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PICTURE THIS
Mid-State and Edna Mahan staff embody holiday spirit.
As we move through the heart of the season and approach a new year, I would like to thank each of you for your commitment to the New Jersey Department of Corrections and for your support as I transitioned into the position of Acting Commissioner. Together, we’ve made significant strides in a very short period of time.

The holiday season can be a trying time for you, our dedicated staff, as many of you sacrifice being with your families in order to keep our facilities safe and secure. Your efforts are deeply appreciated.

Now also is a time for renewed vigilance. For inmates, feelings of anger, depression, and remorse can develop during the holidays, which could result in misbehavior. These feelings could emerge in individuals who typically don’t have behavior issues. Please be on the lookout for such tendencies.

We are grateful for your professionalism and commitment, and I look forward to working with you and continuing our success and momentum into the New Year and beyond.

Happy holidays to you and your loved ones.

Sincerely,

Acting Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq.
Correctional Police Officer James Zeban is a longtime member of the custody staff at New Jersey State Prison.

ROAD WARRIOR

Officer’s Assistance at Accident Scene Takes Completely Unexpected Turn

By Matt Schuman

“Your instincts take over,” Zeban explained. “At that moment, you don’t consider the possible ramifications of chasing someone into oncoming traffic on Route 29.”

The unlikely episode began to unfold when Zeban, a training officer at the Trenton prison, stopped to render assistance at the scene of an accident involving two vehicles.

“A Ford truck had rear-ended a Toyota, and when I went to check on the individual who was rear-ended, he was unresponsive,” said the correctional police officer, a New Jersey Department of Corrections employee for more than 14 years. “Once his eyes started to flicker, I asked him a series of questions, as we’re instructed to do. Slowly but surely, he started to talk.”

By then, a pair of officers from the Mercer County Sheriff’s Office had stopped at the accident scene. One of the sheriff’s officers approached the Ford truck, which contained a driver and a passenger, neither of whom appeared to be injured.

The situation suddenly became unexpectedly dramatic and dangerous.

“I heard the sheriff’s officer yelling at the driver not to move, to stay in the car,” Zeban recalled. “Then,
the driver’s side door opened, and the driver darted out of his truck directly into the traffic on Route 29, with the sheriff’s officer in pursuit.”

That’s when Zeban’s instincts took over.

He, too, began chasing the driver, whom he and the sheriff’s officer were able to tackle on the road.

“The whole time, the driver was screaming in Spanish and trying to fight with us,” Zeban said. “The guys from the sheriff’s office worked for the Fugitive Task Force, so they had leg irons, which we were able to use before we could get the driver off the road and move him to a safe location.

“When the police showed up, we tried to put him into a squad car, where he might be more comfortable, but he kept fighting, so we had to hold him on the ground until an ambulance arrived,” he continued. “Luckily, one of the EMTs spoke Spanish and was able to calm him down a bit, which enabled them to secure him on a stretcher and take him to the hospital for evaluation.”

In retrospect, Zeban is thankful that he and the others weren’t stuck by a passing motorist while they were struggling on Route 29.

“One of the sheriff’s officers was trying to divert traffic, but it’s still pretty scary to think about what could have happened,” he admitted. “It almost seemed like a movie. In the back of my mind, I’m thinking, ‘Is this really happening?’ It was surreal.”

Once the situation was under control, law enforcement personnel spoke to the passenger in the Ford truck. That’s when they learned that the driver had been talking about killing himself for at least an hour leading up to the accident.

“The passenger said the driver told him to brace himself and prepare to die,” Zeban related. “Then he accelerated. As it turned out, the Toyota took the brunt of the collision.”

Zeban later heard that the driver of the Toyota was hospitalized, but fortunately, his injuries weren’t life-threatening, and he was released after a brief stay. Zeban was unsure of the status of the driver of the Ford truck.

What he was sure of, however, is that he did the right thing by stopping to help at the scene of an accident.

“I did what I’ve been trained to do: pull over,” said Zeban, who has taught CPR as part of his duties as a training instructor. “Anybody in this job, your first instinct is to help whenever and wherever possible. I would hope somebody else would do the same thing if an accident involved someone from my family.

“I’ve stopped for motor vehicle accidents in the past,” he added, “although I must admit, I’ve never experienced anything quite like this.”
Correctional Police Sergeant Michael Blaha (left) and Correctional Police Officer Kris Gordon become emotional when discussing Cops for a Claus.

