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Harvest Now has forged an affiliation with the Bayside State Prison Horticulture Program.

IN HIS HONOR
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Cover photo: Among those taking part in Career Day at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women are John Harmon of the African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey and Marjorie Perry of MZM Construction and Management Company, Inc.

Inside Corrections is a monthly publication of the Office of Public Information at the New Jersey Department of Corrections.

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INSIDE WORD

with Acting Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq.

July 30 is among the most important dates on the calendar for the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC), which will be holding two distinct, yet related events.

First, a memorial service commemorating the 22nd anniversary of the death of Officer Fred Baker will be held at Bayside State Prison. As always, the memorial service will begin at 7:55 a.m. NJDOC staff will be joined by dignitaries and, of course, friends and family of Officer Baker.

On that tragic day in 1997, at precisely 7:55 a.m., Officer Baker was fatally stabbed by an inmate at the prison in Leesburg. The NJDOC lost an exemplary officer, and the Baker family, whose unyielding dignity and bravery have been truly inspirational, lost a loving husband, father, brother and son.

Later in the day, at noon, on the grounds of the Department’s Central Office headquarters in Trenton, the NJDOC will mark Correction Officer Day with a ceremony in honor of our entire custody staff. The ceremony will pay special tribute to those who lost their lives in the line of duty. In addition, we will recognize the recipients of this year’s Departmental Service Awards.

Back in 2012, legislation was signed into law designating July 30 as Correction Officer Day in New Jersey. It is no coincidence that Correction Officer Day is observed on the date that Fred Baker made the ultimate sacrifice.

I cherish this opportunity to publicly let our officers know how much they are appreciated.

Sincerely,

Acting Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq.
Women at Edna Mahan Attend Career Day

By Matt Schuman

Amazon hasn’t forgotten about the women who comprise the offender population at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women. Neither has Macy’s. In fact, none of the dozens of businesses and agencies from across the community who were represented at Career Day, held June 13 at Edna Mahan, have forgotten about the women housed in the Clinton facility.

“I’m extremely proud that so many companies and community partners came to the prison, experienced the event for themselves and are willing to offer the women potential opportunities once they’re ready to leave,” said Dr. Darcella Sessomes, New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) Assistant Commissioner for Programs and Community Services.

“It’s so encouraging to know the event was as impactful as it was,” she continued. “The women were able to walk away feeling that they had valuable information about services available in the community and to know which companies may be willing to take a chance on hiring them. Getting that much positive feedback is priceless.”

Sessomes was equally heartened by reports she received from the visitors.

“The Macy’s representative told someone from my staff that this was among the best job fairs she’s attended, because the women were so engaged,” the Assistant Commissioner related.

For Jovani Diaz, one of hundreds of Edna Mahan inmates who attended the event, the gathering was especially relevant, since her release date was less than two weeks after Career Day.

“I was really looking forward to this, because I
want to take advantage of any opportunity that could help me become a better person and a productive member of society,” she said. “It’s gratifying to realize that there are people out there who are willing to give me a chance, an opportunity to show how much I’ve grown as a person. Now it’s up to me to take advantage of these opportunities.”

Back in 2005, Esperanza Maldonado was an inmate at Edna Mahan. On this day, however, 14 years later, she was seated at the Sansone Auto Group table, discussing employment possibilities with current offenders.

“For me, this is an opportunity to come back here, share my story and let people know that being an inmate here isn’t the end,” she stated. “If you decide you want more and that you’re willing to change, there are people who can help. When I was here, I was making $1.45 for picking up trash on the highway. Now I’m making six figures, so you can’t tell me there’s no hope.”

At the table to Maldonado’s immediate right was Tracey Syphax, a successful entrepreneur and author who was incarcerated in the early 1990s.

“There was a time when I was in the same situation as these women, so I’m living proof of what’s possible once you leave prison,” he said. “All of these folks from the community are here because they’re willing to help these women make the transition back into society. I tell them that it’s not necessarily going to be easy, but take advantage of what’s available, and don’t be afraid to work for what you want.”

Variations of Syphax’s message – that hard work and determination are prerequisites to future success – were repeated by numerous visitors throughout the event.

Marjorie Perry, President and CEO of MZM Construction and Management Company, Inc., encouraged the offenders to stay focused and not to be afraid to fail.

“When you encounter rough times, and you will, make sure you have people around you who will pull you up and out – and not remind you how bad things are,” she said. “Education is essential. You can always go to the library. You can always study. There are so many things you can do online. Don’t sit around waiting for somebody to tell you what to do. Go out there, and be proactive. Make it happen.”

Perry did, indeed, make it happen for herself.

“I’m a black woman in the construction trade,” she noted. “Sometimes I’m the only black woman in the room. I had to learn the game, understand the language, try again if I failed, go back to work on my civil engineering degree, go back to work on my MBA. All of these things were steppingstones to where I am today. When the women here ask if they can succeed, I tell them yes. Absolutely.”

