

Speaker gives hope to Oregon inmates

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Inmates at Santiam Correctional Institution listen as Mitchell S. Jackson reads from his book *Friday*, March 22, 2013. The former inmate of Santiam returned for the first time since his incarceration 15 years ago to read from his book and inspire current inmates to make the decision to never again return to the prison system. Purchase Image Zoom

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Mitchell S. Jackson, a former inmate at Santiam Correctional

Institution, returned to inspire current inmates to make the decision to never again return to prison. / KOBBI R. BLAIR / Statesman Journal



SAL0325-Prison Series I

Inmate Education by the numbers

40 percent: The number of offenders admitted to Oregon Department of Corrections custody who have no high school diploma or General Education Development (GED) certificate.
1989: The year the Inmate Functional Literacy Statute passed that governs the Oregon Department of Corrections' adult education system. The law, which was amended in 2007, requires that an adult

basic skills development program be offered to offenders in DOC custody.

800: The average number of inmates who complete the GED program each year

3,000: The number of incarcerated adults each year in 12 institutions across the state who are provided English as a Second Language, Adult Education and GED test preparation services.

Source: Oregon Department of Corrections

About this series

This story is the first of in an occasional series about the variety of programs within the Oregon Department of Corrections.

Mitchell S. Jackson has crossed the yard at Santiam Correctional

Institution many times, but never as a free man until Friday.

When he did so last week, the 37-year-old was nervous and excited. Just the day before, his mother had texted him this message: “Every decision you’ve made has brought you to this moment.”

Jackson has not been proud of some of those decisions.

But when he walked into the recreation room at the minimum-security prison in Salem and saw that every seat in the house was occupied by a body in a blue “Oregon Department of Corrections INMATE” shirt, he swelled with pride.

The prisoners in the room did not have to be there to listen to him speak. Jackson knew that from experience.

“It’s hard to describe a moment like this,” he said to his audience, “but it has to be one of the most proud moments of my life.”

Jackson was an inmate 15 years ago at Santiam, yet when he returned last week, it was of his own will. He had emailed Superintendent Paula Myers and asked whether he could share his story about the role that writing and education played in changing his life.

“He introduced himself and told his story,” Myers said to the 40 or so inmates in the room, all staring up at her on stage. “His story started where you guys are sitting. I hope today’s experience sparks in you (the realization) that there is hope for all of you.”

Jackson was raised in northeast Portland and had NBA dreams that never came to fruition — despite an impressive jump shot and vertical leap.

Jackson, instead, slowly climbed the academic ladder: Portland Community College then Portland State University. But during his junior year, he was arrested for selling drugs and sentenced to 16 months in prison.

“How am I ever going to get through this?” he remembers thinking.

There were plenty of men in the audience Friday, sitting where Jackson once sat, with those same doubts : How will I get a job? How will I stay out of prison? How will I take care of my family? How?

Ron Morales is serving time for assault and coercion. He is 49 and looking at a release date in 2015. He said he decided to attend Jackson’s presentation because he wanted to hear a success story firsthand. Morales realizes he will have barriers to overcome when he is released.

He said he has a custom car business to fall back on when he gets out, but he knows that many other inmates are not so fortunate. Morales, who is taking math and computer classes to stay on track, thinks education programs for inmates are crucial to reducing recidivism.

“If they’re not given any tools for when they get out, they’re just going to recommit a crime,” he said.

Jackson’s audience for the hour was full of questions: What are his writing tips? Who inspires him? What’s his relationship like with his mother?

Mostly, though, they wanted advice.

“I want to get out and stay out,” one inmate said.

A security guard’s radio crackled. An announcement rattled over the intercom.

When Jackson was released July 7, 1998, he decided never to return to prison. College helped him keep that promise to himself.

“I went back to college in the fall, and that’s one of the things that saved me,” he said.

Today he has three degrees, teaches writing at New York University and works as an entertainment journalist. He is the author of an e-book collection of fiction and nonfiction titled, “Oversoul” and the soon-to-be released novel, “The Residue Years.”

His decision to continue his education was made outside prison walls, but the Oregon Department of Corrections offers opportunities for inmates to participate in educational programs within the penal system.

Studies have shown that education and training programs within a correctional setting play a significant role in reducing recidivism and increasing employment for people on parole or post-prison supervision. Oregon’s recidivism rate is about 30 percent, according to the Department of Corrections website.

Oregon law requires a functional literacy program for everyone in custody, with the exception of people who are serving life sentences or less than one year; people who have been sentenced to death and inmates who are developmentally disabled.

On average, 800 inmates complete the department’s GED program each year.

Higher education programs also are offered. College Inside is a degree program designed to allow incarcerated students to obtain a two-year college degree that can transfer to a four-year university with a focus on general studies, business or automotive technology.

The program is provided through Chemeketa Community College and is funded by a private donor and by Chemeketa staffers.

Fifty-eight inmates have graduated from the program, and 61 degrees have been awarded since the program was founded in 2007, according to College Inside data.

According to data based on students who graduated prior to release from prison, 78 percent have gone on to work or attend college. Twenty-two percent of program participants are in transition. None have gone back to prison.

“You can’t just lock them away and forget about them, because they will move right next door to you, and what you want is for that guy to be a different and better person than the person who went to prison,” said Betsy Simpkins, College Inside program coordinator. “And the way we can do that is to give them the tools they didn’t have before. Higher education is the tool.”

Jackson, who took advantage of that tool outside prison walls, stood on stage in front of his inmate audience Friday, wearing his own clothes, knowing he could leave at the end of the afternoon.

The writer, author and professor opened his laptop computer and prepared to read the first few pages from his new book, which began as a journal he kept inside Santiam Correctional Institution — the place where he decided his story was worth telling.

He opened with the first sentence: “It’s years beyond the worst of it.”