

Community

- [Classifieds](#)
- [Reader Forum](#)
- [Calendar](#)
- [Church listings](#)
- [Community groups](#)
- [Government](#)
- [Links](#)
- [Local history](#)

Sections

- [Front page](#)
- [News](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Milestones](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Arts/Entertainment](#)
- [Weather](#)
- [TV listings](#)

Assistance

- [Archives](#)
- [Contact us](#)
- [About the News](#)
- [Subscriptions](#)
- [Advertising](#)

News

The faces of Fort Stanton: Building a future on the area's past

By Dianne Stallings, Ruidoso News staff writer

Friday, August 18, 2000

One of Fort Stanton's new residents thanked Lincoln County commissioners Thursday for not opposing the state's lease of the historic fort to a drug and alcohol rehabilitation residential program for transitioning prison inmates.

"I've been here a month," said Pete from Socorro, a clean-cut looking young man identified only by his first name. "I've been using drugs since I was 10. I am an addict and was in and out of trouble and in and out of jail."

He served five and a half months of his last sentence in jail before he was sent to Fort Stanton, he said.

"I'm learning about myself and learning how to make new friendships, he said. "I'm figuring out what led to my drug addiction. I'm thankful Amity is here for me. I was never offered a place to go before."

Amity program director at the fort, Pam Jay, said the educational and community work program focuses on building inmates' self-esteem. Many of the counselors are former addicts, who "have been there, done that," and can command the respect of participants, most of whom are on probation or moving toward parole, she said.

A community committee screens candidates before they come to the fort, she said. The maximum to be served now is 48, she said. Jay said she joined the program from Amity's Arizona operation, although she's been in the field for 25 years and originally came from Berkeley, Calif.

"(Participants) usually come from a background with a lot of degrading experiences," she said. "That's no excuse, but drugs put them out of their psychic misery and they get incarcerated for that and that's degrading and dehumanizing.

"We're breeding a more hostile person as (he) goes through our correctional system where there is not just low self-esteem, there's no self-esteem."

The program helps bring back a person's sense of personal value so that the effort to change has some value for them, she said.

"For every \$1 spent in treatment, we save \$7 in prison costs down the road," she said, adding that recidivism was cut by 50 percent among inmates participating in Amity's therapeutic and teaching curriculum in California.

The participants will reap personal rewards from helping maintain the military cemetery at the fort 12 miles northeast of Ruidoso, complete repairs and clean the grounds among other chores, she said.

The occupancy of seven buildings at the fort by Amity, a non-profit entity, should not interfere with plans to open and operate a museum there, she said.

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On a request from Dick Weber, president of Fort Stanton Inc., commissioners agreed Thursday to issue a request for proposals to operate a museum at the fort.

Weber said Les Swindle, head of property control for the state General Services Department - which manages state property - was willing to issue a memorandum of understanding for the museum. The non profit Fort Stanton Inc. group will include the county in its \$2 million insurance policy for the museum operation, Weber said.

With help from the Hubbard Museum of the American West, exhibits should be interesting, he said. The fort museum would follow the same hours as the Hubbard museum in Lincoln from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday through Tuesday.

The state would handle major repairs. The fort group would do minor repairs with help from a generous contractor, Weber said.

"You have to decide if you want to step into this responsibility," he told commissioners. "We've been trying to get this museum for four years. It will represent a private, government and non-profit partnership."

Commissioner Leo Martinez said it's important for the county "to get its foot in the door" in light of interest on a federal level to participate in plans to convert the fort into a living museum with tours and demonstrations.

County Manager Tom Stewart said he will draft the RFP after seeing what happens today when he attends the state's pre-RFP conference for a study on the future use of the fort.

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