Providing materials on behalf of the NJDOC’s Office of Community Programs are Ellen Sava (left) and Kerry Pimentel.
John Harmon, Founder, President and CEO of the African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey, is committed to persuading inmates to believe in themselves and what they can accomplish. He is well aware the task can be challenging.

“People have value, but they don’t always understand their own worth,” he said. “We’re here to reassure them that there is another life after this life, but if you don’t work to become a productive member of society, you’re going to come back here.

“Outside of here, there is the potential for a tremendous upside, but there are steps that need to be taken. It’s not going to be easy, but you can do it. Use the tools available to you. Leverage the resources. This room is filled with people who want to help. If you’re receptive, it could be a different day when you leave here.”

One of the people who was available to help the offenders was Weldon Montague of the New Jersey Department of Labor, who announced that every inmate who attended Career Day would be bonded for up to $50,000. Thus, in a case of property loss due to the employee, the employer would be reimbursed.

“It benefits both the applicant and the employer,” Montague explained. “Bonding gives an employer piece of mind as well as an incentive to hire you. It’s a win-win. These women may have made a mistake in the past, but let’s look forward, not backwards.”

The New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission created a Driver History Abstract for each participant. The Abstract includes information on moving violations, points, accidents and license suspensions.

“Everywhere you look, there are resources,” said inmate Jade Fanz. “It gives us hope.”

Edna Mahan Administrator Sarah Davis has heard similar sentiments from large numbers of participants.

“The feedback,” she said, “has been overwhelmingly positive.”

NJDOC Chief of Staff Suzanne Lawrence noted that employment fairs previously were held at Northern State Prison and South Woods State Prison. In keeping with the Department’s commitment to offender reentry, she reported that additional events will be held in the future.

“People realize that offenders are returning to virtually every community,” she said. “By supporting them and helping them to succeed when they rejoin their communities, we’re enhancing public safety. Furthermore, we’re demonstrating that every individual matters.”

Macy’s was one of the many employers to participate in Career Day.
Despite all the positive exchanges taking place during the June 13 Career Day at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women, one inmate, who asked that her name not be used, was admittedly skeptical.

“I didn’t think any of the businesses there would actually be interested in hiring a former inmate,” she said.

Thinking all the pomp and circumstance was just that, she perused the room, quietly collecting pamphlets and business cards from potential employers.

After her release from Edna Mahan only a few weeks later, the woman decided to find out whether any of the businesses that had visited Edna Mahan on Career Day were truly interested in hiring a former inmate.

Shortly after sending an email to one of the businesses that was represented at Career Day, she received a response inviting her to discuss the possibilities of a new career.

Rich Liebler, Chief Administrative Officer of the organization that hired her, Sansone Auto Group, has a far-reaching history of helping former inmates.

“People don’t always get to choose the environment they live in, and that leads to circumstances that are not always their fault,” Liebler said. “But I have found you can profoundly change someone’s life through a job.”

In addition to specific job training, the company also prepares former inmates with crucial skills, such as resume writing techniques and effective communication.

Former Edna Mahan inmate Esperanza Maldonado, a sales consultant who has been with Sansone Auto Group since 2006, has been mentoring the new hire.

“Being released from prison is an extremely overwhelming experience,” Maldonado said. “A support system and the knowledge that someone believes in you is the most important thing an ex-offender can have.”

Although she is still in training, the recent addition to the employee roster at Sansone Auto Group says things are going well.

“I love it,” she said. “I’m so thankful that during a time I expected so many doors would be shutting, they opened one for me.”
Correctional Police Sergeant Derek Slimmer was in his garden at home when the idea of a gardening project at Bayside State Prison entered his mind.

After some research, Slimmer, a devout gardener, decided to put his initial thought into action. He came across Harvest Now, an organization that promotes knowledge and use of local foods.

Slimmer wrote a proposal and forwarded it to his immediate supervisor. A few months later, a pilot program was approved by the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) in conjunction with Harvest Now.

Harvest Now will donate $300 worth of seeds annually to the Bayside State Prison Horticulture Program to grow fruits, vegetables and plants on the grounds of the prison.

The first seeds arrived at the prison in May 2019. The first fruits and vegetables should be ready to harvest in late August or early September.

The harvest will include tomatoes, broccoli, cucumbers, eggplant, garlic, kale, lettuce, onions, peppers, radishes, spinach and cabbage.

"Hopefully, the inmates can see their hard work is really helping needy families," Slimmer, who has been with the NJDOC for 18 years, said. “Some of our neighboring communities are very impoverished. This is why I wanted to start this program."

The program hopes to donate 10,000 pounds of crops within the first year and double the amount of space and harvests donated by 2020.