HO, HO, HO

Mountainview Volunteers Brighten Holidays for Children and Their Families

By Matt Schuman

Kris Gordon and his family will always remember the 2009 Christmas season for all of the wrong reasons. Gordon’s daughter, Maya, who was less than nine months old, was hospitalized – at Morristown Medical Center and later Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia – with an illness that had medical professionals baffled.

During the young child’s stay at the hospital in Morristown, the family’s real-life nightmare was briefly, and thankfully, interrupted by a cluster of law enforcement officials.

“A group from the Morris County Sheriff’s Office was going from room to room with gifts,” recalled Gordon, now in his 13th year as a correctional police officer at Mountainview Youth Correctional Facility.

“They left a ring stacker for my daughter. It was such a beautiful gesture, and it got me thinking,” he continued. “I figured if the
The sheriff’s office could do something like that with a relatively small staff, why couldn’t we do something similar at Mountainview, with hundreds of officers?”

The following December, Gordon and some of his workplace colleagues introduced the Cops for a Claus toy drive, a facility-wide labor of love that’s been in effect every year since.

Cops for a Claus relies on donations of toys or cash largely from the Mountainview staff. All proceeds are used to purchase additional toys. Then, on a Friday morning a week or two before Christmas, Gordon and a cast of fellow volunteers, ranging from a handful to a few dozen, distribute the toys in the pediatric unit of a hospital within a few hours of the prison.

The volunteers have visited St. Barnabus Medical Center in Livingston and Beth Israel Medical Center in Newark on multiple occasions and numerous other venues at least once. This year, on December 14, Cops for a Claus distributed toys at St. Joseph’s Regional Medical Center in Paterson.

“Seven of us wore costumes, which the kids really seem to enjoy,” Gordon said. “I was Santa.”

Other characters included Rudolph, the Gingerbread Man and Anna and Elsa from the Disney film “Frozen.”

“Every single year, it’s absolutely heartwarming,” said Correctional Police Sergeant Michael Blaha, a longtime Cops for a Claus volunteer. “It gives kids and their families something to believe in while they deal with whatever they’re forced to deal with. Blaha and Gordon aren’t the only volunteers who become emotional when contemplating their involvement with Cops for a Claus.

“Some of the toughest guys I know have taken part in these hospital visits,” Blaha related. “As soon as they walk into the room and see the kids, everything just melts away. It’s so difficult for anyone to come to terms with what these kids and their families are going through, especially during the holidays. So if we can do something to brighten their day, it’s incredibly rewarding.”

Yet another source of pride for the Cops for a Claus volunteers is the program’s impact on the New Jersey Department of Corrections.

“First of all, the administration and staff at Mountainview have been totally supportive,” Gordon said. “I believe virtually everyone in this Department wants to be seen in a positive light, which is why it’s such an honor to be able to give back to the community when the opportunity presents itself. When we’re in the hospitals giving out toys, everyone sees all of the officers wearing their uniforms. Then they talk to those of us wearing costumes and find out we’re correctional police officers as well. It reflects well on the entire Department.”

Gordon, whose daughter underwent two bone marrow transplants but is now in excellent health, proudly reported that Cops for a Claus has become a permanent fixture on both the Mountainview calendar and his own calendar.

“It’s simple,” he explained. “One year at the hospital, a woman asked me why I do what I’m doing. I said, ‘Because I’ve been where you are.’ I won’t forget that.”
Princeton students face off with inmates during the “Ivies vs. Inmates” chess competition.

CHECKMATE

Prison Chess Competition More Than Just a Game for Both Inmates and Students

By John Cokos

Princeton University students Jacob Berman and Dylan Mavrides waited inside the gym at New Jersey State Prison along with four fellow student chess club members. Forty-nine inmates quietly filed into the room while officers kept watch. Berman and Mavrides, both of whom have visited the prison before, scanned the room for familiar faces.

“I had a chance to connect with many of these guys on a personal level,” Berman said. “We joked around a little and trashed talked each other.”

In the hours that followed, the students competed with inmates in a semi-annual event known as the Ivies vs. Inmates chess competition.

Both the inmates and students look forward to the competition, which has garnered attention from numerous media outlets, ranging from the Star Ledger to Sports Illustrated.
The setup of the games, known as a simul in the chess world, has each student playing eight or nine opponents at the same time.

To say every inmate and student was completely engrossed in the game is an understatement. The level of focus brought the crowd’s initial murmurs down to almost complete silence, where each player’s facial expressions were more telltale than words.

So why do two groups of individuals from such different walks of life want to spend time together?

“It’s a love of the game,” said John Marshall, a Princeton-area actuary who has helped coordinate the event since its inception in 2001. “The contrast between these two groups of players, who are unlikely to meet anywhere else, is fascinating.

