

Captive Minds

Prison gives young offenders second chance at school

By Jenni Dillon

Kristopher Panichello hasn't had an easy life. Born to two drug-addicted parents, he spent much of his childhood passed from one family member to another, "kicked around like a football."

"I was brought up with problems, so people thought there were problems with me," he said.

He got in trouble off and on as a child before enrolling in an alternative school, where he cleaned up his act for a time. Then, in ninth grade, he went to a new high school and started hanging out with a bad crowd again.

"I hung out with the wrong, stupid kids: robbers, drug dealers," he said. "I made wrong choices. Unfortunately, they were big wrong choices."

Now, at 20 years old, Kristopher is in prison.

Arrested at age 18 for burglary and second-degree assault, Kristopher has been in jail for a year and a half and has at least four more to go.

After serving his time, he hopes he will be placed in a halfway house before getting back to a somewhat normal life.

A well-spoken youth, Kristopher doesn't seem like a criminal.

His language isn't filled with the slang and obscenities of his fellow inmates. He speaks quietly and intelligently. He dreams of a career as an electrician and a life on the "right track."

"Basically, I want what everybody wants: a house, a family," he said. "I want to find a girlfriend who will

shake her finger at me. My only plan other than that is to be good."

He knows his life will never be completely normal.

Wherever he goes, he forever will carry the title of "felon." It will be part of every job interview, every loan application, every conversation with that prospective girlfriend.

It's a title Kristopher knows he deserves. Despite an imperfect upbringing, he takes responsibility for his actions.

"I can't deny the wrong choices I made," he said. "I knew wrong from right."

Still, Kristopher is one of the lucky ones. Of the untold number of young criminals in the nation, Kristopher is one of about 45 in the Youthful Offenders Program at Spring Creek Correctional Center in Seward, a program unique in the country.

While he's being punished for his mistakes -- rightfully so, he said -- he also is being given a second chance.

Spring Creek Correctional Center is nestled between the Kenai Mountains and Resurrection Bay in Seward and boasts a pristine view of Godwin Glacier on clear days.

Though the location is suited for a resort, the facility is far from luxurious. The view may be spectacular, but residents at the center see it only from behind razor wire-topped fences and Plexiglas security doors, a tease at a world of freedom of which they no longer are a part.

A maximum-security prison

for men, Spring Creek is home to some of Alaska's most heinous criminals. Under the constant scrutiny of guards live rapists, murderers and thieves.

But the prison also is home to something most would not expect to find: a high school.

Inside House 2 of the prison is a module of cells -- Fox Mod -- that serves as home to about 45 young men attending school while serving their sentences.

The Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, operating under an agreement with the Alaska Department of Corrections, runs the only regular high school program within a maximum-security prison in the country, offering young men who have taken the wrong path an opportunity to gain an education, a high school diploma and a chance for a productive future.

The program began four years ago, in part because money was available. The federal government offers grants for education programs for juvenile offenders, but that money wasn't being tapped, according to Wayne Young, principal at Spring Creek School.

By starting the program at Spring Creek, the district was able to add students to its enrollment tally -- thereby gaining money under the state's regular per-pupil education funding formula -- and bring in additional revenue from the federal government to run the program.

The district also gained a chance to reach out to the most vulnerable students in Alaska.

With 55 beds, Spring Creek

School is open to any young felon in the state. The students must be convicted of a felony between the ages of 18 and 22 or be juvenile felons tried as adults. Most of the young men in the facility -- 21 percent, as of an October count -- are jailed for sex crimes. Another 19 percent are in for robbery, and 13 percent are doing time for assault. One or two were convicted of manslaughter and murder, while the rest were charged with crimes ranging from arson to burglaries and thefts to drug and weapon violations. While the student-inmates by no means account for all the young felons in the state, they represent some of the more fortunate ones. A few ended up in the program by chance, but many others were sent to Spring Creek specifically because of the school program.

As word of the program travels throughout the state, it slowly is becoming a positive option for defense attorneys and judges working with young convicts. According to Young, placement in the program sometimes serves as a mitigating factor in sentencing or with parole boards.

That's because Spring Creek offers something that no other prison does. While many correctional institutions across the country provide inmates an opportunity to pursue a general equivalency diploma, or GED, on their own, and some provide forms of educational programs, Spring Creek is the only one to offer a full public high school program.

The school district provides a principal and three full-time teachers for the program, and students have a chance to walk away with a real diploma. They also have mental health and

substance abuse counseling, as well as opportunities for further job training and even college classes through the cooperation of the Corrections Department and area educational institutions.

