

# Who We Are

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## A night in the Wells County Jail

On Wednesday, Jan. 13, this group made a visit to the Wells County Jail, sharing their testimony and bags of gifts with the inmates in numerous cell blocks. Lemuel Vega and Levi Gerber playfully pose behind a jail door from the old county jail while in front are, from left, Kelly Aschliman, Kurt Fiechter, Donna Vega, Olimpia Gerber, Steve Gerber and Joel Sinn. (Photo by Mark Miller)

By MARK MILLER

It was something I wanted to do. But there was no shortage of apprehension.

I got a call from Lemuel Vega in early January. “We’re going to visit the Wells County Jail next Wednesday. Would you like to tag along?” I welcomed the opportunity to see what I feel is an uncommon and remarkable ministry in action. But who wants to spend an evening in the county jail?

The group of eight people who would represent Christmas Behind Bars are already in the jail’s lobby when I arrive the evening of Jan. 13. Several faces are familiar; most not. They had just finished unloading at least a dozen plastic garbage bags filled with small paper bags. Jail personnel were helping move them into an interior meeting room.

Everyone needs to be searched. The security is not unlike what you experience at the airport. Lockers are provided for cell phones. I had brought a camera, which was not permitted inside the secure areas,

We gather in the interior meeting room where the bags of goodies had been taken for a briefing by the shift commander. We load the bags that would be given to the prisoners onto hand carts, leave our coats there and, after a prayer, then split up into two teams. Leaving the meeting room down a hallway, one group goes left, the other to the right.

First stop: Cell Block H. I count 14 men, most in what I would call the common area. Individual cells, each door capable of being locked, feed into this area. Two of the cells are locked with its inhabitants inside. Disciplinary reasons, a guard confirms. (There are three to four guards with the group at all times.)

Vega’s passion for his ministry is always evident. He is not shy about sharing his faith; what one might call “dramatics” can be part of his witness, such as prostrating himself on the floor or emptying a trash can to make a point. The prisoners have

little choice but to pay attention.

He struggles sometimes with what he tries to say. “I’ve got a third-grade education,” he will say often tonight. “I don’t know much about pronunciation, but what I do know is that if you submit yourself to God, he can change your life.”

There are nodding heads. While it is very clear that some are touched, it is also apparent that others are not.

Some other members of the group also speak, but not in each cell block. Levi Gerber recognizes one person whom he had known when he was in this jail. His testimony of stealing from his father’s business and getting involved in parties and drugs brings a new level of attention from the inmates. Levi could speak their language too.

“This is my first time back in jail with the Christmas Behind Bars,” Gerber says. “I wanted to show you guys that I care and that there is a better life. I enjoy my life better than when I was on drugs.”

After about 10 minutes, the group passes out the bags of candy and treats.

“It’s not about the candy,” Vega explains to the inmates. “It’s about that you have not been forgotten. And I pray that our ministry here tonight will inspire you to try — one ... more ... time,” he concludes with emphasis.

We move on to Cell Block G. Vega’s message utilizes a different Bible passage and his questions vary.

In one of the cell blocks, he recognizes a young man. “I used to hustle drugs with your daddy,” he says. “I tried to help him when he got out but it didn’t work out. I’m sorry your daddy died.”

As this group was returning towards the central area, Vega notices the noises coming from Cell Block H, our first stop that evening. The sounds are ones of light-heartedness. He asks the jailers if we could go back inside.

“I couldn’t help but hear what sounds like you enjoying yourselves,” he tells the prisoners. “Could you share with us how you’re feeling?”

“This showed us that somebody out there cares about us,” one speaks up quickly.

“Just you guys coming,” another adds. “You took time out of your day. How many people do that?”

Vega took the opportunity to reinforce his message of hope.

“You gave us something to think about,” another inmate adds. “Maybe something to look forward to.”

As we cross paths in the central area with the other group to re-stock the gift bags, the two groups change rosters a bit; I join the group led by Steve Gerber. His presentation was less dramatic than Vega’s but no less passionate.

In one cell block, he asks the men to join him in a song. I had never heard “Jesus Loves Me” sung in a circumstance that defies description. There is a long period of silence after its completion, and then a quiet “thank you” from one of the inmates.

Both Steve Gerber and Vega give other members of the team a chance to share why they were there. Each has their own story of redemption; each want to offer the hope of their faith.

Joel Simm talks about freedom with one cell block — how good it felt once he got out, but more importantly, he shares, “was the freedom I found in Christ.” He gives another group some practical advice as well. “Who you hang out with,” he says, “means so much.”

There are more cell blocks and more stories. There are two stops in the isolation cells. The group was in the jail for two to three hours.

As the group gathers back in the meeting room, preparing to leave, one of the guards expresses his appreciation to Vega.

“This is the first time I’ve seen this,” he says. “This is good.”

The chilly January air feels a little fresher and more welcome than when I’d entered. The apprehension is replaced by gratitude. ♦