“It proves that chess is a great moderator,” he added. “It cuts across all social strata and places your focus solely on those 64 squares.”

For some of the students, the event began as simply another opportunity to play chess, but then turned into something more.

“The first time was mainly because I loved chess club and I wanted to be as engaged as possible,” said Mavrides, who has visited the prison four times to play chess. “It’s evolved into a fun tradition where I get to see a tiny bit of a world that I am pretty disconnected from day-to-day and help the prisoners have a good day every once and a while.”

Many of the inmates are skilled chess players, and the competition with the students is the pinnacle of being a member of the prison chess club. Interacting with the students offers a challenge and a connection to the outside world.

“These students are very high-caliber players and challenging to play,” said an inmate who asked to remain anonymous. “They also bring a wide range of backgrounds, and they leave with a different perspective of the men behind these massive walls.”

Prison officials note that prison chess players are less likely to behave insubordinately, stating the game reinforces concepts like discipline, respect and patience.

“All of the players were very polite and sportsmanlike,” said Berman, who has been playing chess since age 2. “They’ve expressed excitement and gratitude for the opportunity to compete with us and to get to know us.”

Not unlike the game of chess itself, the competition has offered a unique opportunity for both parties to learn from each other.

“It demands you place yourself in someone else’s shoes – to explore someone else’s motives,” Berman said. “It’s an incredible reality to observe, and I’m still trying to wrap my head around what a novel experience this has been.”

“It’s a love of the game. The contrast between these two groups of players, who are unlikely to meet anywhere else, is fascinating.”

BOOK IT

What’s So Funny? NJDOC Employee Compiles Collection of Stories and Essays

By Matt Schuman

The process begins with a simple idea.

“If I have an idea, I’ll immediately write it down, whether it’s on my cell phone or even on a Post-it Note,” Patrick Lombardi related. “I’ll include as many details as possible. Then, as soon as I can, I’ll go back and flesh it out into an actual story. From there, I can make changes, edit it and try to improve it any way I can until I’m comfortable with what I have.

“I learned a long time ago that the key for me is putting the idea or concept on paper right away,” he continued. “If I don’t, I’m guaranteed to forget it.”

In August, the 25-year-old Lombardi, part of the staff of the New Jersey Department of Corrections’ Office of Employee Relations, self-published his first book, “Junk Sale,” a collection of 16 short stories and essays. “Junk Sale” is available on Amazon as both an eBook and paperback.

The common thread in each entry is a large dose of humor.

“It’s satisfying when someone tells me the book is a funny and engaging read,” said Lombardi, whose writing style is heavily influenced by well-known humorist David Sedaris.
“Now, if somebody says, ‘This book really made me think,’ it leaves me wondering, because I definitely didn’t try to come up with complex characters and situations,” he deadpanned. “I just wanted to make the reader laugh and hopefully enjoy what he or she was reading.”

Some of the stories in the book are loosely based on personal experiences. “Don’t Hire Me” is an amusing account of the interview process for a highly undesirable job. “Bulberry Road” was inspired by a thoroughfare the author passed each day during his commute to work.

Other entries, such as “Prized Possessions,” had almost nothing to do with Lombardi’s real-life experiences.

“I wrote ‘Prized Possessions’ about a kleptomaniac,” he said. “I intentionally made the character the polar opposite of me. In fact, when I was younger, my mom told me that if I stole something, that item would bring me bad luck. That warning always stayed with me, and I thought about it while I was writing the story. I also thought about the concept of an individual roaming through someone else’s empty house, with access to whatever he wants.”

Lombardi’s original plan was to set up an online site to post his stories and essays, but when a friend self-published his own book of stories, novellas and poems, Lombardi was sufficiently motivated to publish a book of his own.

“I thought it would be nice to physically hold a book whose words I had written,” he explained.

That, however, wasn’t his sole motivation.

“I certainly didn’t do this to make money or to become famous,” he said with a chuckle. “The thing is, I listen to indie music a lot, and so many of those guys are able to make an enormous emotional impact on listeners, even though they’re not household names.

“In a similar vein, if one person – or more than one person – really enjoys reading this book, I’ll feel as if I’ve accomplished my goal.”

The book doesn’t include any stories about the NJDOC, largely because virtually all of the content was composed before he came to work for the department more than two years ago.

“If ‘Junk Sale 2’ eventually comes out,” he speculated, “maybe things will be different.”

“It’s satisfying when someone tells me the book is a funny and engaging read.”
Correctional Police Lieutenant. Michelle Jones plans to travel and finish work toward a degree in psychology when she retires.