Young, who has been with the school for the past three years, said the program has gained national attention as a pioneer in the corrections field, especially as many states are facing budget shortfalls. As states that previously touted a "lock 'em up and throw away the key" philosophy realize there is a significant cost to housing inmates, Young said he believes corrections will move more toward education in the future.

"Housing costs a lot," he said. "It's all well and good, and certain categories (of criminals) should be housed. But the youthful offenders made poor decisions and tripped themselves up with the wrong crowd and often drugs and alcohol.

"It doesn't mean they don't do their time, but once they get here, we try to steer them back on the right pathway."

Young admits his background in rural education may bias his viewpoint, but Sgt. Bill Lapinskas, the head officer in the Youthful Offender Program, agreed.

"If we weren't teaching them this stuff, the guy who robbed your house last year would be teaching them what he learned," Lapinskas said. "You want to send that kid to that kind of school or to our school?"

"That stuff" the school teaches includes the same curriculum all high-schoolers in the district receive, and students are held to the same standards. They have to complete the same 22 credits students in other high schools do,

and like all Alaska high-schoolers, those graduating this year will have to pass the High School Graduation Qualifying Exam.

However, Spring Creek School is much different than most high schools. It is, after all, still a prison.

Life at Spring Creek, even for the students in the program, is highly structured and disciplined, and inmates are always watched. They live by a schedule set by the Corrections Department and abide by strict rules.

Fox Mod, one of two securely enclosed module spaces within House 2, serves as sleeping quarters, common area, classroom and kitchen for the young inmates.

Students sleep two to a cell, with only bunks and toilets at their disposal. They spend nights, as well as several hours a day, locked in those cells.

While they may move about the rest of the prison facility at times, the students spend most of their time in the common area of the mod, supervised by personnel in a guard station outside the one clear wall, as well as by two officers patrolling inside the mod.

Weekdays run on a strict timetable:

6 a.m. -- Prisonwide count; students locked in cells.

6:30 a.m. -- Breakfast; optional.

7 a.m. -- Mandatory physical exercise in the gym.

8 a.m. -- Shower, dress, tidy the mod.

9 to 9:30 a.m. -- Teachers arrive to start classes; students locked out of cells.

12:15 p.m. -- Prisonwide count; students locked in cells.

12:45 p.m. -- Lunch in the mod.

1:15 p.m. -- Teachers return for more class time.

4 p.m. -- Teachers leave.

Evenings and weekends are more lax, but still offer little in the way of entertainment. There's a single TV in the common area of the module, and students often play cards at the tables. Some do homework, and those with enough points (based on behavior) are afforded the option of time outside in the yard with the general population of inmates.

Inmates wear color-coded, prison-issue uniforms every day. In Fox Mod, students wear bland, tan pants and shirts, personalized occasionally with a long-sleeved T-shirt or stocking cap for extra warmth.

It's not a pleasant life.

"It's bulls---," 20-year-old David Hopson said. "They treat us like kids. You've gotta have certain points to go outside."

"It sucks," echoed Kenneth Husky, 18. "It's jail."

As in all jails, inmates do occasionally find alternative forms of entertainment, and the students aren't an exception. The guards constantly fight the prison's black market, where inmates make and sell contraband ranging from home-brew alcohol (an interesting combination of water, sugar, yeast and an occasional root beer candy) to cigarettes (often sliced into small single-drag pieces) to drugs. Some fashion crude tattooing devices and ink their fellow inmates for money, a serious violation that carries heavy consequences, in part because of the inherent health risks.

This alternative entertainment, however, carries strict punishments.

And there still is a risk of violence.

"Anything can be a weapon," Young said. "And there is still a

predator-prey environment, even if it doesn't seem like it."

For the student-inmates, attitude problems and refusal to participate in classes can result in time in the "meditation cell," a cell stripped bare of everything except a roll of toilet paper. Though students can be placed in such a cell for only three hours at a time, prison staff members said one or two visits often change behavior permanently.

More serious offenses lead to suspension from the mod, and students are transferred to a far less pleasant house. In House 1, the most violent offenders are kept on permanent lockdown in individual cells, escorted to showers in shackles. Students quickly find that life "in the hole" is far worse than following the rules in Fox Mod.

Fortunately, staff members said, these punishments aren't needed as frequently as one might imagine.

For one thing, interaction with the general inmate population provides a sort of impetus for students to behave and stick to their studies, Young said.

"(The guys) in the general population support the kids getting the education," he said. "It's a subtle peer pressure, so they don't end up lifelong residents of the community."

