



Prison ministry brings gift of faith to inmates

By Lee Strong

More than 200 people were celebrating Christmas in the school cafeteria. A sound system blared carols — interrupted by announcements and songs sung by children at the party. The walls were decorated with holly, wreaths and Christmas greetings.

The scene could have been taken from almost any Christmas party — except for the decorated bars sealing the room and the guards who stood at intervals along the walls, smiling but alert reminders that the celebration was taking place behind prison walls.

Nearly half the guests at the December 10 party were inmates at the Auburn Correctional Facility. Joining them were family members and volunteers, including many involved with Residents Encounter Christ (REC).

REC first came to Auburn eight years ago in the form of a three-day retreat incorporating witnessing, prayer, liturgy and song. Since then, volunteers have offered seven additional REC retreats in the prison. REC has also spread to other prisons in central and western New York, but Auburn remains its upstate base.

As a follow-up to the retreats, prisoners at Auburn participate in a weekly program called Fully Alive. Every Tuesday night, six REC team members meet with approximately 20 inmates for three hours of prayer, song and Scripture discussions. Team members also share with the prisoners more personal gifts of love, concern and faith.

"(REC) provides inmates with unconditional love of a very dramatic nature," explained Deacon Stan Zawacki, who staffed the first REC at Auburn, and has directed similar weekends at correctional facilities throughout upstate New York. "We go in and we love and we show how we've dealt with darkness in our lives, and through Christ and other people, how that darkness was eliminated. Through the witnessing of our stories and the interaction with the inmate and his story, barriers start to break down."

"The REC team shows that there are still people in society that are willing to put their lives on the line to give a person a chance," observed inmate John Collins. "What happens with (the team members) is they are willing to let a man develop into a person who cares, to develop a relationship with people and himself."

"A long time ago, we became more than friends, we became family," declared Julio Ortiz, inmate coordinator for the program. "(The volunteers') support, their love, their understanding, their non-challenging ways and their openness to all prisoners that attend those RECs makes you open your eyes."

The love and concern of REC team members over the years have produced dramatic changes in some prisoners.

Before he attended REC, Robert Torres had



REC volunteer Fritz Palleschi (left) and inmate Jeff Underwood chat during the Inmate Christmas Party held at the Auburn Correctional Facility on Saturday, Dec. 10. Upon entering the prison, Underwood couldn't read or write and had a stutter. He credits his involvement with REC and the support he received through the Fully Alive meetings with helping him resolve these problems.



Inmate Jesse Jackson and his family — his wife, Janet (second from left), children Ayana, Steven and Tashanda, and Lucille Jackson — spent time playing cards, chatting and enjoying their day together.



Julio Ortiz, an inmate at the Auburn Correctional Facility and inmate coordinator for the Residents Encounter Christ program, helps his wife, Patricia, and son, Julio II, slice into a special holiday cake Ortiz had the kitchen make for the prison's Christmas party.



Roberto Torres and Candida DeLuna announced their engagement during the Christmas party. Torres became involved with REC in September and speaks highly of the program. The couple plans a wedding sometime after his release in March.

such a violent temper that he regularly fought with other prisoners. In fact, he spent nine months of 1987 locked up because of fighting. Then, this past September, he went to REC.

"It's like walking into another time," Torres said. "It wasn't a part of the prison. It was full of peace. It was full of love. It was full of warmth. It was full of smiles. It made me be in touch with myself. It made me humble."

Torres and his fiancée, Candida DeLuna, became engaged at the Christmas party, and plan to marry when he is released from prison in March, 1989. DeLuna said that the sudden change in Torres surprised and pleased her. "His behavior is different — more understanding," she observed. "Before, he was a violent person, always getting upset for every little thing. Now he knows how to deal with a problem. He's achieved a lot for himself. He's a new man."

Jeff Underwood arrived at Auburn in 1981 unable to read or write and afflicted with a stutter. He attended the second REC in 1982, and has been involved with REC and Fully Alive since.

"I'd never seen love before," Underwood said in a soft, deliberate voice — without a trace of a stutter. He credited the REC team members with helping him learn to read and write and to overcome his speech defect. "I used to be so nervous," he said. "I think (my cure) is from these people who encouraged me to take my time."

Underwood calls REC team members his friends, and attributes his growth as a person to "the realness, the authenticity of the people sharing their life and experiences that I can identify with."

Inmates frequently speak of the personal way in which REC team members share with the prisoners during retreats and the Tuesday night gatherings. The team members' willingness to talk about their own struggles and weaknesses frees the prisoners to open up in ways they normally wouldn't in prison. "You can tell it's

sincere," Ortiz said. "You can't con a con. These people aren't conning. These people are for real."

Fritz Palleschi, coordinator of the Fully Alive program for eight years, believes the REC volunteers are simply being honest with the inmates. "It's not that we're special," he said. "We're just lay people. We have gifts and the Lord knows what those gifts are, and he uses them."

Team members' openness also help the inmates realize that they are not different from those living outside prison walls, Ortiz observed. "It's mostly the understanding of how other people and their relationships with God are basically the same thing as ours," he said. "Just because we're behind walls doesn't mean we are the only prisoners. People out there with their problems and hang-ups are prisoners, too."

In the process of interacting with team members, meanwhile, the prisoners rediscover their humanity. "What happens in prison is what I call a dehumanizing process," Collins said. "What REC does for you is build you back up. It builds a foundation to build your life back up to be a productive citizen. They teach you to love yourself."

Ortiz noted that he had seen hard-core, violent criminals moved by REC. "I've seen them cry," he reported, "not tears of regret, but

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