

I am sending this on behalf of **Kyle Hedquist**, a prisoner at OSP

December 10, 2019

Merry Christmas,

I am excited to see what the new year brings, 2019 has been great for 7th Step. We hosted a Re-entry Simulation, assisted with numerous classes including, Financial Peace, BluPrint for Success, Inside-Out DADs in English and Spanish, the only Spanish speaking parenting program in the State of Oregon! We also hosted many community organizations dedicated to helping prisoners when they return to their communities and we thank you for that! Of course we had our annual "Release Fair" bringing in dozens of resources for our population, as many of you know I continue to make copies and send them throughout the State prison system. Each of these classes are like a little gift, we also collaborated and started a storytelling group, Ground Beneath Us, which has been a great journey of self-discovery. We continue to reach out to other organizations and bring in programming like Phoenix Rising, and Co-Dependants Anonymous. With our volunteers we continue to make serious changes in OSP and the ODOC in it's entirety. Change is never simple or easy but it can happen when a community comes together with purpose.

I have included a great Christmas story, enjoy!

A Christmas to Remember

Kyle Hedquist

Christmas seems to simply have a magical sense about it. Maybe it's the cold weather or the snow, maybe family time spent by warm fires. I think it might just be the bountiful tables filled with food from Thanksgiving to Christmas! I guess the specifics get lost over generations. Traditions are born out of time spent with the ones you love. As a child Christmas time was a blessing, spent at Grandma and Grandpa's house. As an adult Christmas has taken on even a greater blessing. Spending time surrounded by fellow prisoners takes on a tradition of it's own. I find ways to reach out to my fellow brothers in blue and make them feel special, remembered, and maybe just a little bit normal.

Some of my fondest memories of Christmas are found in the prison's infirmary. Many men mostly recovering from some medical procedure, others suffering death from a terminal illness, all locked inside a small dormitory dating back to the 1950's. And here is where you find me, feeling festive I look for ways to put up decorations and try to convince the prison administrators to purchase a tree. I carefully unwind balls of decorations that we have reused over and over for the past 20 years. The twine and tinsel frays and breaks but we tie it back together again stringing along a line of knots to make the length from post to post. The red and green colors break through the plain beige walls. Everything in prison is color neutral; the brightly colored foil shines bright even after years of fading. Some of the men shrug their shoulders but others crack a smile. I know some of their stories and I know they miss their families and friends outside of these walls but we are here and it's Christmas time!

One year we had the largest tree that I can remember, not only did it fill the 10-foot ceiling but it was also wide. I loved it! The smells of pine and forest filled the floor. It was so large the decorations were spread far apart. I had this silly little string of lights that kind of wrapped around it. It was our tree and soon the patients came over to touch, and smell. I think they must have been thinking of their childhood or their children but smiles were everywhere. I had just enough room to reach the plug-in next to the bathroom doorway and wow, did that tree glow. I convinced the nurse on duty to turn out all of the lights and boy what a wonderful treat, reds, greens, blues, and silver twinkled. I will never forget the look on the faces of those men. But this was a prison and so the lights were back on and we were back in the business of getting men processed and back to their cellblocks.

A friend of mine, Dave, had knee surgery and was due back later that day. It may have been around 9:00 a.m. when a nurse informed me that he was on his way I was so excited to show him our newly decorated tree. I saw the wheel chair come off the elevator and I helped get him to his bed, he was right up front and the tree was looming large and bright. He was heavily medicated and didn't really want to talk he got in bed and went to sleep quickly. Often many men returning from the hospital are still under the effects of the anesthesiologist so it's not uncommon to have men sleep for a day or longer to regain their strength before returning to mainline general population. The next morning I came to work eager to see how my friend was faring. He was up and eating breakfast. He was staring at the tree; it was before dawn so the lights were dim and the tree was shining bright, I asked him, "What do you think of it?" he just muttered. I walked over and saw "Mike" he had also had some kind of knee surgery and was hobbling on crutches but the tree fascinated him. He would often just relax and enjoy the lights and smells it gave us. My friend, Dave was in slow recovery, he didn't like using the wheelchair and would often stumble around on crutches when having to go to the bathroom or shower. Dave was a big guy; he was easily 6'2" and at least 245 pounds. They had him on some good pain medications but they made him loopy and unpredictable, often he would decide to just get out of bed and walk, knowing full well he would fall we would surround him quickly to get him settled and back in bed. Anytime I left the floor I would make sure to tell the others to keep a sharp eye on Dave and not let him get up too fast.

I remember the morning it happened. I was busy cleaning the floors and had to go up front to get a fresh bucket of mop water. I know I told the others that I was leaving and to keep an eye on Dave. But there I was in the back hall with a hose and a bucket when I heard a crash, it sounded like a bookshelf had fallen! I quickly made it down the hall and found Dave, face down on top of the tree! He was wrapped up in decorations and lights. We were all laughing and helping him get up, he was not happy, blaming the "stupid tree". It took a couple of us to get his hulk off the floor. As I grabbed his wheelchair I heard a sound from the tree, a small, quiet, voice, "help" I froze, had the Christmas tree just asked me for help? I hesitated long enough to hear a faint "help" again and realized Mike was under the tree! His short frame fit perfectly under the tree and we all grabbed hold of the branches to get "help" for Mike. He was fine, a bit shaken up. I asked him what happened, he didn't know of course but what we put together was Dave had somehow got to the bathroom, undetected, and Mike was on his way to the bathroom, when in his words the tree "attacked" him. Once everyone was accounted for we laughed as we looked at our poor tree, now stripped of branches, the decorations lay broken on the floor and of course the

lights didn't work anymore. But I was determined so I cleaned everything up and left our tree right where it stood until after Christmas.

Christmas is full of memories of time spent with the people you are around. I love this time of year and I have fond memories, happy times spent with those I have grown up with. They may be liars and thieves but they are my family. So often I hear about how "difficult this time of year is" from staff and other prisoners but I have found ways to make others smile in my community. We would do well to think about how we can make others smile and bring about good cheer, isn't this what Christmas is suppose to be about? If I only think about what I'm missing "out there" I'm really only being selfish and Christmas is the "season of giving". This is the time of year I commit to reach out and give a gift of love, happiness, and good cheer to my brothers in blue.

See you all in 2020!

All my best,

Kyle