Chris Lau, one of the teachers in the program, added, "One of the things that works to our advantage is that prison, I think, is really, really boring. We give them something to fill that time. They're happy when the teachers are in there. Even if they complain, they're happy."

And complain they do. The young men aren't always willing students.

They get distracted easily,

which isn't surprising, as teachers conduct three separate classes in the same open area.

They display typical teenage male posturing, exacerbated by the prison atmosphere.

And they resist attempts at adult authority.

Still, they do the work.

Much of the success is a function of the teachers, Young said.

"Flexibility is the key to delivering education to this population," Young said. "We have special needs and we have very bright students. We don't really have those in the middle. That's a significant challenge to instructors."

A number of the students at Spring Creek suffer from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome disorders, he said.

In addition, most of the students have been out of school and in the court system for at least a year before coming to the school, and several were out of the classroom before their arrests, as well.

"We pick up wherever they left off in schooling," Young said.

Challenging as it may be all three teachers in the program have experience working with at-risk youth, and all chose their jobs out of a desire to work with the young offenders.

They have methods for dealing with the attitudes and resistance and enjoy their work.

On a recent Wednesday morning, for example, science teacher Mary Alice Allman was dealing with a particularly rowdy group in her chemistry class. Her tactic: a quiet and persistent patience.

"Think, I want you to think," she told her students, as she tried to teach them how to calculate the

number of moles in a chemical formula.

“Man, I don’t want to do this,” one student complained.

“It’s because you’re stuck, isn’t it?” she subtly challenged.

“It’s too much thinking,” the young man said.

Still, as Allman prodded, the student continued working the problem, finally solving it correctly.

“I told you you knew it!” she praised.

Lau, the youngest of the teachers in the program, works with more exuberance. Occasionally adopting the mannerisms and language of his students, Lau tends to relate to the young men on their level. He’s quick-witted and doesn’t pull punches in the verbal jousts with the students.

“You’re talking about psychics?” he asked, overhearing a side-conversation between a group of students.

“What’s my future?” he mimicked.

“You’re in prison.”

“Damn, you’re good.”

He pushed at another slouching student with the same type of humor.

“Brewer, you’ve been here longer than anyone I’ve ever met. You’re not trying to graduate, you’re trying to get my job,” he taunted.

Jokes aside, though, Lau also demands his students’ attention.

“Focus, focus, watch the finger,” he said, snapping in front of a distracted student’s face. “Back on the board. Focus, focus.”

Math and reading teacher Gary Blount takes a more reserved approach. Speaking loud enough to be heard over the din yet soft enough to sound gentle, Blount worked with his first group of math students, explaining the

lesson slowly but without pause for distractions.

While he prefers a congenial attitude, he doesn’t let the students “pull game” on him.

“What do you mean your back hurts?” he asked a whining student. “Your back isn’t hurting. Now ...”

But while he can be tough, he also exhibits an eternally positive attitude.

Between classes, Kristopher, the 20-year-old in for robbery and assault, took a moment to explain the previous day’s algebra lesson to another student, drawing up a sample problem and walking his peer through it. Blount stood back, watching with a proud smile while Kristopher completed the lesson. Only then did Blount step forward, patting the young man on the back.

“Maybe I should let you teach this class,” he said.

The rest of the morning, the teacher wore a smile, offering congratulations and high-fives for the smallest successes.

It’s the little moments, like Kristopher’s mastery of the lesson and attempt to help a fellow student, that make the job worthwhile, Blount said.

It’s not always easy teaching at Spring Creek, the teachers said. Educational materials are limited due to prison security rules: Allman teaches chemistry without chemicals and biology without dissecting tools. The teachers often interfere with each others’ classes in the open classroom environment. Students come and go constantly, not only leaving classes for counseling appointments during any given day, but also leaving the prison for other court procedures for

extended periods of time.

Still, the teachers say the job offers benefits they wouldn’t trade for a more “normal” environment.

“I’ve had probably three of the smartest kids I’ve ever had right here,” Blount said.

In addition, he said watching the students graduate is one of the best rewards a teacher could receive.

“Graduation is always a memorable moment,” he said. “It’s just as important to them as at any school.”

Maybe more so, said Sgt. Lapinskas.

“It’s their first real success,” he said.

For Blount, an added bonus comes from the graduates who go on to pursue further education on their own.

Blount not only teaches in the regular school daily, he also volunteers his Saturdays to tutor students in their college studies.

“It’s rewarding that they actually want to continue learning and want help with their college math,” he said.

Allman said making an obvious difference in a young person’s life is a reward in and of itself.