FIVE QUESTIONS

with Correctional Police Lieutenant Michelle Jones

Nearly 25 years ago, Correctional Police Lieutenant Michelle Jones of Bayside State Prison was a nursing student and an employee at an insurance company. For the Newark native, a career in law enforcement was the furthest thing from her mind.

Today, Jones is one year away from retiring from the New Jersey Department of Corrections and a newlywed with plans of traveling and finishing work toward a degree in psychology.

Jones recently discussed her journey with John Cokos of the Office of Public Information.

How did you come to choose a career in corrections?

I was assigned as a juror in a complex murder case. I watched how the attorneys interacted with the jury and each other. I observed the defendant’s body language and responses to questioning. I was so intrigued by the court proceedings that I asked a sheriff’s officer how I could get a job like his.

I took the civil service test hoping to get a job in the court, but I was certified for corrections. I have to admit, I was disappointed. I soon learned the Department of Corrections was the better opportunity, and I have never regretted my decision.
Can you give a snapshot of your soon-to-be 25-year career with the NJDOC?

Northern State Prison was my first assignment. It’s funny. I’m a Newark native, but I was oblivious to the fact that Northern State was built along a highway that I often traveled. My start there was new and exciting and very different from my 10 years with the insurance company. I then transferred to South Woods State Prison when it was still in its early stages of development. Throughout the years, I worked in many different areas of South Woods, with the Extended Care Unit being my favorite.

I received my first promotion to sergeant at Southern State Correctional Facility. Southern State was totally different from Northern State and South Woods because of its dormitory-style setting.

I was assigned to the opening of the “blue roof” minimum security building at Southern State, which ran the drug treatment program. I remained there for five years.

I returned to South Woods after making lieutenant.

I like change, and I wanted new challenges and a change of pace for my last few years in the Department, so I took a voluntary transfer to Bayside State Prison. I worked as the Operations lieutenant and at the Ancora Psychiatric Hospital satellite unit before its closing. Now I’m the administrative lieutenant at the main facility.

Each institution has offered a different experience. While I’ve met many great people at each facility, Bayside is like a big family. The camaraderie here is amazing.

What is a standout memory you have from early in your career?

The blizzard of ’96. I had to stay at work for nearly two days. It was a humbling experience and made me realize how much I took my freedom, the amenities of home and time with my family for granted.

To What Do You Attribute Your Longevity?

A few things. Being assertive. My quiet demeanor is sometimes taken as a weakness, and I have been tested by the inmates over the years. For instance, as a female, inmates will constantly attempt conversation and try to “woo” you with compliments. We have to shut them down from the start and let them know we will not tolerate that behavior.

I have always been and still am open to advice, because there is always something to learn. I’ve learned a great deal from observing the actions of others.

I also have an associate’s degree in criminal justice, and a few of my professors worked in corrections and in other law enforcement fields. So it has been interesting to see how things I’ve learned in class have tied into my work experience.

Do you recommend employment with the NJDOC?

A job in corrections is not for everyone. I do feel it is a great opportunity, but it can be as difficult or rewarding as you make it. When the application comes out for the civil service test, I do spread the word, though – from calling family members and friends to letting gas station attendants at the Wawa know.

When I encounter recruits at the prison, my advice to them is the same that I learned at the academy. Be firm, fair and consistent.

“I have always been and still am open to advice, because there is always something to learn.”
CONGRATULATIONS,  
CLASS 244

NJDOC welcomes new correctional police officers to Department.

