Inside Mt Gambier Prison: Education and work in jail

ABC South East SA  By Kate Hill
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PHOTO: Mount Gambier Prison has devoted a large space to growing vegetables, which are cultivated by inmates and used in the prison's kitchens. (ABC South East SA: Kate Hill)

For those used to the hard imagery of American television prison series, the reality of what happens behind the walls of Mount Gambier Prison is quite different.

Just beyond the shadow of the tall perimeter fence is a man at a table, quietly strumming a guitar.

The tune is familiar — Johnny Cash's Folsom Prison Blues.

Catering for low and medium-security inmates, prison director Glenn Ahern said most inmates were involved in either an education or work program during their time there.

If the will is there, an inmate can emerge from their sentence with a TAFE certificate or woodworking skills, they could take art or guitar classes, or help run the prison's small library.

On a Tuesday morning, G4S Education Coordinator Peter Fox is ordering titles he is planning to add to the library's two bookshelves, currently stocked with everything from Lee Childs to Bryce Courtenay.

On the list are The Everything Father-to-be book, a book on painting techniques, and Romantic Poetry: 150 Poems for Love and Romance by Emily Browning.

"Some of the prisoners want to write nice poems to their partners," he said.

Crossed off the list is Chris Kyle's American Sniper — clearly, some books are allowed and others are not.

Art classes have also started at the facility, by a small group of prisoners who eventually want to enter their work in a prison art competition.

In the computer room, an inmate and Dr Who fan turns around his screen to show an intricate 3D cad drawing of one of the world's most recognisable science fiction symbols — a TARDIS.

Inmate Jason (not his real name) is 45 years old and said he had been painting for most of his life.

He brings out one of the art pieces he has been working on, an acrylic painting of an old Indian farmer that he has copied
from a 1980s photography magazine.

The likeness is surprisingly good.

Passing by, a guard quips "you missed his wrinkles".

The prison classroom

In a classroom that looks similar to any high school, Mr Fox watches as about 10 men wearing headphones tap away at calculators and write up assignments on computers.

With his easy smile and friendly manner honed from years of high-school teaching, Mr Fox brings an air of normality to the classroom full of convicted men.

PHOTO: Inmates can learn basic maths and English skills or even study for a TAFE certificate at Mount Gambier Prison. (ABC South East SA: Kate Hill)

He said skill levels in his classes varied dramatically.

In today's class, one of the men left school at Grade 5, while the man sitting next to him studied medicine at university.

This month, 12 students began their studies in a course that will be nationally recognised once their prison time is up — a TAFE Certificate III in Micro Business Operations.

The prison also plans on starting TAFE certificates in horticulture due to prisoner interest in the facility's ever-expanding vegetable patch, which is spreading over large areas of the grounds.

The garden has been planted by prisoners and the produce reaped goes straight back into the prison's kitchen to be eaten by inmates.

All in a day's work

The same morning in the woodwork shop, dust and woodchips fly as men saw, nail and sand lengths of raw wood.

Every man on the floor is wearing black, the initials MGP stencilled in white on their chests and there are locks on the tool cabinets.

A hammer or staple gun going missing means a lockdown and search of each man there.

A place in the wood manufacturing workshop is one of the most coveted at Mount Gambier Prison.

Out of the 386 inmates currently housed at the prison, there are just 30 spots, earned through trust and good behaviour.

The prison makes the experience as real as possible.

The men clock on at 8:00am, taking raw Tasmanian oak and locally sourced radiata pine and turning it into bed heads, chests of drawers, and wardrobes.

Here, I'm helping people who want to be helped.

Peter Fox, G4S Education Coordinator
Just as in any workshop, there are occupational health and safety regulations the men must abide by and a supervisor they answer to.

The items produced here are just the same as any you would see in high-end furniture stores anywhere in Australia and their main competition is Chinese imports.

Each fortnight, a large van pulls up at the entrance, it is packed full with finished products that are delivered to Adelaide wholesale furniture companies.

Those who buy the furniture will often be unaware of its source.

Prison director Glenn Ahern said money earned from the sales was channeled back into the prison’s workshop and other industries.

The men are paid for their work — about $5 a day — which goes into their prison account and can be used to buy cans of soft drink, cigarettes and phone money.

Their supervisor said the men enjoyed the manual labour aspect of the work and being able to use their hands to make something tangible and real.

Sweeping back a cover, Steve (not his real name) shows me a finished chest of drawers and runs his hands over the bevelled edges of the raw wood.

The prisoner, who has been here for the last four years, is clearly proud of his work.

Serving a sentence of nearly 10 years, he has also been at Yatala Labour Prison, Port Augusta and Port Lincoln, but said he hoped to serve out the remainder of his time at Mount Gambier.

In the outside world, Steve said he “knew a little bit about building” and hoped to put the skills he has learned to good use when he was released in five years’ time.

He wishes the time spent in the workshop would help towards a TAFE or equivalent qualification, but as yet, this is not available, but he still enjoys doing a hard day’s work.

Plus there is another factor.

“The time goes quicker,” he said, with a wry smile.

At 3:00pm Steve and the other men put down their tools, which are checked and locked away, and return to their cells.

Over the years, there have been some incidents where tools have been dropped or hidden, but Mr. Ahern said they have “never lost a tool that hasn’t been recovered”.

A person is more than their crime

The 150 staff who work at the prison often see a different side to prisoners, one beyond the title bestowed upon them in
As one forensic psychologist told ABC South East "a person is more than their crime".

Back in the classroom, Mr Fox is helping one of his students struggling with spelling in his assignment.

He believes the skills he is developing in prisoners are helping them find a fulfilling place in society upon their release.

"Education is the most important thing on the pathway to not reoffending," he said.

Mr Fox said he enjoyed his work and found it fulfilling to watch his students' progress.

"It's actually revitalised my interest in teaching," he said.

"Here, I'm helping people who want to be helped."

His favourite moments are seeing his students begin to grasp a difficult concept, such as fractions or verbs for the first time.

"Just to see when the light goes on — it's the little things."

PHOTO: Education Coordinator Peter Fox returns books to the Mount Gambier Prison library bookshelves. (ABC South East SA Kate Hill)

*Names have been changed to protect identities.*

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