“One of the things I’ve learned is they aren’t used to seeing people happy,” she said. “They’re not used to that type of home environment or life. To show them normal people can be happy and life is good ... I think that’s a good thing.”

The environment provides other pluses, as well. The very nature of the program means class sizes are extremely low, and Lau said the prison atmosphere makes for some “captive” audiences.

“You don’t have a lot of distractions,” he said. “There are no sports. You don’t have to deal with parents. It’s just you and the kids.”

Unlike many schools, where classroom management often takes up much of the teachers' time, discipline issues at Spring Creek are handled exclusively by Lapinskas and the other guards.

The sergeant said it takes a special kind of guard to work in the mod, and all officers there are hand-selected.

"They have to have the right temperament. They can understand a teenage moment as opposed to a threat to security," he said. "We're hands off. We don't want to interrupt a teaching moment. If there's an argument, we only come in if we're needed."

Still, when a student acts up, all it takes is a nod from one of the teachers for a guard to step in and handle the situation. Even that, however, isn't so frequent.

"We get the worst of the worst," Young said. "But by the time they're here, they're ready for structure. Education is the main focus."

The teachers and facilitators of the program said they have seen all manners of successes.

Recently, for example, the school had its first scholarship recipient. The University of Alaska offers full-ride scholarships to the top 10 percent of students at each high school in the state, and Spring Creek is no exception.

"That raises public questions: Why are there college scholarships for offenders?" Young said. People need to remember the kids aren't going to be in jail forever, he explained.

"They're not sociopaths; they're not repeat offenders," he said. "They're going to be out in society. They could be your neighbor."

In addition to such individual successes, however, are bigger

achievements for the program as a whole.

Most of the students in the program are facing four-and-a-half to five year sentences, which means only a handful have graduated and gone back to the "real" world in the program's four years of existence.

Young said administrators are in the process of starting a tracking system for released program participants, so exact recidivism numbers are not yet available.

However, he said, he knows of at least three young men on the Kenai Peninsula who have completed the program and continue lives free of crime. Furthermore, he added, national studies show that increased education often equates with a reduction in repeat offenses.

That's important, both for society and the state, he said.

Housing an inmate costs about \$100 a day nationwide, and that figure is somewhat higher in Alaska. Therefore, the state saves a minimum of \$36,500 a year for every student the program turns around.

The school district will spend only about \$337,600 this year to run the program.

But while the program offers potential financial savings for the state and a safer society for Alaska residents, it offers even more for the students it touches directly: an education and a second chance.

Jess Bohn, 18, is one of those students.

Born in California, Jess has hopped around the country with his family throughout his life. The family moved to Texas and later Oregon before settling in Alaska five years ago.

Through most of his life, Jess stayed in school and out of trouble. That is, until he was 16.

"I was going to school on the outside and working, but I was f---in' around, you know?" he said. "I had no criminal history, just made a f---in' mistake and now I'm suffering for it."

According to Young, Jess and another young man committed armed robbery.

"If they'd used water guns ... their fingers, anything," they'd be in significantly less trouble, Young said. But instead, Jess held a real gun with live ammunition in the chamber.

It was a stupid action, Young said, and Jess is paying the consequences. He and his codefendant returned the money they stole, and Jess now is facing a 10-year sentence with three years suspended, followed by five years of probation.

By the time he's done with prison, he will have missed both high school and college in the traditional sense.

But at Spring Creek, Jess has a chance to complete his education.

Through the high school program, he was able to pick up where he left off at age 16, and he's doing well. In fact, he was the recipient of the UA scholarship and, after graduating in June, he plans to start taking courses through the University of Alaska Anchorage.

Jess said he has high hopes for his future after prison, and they don't include continuing a life of crime.

"I want to get into a career and make a little money," he said. "I'm young, and I really don't know (what I want to do). There are a lot of things out there."

Jess and Kristopher are just two of the students in the mod who are making the most of the

Instructing inmates a challenging, rewarding experience

By Jenni Dillon

Research shows rapport with the students is the key to success.

Wayne Young, principal at Spring Creek School, has faith in the high school program offered within the prison walls. Still, he credits the three teachers on his staff for the program's success.

Spring Creek isn't an easy place to live -- or teach.

It's an atmosphere that takes a special kind of teacher.

Teachers at Spring Creek have to be individuals willing to walk through metal detectors, security doors and a gym full of general population inmates every day. They have to be people willing to work in an environment that could, potentially, be dangerous. They have to be people who can teach with tremendous flexibility. Most importantly, they have to be people who can reach out and gain the attention of their students.

