

Hiouchi man honored for convict rehabilitation work

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In his 20 years working at Pelican Bay State Prison, Thomas Hutzell saw the importance of preparing the inmates for reintegration into society once their sentence was up.

“We always think of it as these inmates are going to be our future neighbors in the community and we want to prepare them for that transition,” Hutzell said.

On Sept. 13, Hutzell was honored for his work facilitating that transition by being named the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation’s correctional officer of the year.

After spending his first 10 years as an officer at the prison, Hutzell, 56, transitioned into counseling prisoners as a counselor I and then prepared prisoners for the Department Review Board as a counselor II.

Then, in 2017, he filled in with the prison’s Division of Rehabilitative Programs and saw his rehabilitation efforts come to fruition.

“We provided group sessions in the Security Housing Unit (SHU), which was really unusual at the time. We didn’t have a lot of programming in the SHU. Once we started providing programming and opened it up to the SHU, they really blossomed, and many of the inmates wanted to take advantage of those programs,” Hutzell said.

The SHU programs Hutzell facilitated became so popular, a waiting list of 80 to 100 formed. Hutzell now oversees 13 groups, with three meetings a day and about eight per group.

“So, they’re real sought after. It’s been really positive,” he said.

The key to the group sessions has been introducing structure into the inmate’s lives for dealing with trauma, relationships and conflict resolution.

“It has inmates look at maybe what made them make the decisions they made in the past, their past influences, trauma they went through and what trauma they caused other people. So there’s that reconciliation with victims,” Hutzell said.

“We cover a lot of material. But we want to give them the tools to use, that may be common sense to you and I, but to someone who has not had that structure before, it’s as simple as setting boundaries in a relationship. They’ll say, ‘What is that? Do you people really do that?’

“They’ve had nobody to model that for them. My goal is to present those tools to them to use in the future, help them get out and be a productive member of society,” Hutzell said.

It was the inmates who actually nominated Hutzell for the Correctional Officer of the Year Award.

He may have done the bulk of the work, hosting the groups and filing the paperwork, but Hutzell doesn’t consider it an individual achievement. “I think of it not as a ‘me’ award but a ‘we’ award, because it takes a lot of people to allow me to do what I do — officers escorting them back and forth to groups, the administration providing programs for us to run.

“I see it as Pelican Bay, it’s their award, not just mine,” Hutzell said.

Hutzell lives with his wife of 36 years, Rene Shanle-Hutzell, in Hiouchi, where he’s lived since his parents moved there in 1963 when he was one year old.

The two are empty-nester parents of three daughters. Hutzell doesn’t have much free time for hobbies, as he oversees 12 rentals, seven in Hiouchi, a few in Crescent City and one in southern Oregon.

“It takes up a lot of my time, but I enjoy it. I guess it’s a constructive artistic thing, buying an old place and fixing it up,” he said.

Hutzell sees himself working a couple more years at the prison. But even then, he can’t see cutting ties with Pelican Bay.

“I’ll probably stay in some capacity even when I retire. I can see coming back and doing something at the prison part-time,” he said.