Harvest Now was founded in 2008 to address the issue of food scarcity in the U.S. Since 2008, Harvest Now has expanded to 18 states and 85 prisons through a strong partnership with various correctional agencies.

Bayside State Prison, the first prison in New Jersey to partner with Harvest Now, is located in Cumberland County.
When I first read through the proposal, it demonstrated not only that the staff here is thinking about the mission of the Department, but also how they can bridge the gap with our local communities,” said Bayside Administrator Jonathan Gramp. “It also provides a valuable knowledge base or skill, and pro-social behavior for the inmates upon their release, many to the local community.”

Gramp added that the Department has been supportive since the proposal to grow vegetables for local food banks was first presented.

“The support from administration as well as the collaborative effort between custody staff and Agri-Industries has been amazing,” Gramp said. “We are looking forward to the upcoming harvest season and the potential for this pilot program to expand here at Bayside.”

Horticulture instructor Michael Griffith said the program offers the inmates benefits that will help them when they transition to life on the outside.

“Harvest Now is helping us show our students that there are ways to give back to the community,” Griffith said. “We try to give our students as much hands-on experience as possible.”

Cumberland County Community Church, which is affiliated with a food bank, will receive crops from the first harvest.

“It’s a way for us to give back and directly impact the Millville community, which has many serious challenges,” Slimmer said.

Inmate Gennaro Guarino said the program has expanded his knowledge of gardening.

“The program has given us more understanding of gardening,” Guarino said. “I’m thankful the NJDOC gave me an opportunity to learn a vocation.”

Instructor Michael Griffith (right) oversees a student’s work at Bayside State Prison.
Members of the Special Operations Group participate in a hazmat exercise with the New Jersey National Guard at the Picatinny Arsenal in Morris County.

ALWAYS READY

**SOG Continues to Expand Ambassadorship, Readiness**

By John Cokos

In 1811, areas along the New Madrid Seismic Zone in the southwestern United States were devastated by a series of massive earthquakes impacting an area of nearly one million square miles.

In late May of this year, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) used the New Madrid earthquakes as the basis for coordinating Shaken Fury, a multinational search and rescue exercise that was the largest to date in the U.S.

Members of the New Jersey Department of Corrections’ (NJDOC) Special Operations Group (SOG) were deployed as members of the New Jersey All Hazards Incident Management Team (NJ-AHIMT) in support of the 10-day exercise. The team, developed by the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management, specializes in comprehensive incident management and is deployable to any state upon request.

“It takes several years of exercises and real incidents to accomplish credentialing as a member,” said Correctional Police Sergeant Kevin McGowan, who serves as the NJ-AHIMT resource unit leader.

On May 31, the NJ-AHIMT arrived at the Muscatatuck Urban Training Center in Indiana, which served as a simulated disaster area in the wake of a 7.7 magnitude earthquake around the Cottonwood Grove Fault near Memphis.

In addition to NJ-AHIMT, more than 30 other groups throughout several states and beyond took part in Shaken Fury, including the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), various National Guard components and several emergency management task forces from Canada and Australia.

FEMA conducts exercises like Shaken Fury.
to strengthen relationships that improve the effectiveness of the country’s disaster response capabilities.

“The world is evolving into a place where integration is of the utmost importance,” said McGowan. “This exercise showcased FEMA's new initiative of integrating its incident response. Instead of just going out in a support fashion, each group took ownership of its role in managing the incident.”

Shaken Fury is only one of many activities that has enabled SOG to expand the Department’s reach.

For example, in May 2019, SOG had multiple roles as part of the incident management team during an exercise with the New Jersey Department of Health involving the Strategic National Stockpile, the nation’s largest supply of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies for use in public health emergencies.

Members of SOG’s Chemical, Ordinance, Biological, Radiological, Aid (COBRA) team also frequently coordinate with the New Jersey National Guard’s 21st Weapons of Mass Destruction Defense Team at the Picatinny Arsenal for hazmat and tactical decontamination drills.

“SOG is built on the training model,” McGowan said. “Train, train, train, and then act. One of the biggest takeaways from our involvement in these events is that it allows our Department to play a huge role in the resiliency of our state.”

In June, during the three-day Firefly Music Festival in Dover, Delaware, SOG members of the NJ-AHIMT helped organize the festival, which drew nearly 200,000 people.

Senior Correctional Police Officer John McKay, who specializes in planning and logistics for the NJ-AHIMT, was present at Firefly.

“Supporting these events is another way for the Department to support different communities and build relationships with other states and agencies,” he said.

McGowan agreed.

“Everything we’re doing is about integrating for a common goal,” McGowan said. “It shows we’re here to help. This Department has a rich history, and this is something we can sink our teeth into and be proud of.”