"If I didn't have a strong team, it could be a problem," he said.

The teachers on the educational team at Spring Creek School don't end up there by chance. They are people with experience dealing with at-risk youth and, more importantly, with a real desire to be there.

Mary Alice Allman spent 25 years in education in the Lower 48, working primarily with at-risk youth. After retiring and leaving Florida, she heard about the job at Spring Creek and decided to put retirement on hold after all.

"It just fit, and the timing was right," she said.

Allman teaches science, computer skills, vocational education and health to the young inmates at Spring Creek. It's a challenge, she said.

"It's not a regular class," she said. "I teach chemistry, and I can't bring chemicals. I can't bring dissecting tools."

In addition, the open atmosphere within the mod, as well as the ever-changing prison population, creates a chaotic teaching environment.

"We do have challenges," she said. "There are always kids coming and going."

That means teachers have to meet the students where they are, adapt to their backgrounds and work fast, she said. They also have to take into account the students' unique personalities.

"You don't back them into a wall," she said. "You make them want to learn."

Challenges aside, though, Allman said she loves her job.

"From the day we got here, we've enjoyed it," she said. "(The guys) are like regular high school students: Some want to learn, some don't.

"The best part is that we've had some kids that really want to learn. You can tell they haven't had the background and see they're trying to make up lost time.

"It's nice to see significant gains."

Gary Blount, who teaches math, reading and physics at the school, has had a similar experience. Also from Florida, Blount spent the last 20 years of

opportunities granted to them through the program.

Not all the students make the same commitments.

"Not all choose the right road, but you give them the opportunities you can," Lau said.

Kristopher agreed.

"Some (kids) my age have respect; others are young and immature," Kristopher said. "... It's up to the person to want to do good or to get caught up in the mix.

"... A lot of kids don't realize what they're being offered ... The officers and teachers try to make us do it, because in the long run, they know we'll appreciate it."

Still, even the students who aren't taking their education quite as seriously said they appreciate the fact that the program exists and that the teachers care about them.

The program is "all right," said David Krumm, 21, who got kicked out of Skyview High School before being convicted of robbery. "It helped me a lot. It's the only chance I had for a high school diploma."

Still, he said, "Life now sucks."

Like many of his fellow inmates, he said he has no intention of coming back to prison, and he doesn't recommend it to anyone else, either.

Kise Afuola, a 19-year-old doing time for robbery, agreed. He said he hopes other young people can learn from his mistakes.

"To all those other youngsters out there, don't come," he said. "Don't fall into anything stupid. Stay straight, keep your head up. I don't think this is the place for anybody."

his career in education working in administration. But after retiring and hearing about the job at Spring Creek, he said he wanted to get back to working with students.

“(I like) getting back and remembering what I like about education: working directly with students,” he said. “It’s fun to get back to teaching instead of, well, having the worries that Mr. Young has.”

Blount, too, said there are challenges to working at Spring Creek. One is the need for flexibility.

“Most (of the students) have shown they can’t really function in a regular high school, so we have to adapt,” he said.

But, he said, the challenges seem to fade away after time.

“Sometimes I forget I’m in a prison, (the students) are so much like normal high school kids,” he said. “I had a high school of 2,000 in Florida, and I see the same

behavior in class.”

Blount, who also volunteers his Saturdays to tutor inmates who are pursuing higher education, said over time he’s developed a relationship with the young men.

“Some of my former students want to continue learning,” he said. “It’s rewarding.”

And, while attitudes of teenage inmates can be off-putting at first, Blount said he’s come to take it in stride.

“They still rag on you, but you can tell it’s kidding,” he said.

Chris Lau, who teaches humanities subjects ranging from language arts to social studies to art, also said a light attitude is crucial to teaching in such an atmosphere.

“You’ve got to have a sense of humor,” he said.

Lau is the youngest teacher at the school but has been on the educational team the longest. Prior to coming to Spring Creek, he taught in Alaska Bush

communities.

“What I started here for was a great opportunity to work with at-risk kids,” he said.

He admitted it’s a unique atmosphere.

“You don’t have a classroom. It is very loud. We interfere with each others’ classes,” he said. “It’s pretty amazing (the students) can function, but they thrive.”

Despite the challenges, though, Lau said he sees a lot of benefits to working at the school.

“There are none of the distractions (of a normal school). We don’t have to compete,” he said. “We have a lot more resources in the curriculum because we have access to unique funds.”

And, he said, the students themselves are a benefit.

“The kids, for the most part, are fun to work with. Most have turned the corner and want to make something of themselves. They want to learn.”