individual is investing in the safety of Oregonians and is supportive of creating opportunities for so many offenders."

The program isn't open to all prisoners. Inmates need to have at least 18 months of good conduct and be within five years of release. Once accepted, they must maintain at least a B average.

All three Salem prisons -- Mill Creek Correctional Facility, Oregon State Penitentiary and Oregon State Correctional Institution -- now have waiting lists of prisoners wanting college courses.

Nick McCarty, 29, is at Oregon State Correctional Institution in Salem, eight years into an 11-year sentence for armed robbery. He also has a 4.0 grade point for two years' work.

College for prisoners

An anonymous donor has been financing community college classes for inmates at three Oregon prisons.

Current enrollment:

Oregon State Correctional Institution: 31 students

Oregon State Penitentiary: 44 students

Mill Creek Correctional Facility: 20 students

Grade point average for all students 2007-09: 3.4

Requirements for participation:
18 months' good conduct

High school GED

Be within five years of release

Donor's latest gift: \$15,000 Christmas donation for books for women at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville

Donations from others: \$26,483, 2007-09, for textbooks

Contact: [Nancy Green](#), director for Corrections Education at Chemeketa Community College: 503-399-5050

"I want to be a civil engineer and plan on transferring to a four-year school when I get out," said McCarty, who is taking geology, art and American history. "I've never seen any other program in the prisons effect change like this."

McCarty doesn't know who The Investor is, but says, "It's humbling to be the recipient of his generosity."

The first two inmates to graduate from the program and get their two-year college degrees were guys who started their educations in the 1980s but never finished because the Pell grants ended, Green said.

"Most of the students come from families where college wasn't a priority," she said. "To be able to go to college is huge for them."

David Rogers, director of the nonprofit criminal justice organization Partnership for Safety and Justice, applauds The Investor's donation but says the larger issue of prison education is troubling.

"It's absolutely tragic that both adult basic education and higher education classes are so scarce in Oregon's prison system," he said. "Research shows that prisoners who attend school behind bars are less likely to be re-incarcerated, which saves a ton of money and helps people succeed when they return to our communities."

Today, 95 inmates are taking college courses. Some students have graduated. Others have been released and now are full-time students elsewhere.

"A genuine opportunity"

Joel, a 30-year-old former convict who was in OSP for robbery and kidnapping, was released in June and is now a full-time student at Clackamas Community College. Worried about how people might respond to his story, he asked that his last name not be used.

Joel earned a 3.9 average in his six courses at OSP. He said he plans to transfer to Portland State University and eventually start his own Internet company.

"This program was set up in a way that felt like a genuine opportunity," he said. "It was like being in a different place when I went to those classes. The other students worked hard to get into the program and wanted to be there. It was life-changing."

-- [Susan Goldsmith](#)