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Great-Grandmother Rehabilitates Inmates with Compassion, Respect

By J.W. Oliver

After nearly 20 years working to change inmates' lives for the better, Lincoln County Sheriff's Deputy Ellie Grover retired from full-time duty early this year.

As the first-ever programs coordinator for the sheriff's office, Grover works to decrease recidivism through various programs, the most visible being the inmate work crew.

Grover and her Sagadahoc County counterpart supervise Two Bridges Regional Jail inmates as they build trails, paint fire stations, and restore cemeteries, among many other projects for towns and various community organizations.

The beneficiaries of the program pay for lunch and materials only. A conservative estimate places the savings to the community at more than \$200,000 a year, according to Grover.

This figure does not include the savings for early release - the inmates earn a day off their sentence for every two days they work - or recidivism prevention.

One Lincoln County town hired two inmates upon their release after witnessing the quality of their work. "I haven't seen them back, so that shows me that it can be a success," Grover said.

The crew allows inmates with experience as carpenters or painters to use their skills and teach other inmates. The crew members also earn respect and a sense of accomplishment that helps prepare them to re-enter society.

The work "gives them a sense of worthiness, like they can accomplish something," Grover said. "A lot of these people are very, very talented and they have a tremendous amount to offer society."

Recently, a young man present for jury duty - Grover also serves as the county's jury officer - asked Grover if she remembered him. He was a former member of the work crew with "quite an extensive record."

"I haven't been back in four years," he says. "Can you imagine that?" Grover said.

"We just talked to him like a normal human being and showed him some respect and encouraged him to do better and he just did - on his own, obviously - but he listened to the advice he was given," Grover said.

She recalled another young man who served a nine-month sentence for vehicular manslaughter. "He was driving under the influence and his best friend was killed," she said.

"We worked with that young man from the minute he came in," Grover said. His sentence ended in the spring and he went to Lincoln Academy - near the crash site - to speak to the students before graduation.

"You could hear a pin drop," Grover said. "It was so amazing, the message he gave back to those students about drinking and driving."



Lincoln County Sheriff's Deputy Eleanor "Ellie" Grover. (J.W. Oliver photo)

The man completed 10 years of probation without incident and has become quite successful, she said.

Alcohol and drugs bring most inmates to the jail, according to Grover. Even those who face charges without an obvious connection to substance abuse sometimes commit the crimes as a result of substance abuse.

Grover takes a compassionate approach to the issue.

"I don't believe anybody sets out to be a drug abuser or an alcoholic," she said. "It's just one of those things - it seems like it's your best friend and then it becomes the worst nightmare you can imagine."

"I guess because I have kids myself I can put myself in somebody else's shoes," she said. "The old adage is 'There but for the grace of God go I.' It can happen to any of us." "If I had my way, I'd build rehabs instead of jails," she said.

Grover is originally from Waldoboro. Her family moved to Wiscasset when she was 8.

She married at 16, graduated from Wiscasset High School in 1965, and raised three children, mostly as a single mother. She waitressed at Ledges Inn and Le Garage for a total of 35 years.

A Le Garage co-worker and corrections officer, Kathy Williams, told Grover about an opening at the old Lincoln County Jail - a position with health insurance, which Grover had never had.

Grover joined the jail's full-time roster in 1996. She was 50.

The switch from the service industry to corrections was not without some culture shock.

"It was just a whole new lifestyle for me," Grover said. "I was very naïve about the world ... I thought everybody was good - but that part of my thinking helped me get through."

She was able to handle rare confrontations without force. "I treated people with respect and I expected respect back, and 90 percent of the time I got it," she said.

"I was the only full-time female deputy for many years," Grover said. Her fellow deputies have always treated her with respect, and almost all inmates have too.

"For the inmates, I think it helped, me being an older female. They all have mothers or grandmothers or sisters," Grover said. "A lot of them called me Mama Ellie, and it was a term of respect. They treated me like they felt like they wanted to treat their mother."

Around 1999, the county created the position of programs coordinator with the goal of reducing recidivism and hired Grover to fill it.

In 2000, Grover was the recipient of a Maine Department of Education award as the programs coordinator with the most inmates to earn their GED certificates in one year. Lincoln County Sheriff Todd Brackett named her Deputy Sheriff of the Year in 2012.

Today, Grover, 68, lives in Woolwich. She has three adult children, four grandchildren, and a great-grandson.

"I've enjoyed my work," she said. "It was time for me to be able to spend more time with my family. I've worked since I was 14 years old and I needed to be home enjoying my life."

She has trips to the Bahamas, Las Vegas, and Texas on her calendar, although she continues to work about 20 hours a week for the county and plans to stay "as long as they'll have me," she said.