Members of the New Jersey All Hazards Incident Management Team deployed to Indiana for Operation Shaken Fury, a multinational search and rescue exercise organized by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.
Senior Correctional Police Officer Nikeelan Semmon had lofty ambitions.

Family members say that the 36-year-old Semmon had desires of moving up through the ranks, ultimately becoming a lieutenant and eventually retiring from the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC.)

The father of one never got a chance to realize those ambitions after suffering a fatal heart attack while on duty on July 1, 2016.

On the third anniversary of his passing, friends, family members and colleagues of the late officer gathered to pay respect in his memory, dedicating a memorial stone in his honor. The dedication ceremony took place on July 1 at the Albert C. Wagner Youth Correctional Facility, where Semmon spent his entire career.

New Jersey Correctional Police Lt. Joseph Bashaw, who was the late officer’s sergeant at the time, remembered him for his love of the job.

“He was a great guy who was diligent in his duties as an officer,” Bashaw said. “He always took orders and carried them out to the fullest and was well respected by his peers.”

A memorial stone engraved with the late officer’s name on it was unveiled in the memorial garden at the facility, where Semmon worked until his death. Semmon died one month before his 37th birthday.

Senior Correctional Police Officer Chad Ellis, who worked closely with Officer Semmon for a number of years, performed the unveiling along with Semmon’s widow, Ebony Semmon.

“It’s a great honor for me to take part in this,” Ellis said. “I’m grateful for the administration to pay tribute to Officer Semmon.”

Three years since her husband’s passing, Ebony Semmon, said not one day goes by without her thinking about him.

“I think about him all of the time,” Ebony Semmon said. “This stone dedication shows me that his spirit still lives on in the memory of people who loved him.”
The late officer’s wife has created the Nikeelan Semmon scholarship for students with a financial need.

In attendance along with Semmon’s wife was her son, Gavin Semmon, age 7, and a host of other relatives. The 30-minute program started with the honor guard and pipe band. Officers wore badges with a black band.

“It shows my son that his father was a good man who touched the lives of many people in the NJDOC and law enforcement communities,” Ebony Semmon said. “I want to thank the NJDOC for doing this on our behalf. It means a lot.”

Officer Semmon was born in Trenton, New Jersey, and graduated from Trenton Central High School, before serving in the U.S. Navy for four years and in the Army National Guard for two years.

He loved the New York Giants and was a season ticket holder. He also enjoyed seafood and trips to Maryland to visit his sister-in-law, where he would go crabbing and often bragged about his catches.

Albert C. Wagner Correctional Facility Administrator Raymond Royce spoke about Semmon’s service to the law enforcement community and the state of New Jersey.

“It was my privilege to honor Officer Semmon and his sacrifice today and to dedicate a memorial stone in his honor to forever be displayed and serve as a reminder that we never forget those who have given so much for this facility, this profession and to preserve the safety of this great state,” Royce said.

Adjacent to the memorial stone, Semmon’s uniform was placed in a frame on display.

New Jersey Policemen’s Benevolent Association (PBA) Vice President Nicholas Bunnell worked closely with Raymond Heck, PBA state delegate, to get Officer Semmon’s name enshrined on the National Law Enforcement Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Semmon was eventually approved for inclusion, and the dedication ceremony was held on May 13, 2017. An honor guard detail from the NJDOC took part in the ceremony.

“You die twice in your lifetime: Physically and when people stop saying your name,” Heck said. “Heroes go to work and provide for their families every day. Heroes protect New Jersey residents. Semmon died protecting the state of New Jersey.”

Stephanie Jones, sister-in-law of the late officer, came from Washington, D.C., to attend the ceremony.

“From the very beginning to the end, the NJDOC has stayed in touch with my family. They call and stop by daily to see if there’s anything the family needs,” Jones said. “The outpouring of support has never stopped. The NJDOC is part of our family.”
June 27 was Graduation Day for Class 246

The New Jersey Department of Corrections held a graduation ceremony for the 77 trainees who comprised the State Basic Course for Correctional Police Officers, Class 246, on June 27 at the War Memorial in Trenton. A total of 599 Correctional Police Officers have graduated since Governor Murphy took office in January 2018.

Members of Class 246 and guests recognize the Presentation of Colors.

The Retiring of Guidons traditionally takes place near the conclusion of the commencement ceremony.
The five newest staff members of the New Jersey Department of Corrections’ Special Investigations Division (SID) were sworn in during a ceremony held July 9 on the grounds of the Department’s Central Office headquarters. Those taking part in the ceremony included (from left) SID Chief Investigator Duane Grade, Special Legal Advisor Melinda Haley, Acting Commissioner Marcus O. Hicks, Esq., and new SID employees Noreen McCallum, Alexander Piskin-Cobb, John Pomponio, Acquenettea McKenzie and John Iacobucci.