ABSALAM, LYRIQUEA. A  
ALEXY, JENNA R.  
ALLEN, KIMBERLY E.  
ALTE, GAVYN R.  
AMITRANO, GREGORY N.  
ANTON III, GREGORY J.  
AQUINO JR, ANTONIO  
AROCHO, BRLAN  
AUSTIN, COREY M.  
AYALA, BRYANT I.  
BARONA JR, JOSEPH A.  
BASQUIN SR, JOHN H.  
BITONDO, ANTHONY V.  
BOOKER, QUINDORA C.  
BOSTROM, EVAN D.  
BOSWELL, MARLIN F.  
BOYER, ERIC J.  
BRENAN, JAKE P.  
BRENZ SR, DIEGO A.  
BROOKS, CARLOS J.  
CABRERA, JAVIER  
CARBONE JR, MARTIN  
CASTALDO, ZACHARY E.  
CASTILLO, MICHAEL A.  
CHAMBERS, ANTONIO J.  
CIESLIK, JUSTIN A.  
COLORADO, MELISSA  
CONNELLY, TYLER G.  
CORDOVA, KELVIN J.  
DANIELS, JULIAN M.  
DARCY, STEPHEN A  
DEGRAZIO, STEPHANIE  
DEJESUS, MICHAEL  
DEMILIO, MATTHEW J.  
DIAZ JR, MARINO  
DORT, CHARLES F.  
EBERSBACH JR, FINN D.  
ESPERIENCE, DIEFFE  
EVERETT, RAHQUAN  
EWART, VINCENT A.  
FAJARDO, JUDIS M.  
FELSBERG, CARINA  
FERREIRA, CI-HRISTOPHER  
FERRETTI, JOSEPH P.  
FLORES, CHRISTIAN M.  
FOOTE, MARKEE J.  
FRANOLICH, WILLIAM J.  
FUENTES, RICARDO  
GANCIA, JOHN D.  
GARCIA, KEVIN  
GARCIA, GONZALEZ JONATHAN  
GEDEON, EDWIGE G.  
GOMEZ, VICTOR A.  
GONCALVES, TIAGO J.  
GONZALEZ, RUBEN  
GRANADOS, HENRY M.  
GRANT, JAMES W.  
GREER, TYQUAN L.  
GUAMAN, MELENDES LUCIANO  
HAJRA, QENDRDA  
HAMMOND, III BRUCE L.  
HINNANT, CASANOVA R.  
HOLDER, TROY W.  
HOMAN, ALEXANDRIA N.  
IBARRA, DEIVIETRIO  
JANNUZZI, GARETH  
JIIVIENEN, STEVEN J.  
JOHNSON, JOSIMAR R.  
JOHNSON-WHSSON, TREY A.  
JOSEPH, SAMUEL J.  
KELLY, REGINA  
KOSTER, MALLORY C.  
LANGER, MAX J.  
LASISI JR, BABATUNDE A.  
LEBRON, ELVIA
LEMBECK, RYAN D.
LICEA, DAYBER E.
LHK, DOUGLAS A.
MAGUIRE, BRIAN T.
MARZULLO, JOSEPH A.
MAZURA, EDWARD P.
MESSINA II, JOHANN A.
MILLER, PHILLIP L.
MOLINA, BRIAN
MORALES, JOEL
MORRIS, SHANNON T.
MOSLEY, SHAWN C.
MUNN, LATASHA K.
NACCARATTO, VANESSA
NAGY JR, RICHARD J.
NORIEGA, ALDAIR A.
OCEAN, KERVENS
ORTIZ, ROBBY
OWOOFE, SUNDAY T.
PASCUAL, ABRAHAM
PASSARELLA, MICHAEL A.
PATRICCO, WILLIAM D.
PEREZ, DENNIS
PERISSE, VICTORIA M.
PERVAIZ, ZARQ
RAMIREZ, ESTEBAN
ROBINSON III, ROBERT W.
ROMERO, RAUDY L.
ROMULUS, ALEX
ROSE, CHRISTIE M.
ROSENTHAL, JEFFJ.
SANCHEZ, RICARDO P.
SANJUAN, CHRISTIAN D.
SEIFERT, KYLE A.
SENYON, NYANATE F.
SERRANO, GALARZA KRISTIAN
SMITH, ALLEN M.
TEEL JR, BRIAN C.
TINEO, DANIEL A.
TORRES, DIANA G.
UMANA, JEFFREY
VARGA, HUNTER J.
VARGAS, KRISTEL E.
VASQUEZ, RUBENNY A.
VAZQUEZ, ANTHONY Q.
VILLAREAL, ROBERTO Y.
VIOLA, ARMOND M.
WALLACE, TARA M. E M
WILLIAMS JR, ARNOLD
WILLIAMS, KHALID T.
WILLIAMS, PEYTON B.
WILLIS JR, MAURICE V.
WOO, EDMOND A.
YOUNG, TEIRRAH A.
ZAMBRANA, JUAN C.

It’s graduation day for Class 244.
Mid-State Correctional Facility staff came through with an abundance of charitable donations throughout the holiday season. They kicked off the season by gathering several large boxes of Thanksgiving food items during their second year participating in the Home Front Thanksgiving Drive.

The facility’s charitable efforts continued in December when they adopted a family through the Kelly Anne Dolan Memorial Fund. The family’s eldest son suffers from severe hemophilia, resulting in a heavy financial burden. In response, employees rallied to create the best possible Christmas for the single mom and her three children, ages 5 to 9, by providing every item from each child’s wish list.

At Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women, families gathered, a choir provided seasonal song, and Santa distributed gifts during the Title XX Mother and Child Holiday Celebration. New Jersey Department of Corrections Acting Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq., and several members of his staff were among the guests at the event.