

# Who We Are



# They go in so they can reach out

By JESSICA WILLIAMS

Lemuel Vega wants the nation's inmates to try one more time.

His Bluffton-based ministry, Christmas Behind Bars, is providing that opportunity year round.

He credits the community behind his ministry for the success and growth it has experienced. It was against this community, though, he says he once committed terrible crimes.

Vega was 18 years old in the Wells County Jail facing up to two decades behind bars when a half-dozen volunteers visited the jail one day to sing hymns to the inmates.

It was then the germ of an idea stuck in the back of Vega's mind. When he was freed and became clean and right with his savior, the ministry that would become Christmas Behind Bars was born.

The first delivery of "care packages" was made about 15 years ago to the Grant County Jail because Vega remembered the value he received from those singers. On the way back that night, the remaining 50 packages were dropped off at the Wells County Jail.

Over the next few years the operation grew to include Adams, Huntington and Wabash counties. Now during the month of December, the ministry visits 30 county jails, mainly north of Indianapolis.

But about seven years ago, Vega wanted to return to Pendleton, where he had also spent time. He also wanted to visit the Indiana State Prison and the Indiana Department of Correction's women's facility.

Somewhere along the line, the ministry became known as Christmas Behind Bars and today they spread their message of hope and salvation all year round – and across the country.

"It continues to grow and it just seems impossible," Vega added.

There are hundreds of volunteers involved and visits have been paid to Kentucky, Arkansas, Illinois, North Carolina and Tennessee. There are 30,000 inmates in Virginia alone; 15,000 of them received care packages in January and the hope is that the rest will be delivered by September.

All the Indiana Department of Correction facilities have also been visited.

"Some of those people, they may not believe in God, they may be atheists, Muslim, it doesn't matter," Vega said. "You're going there to present to them a physical, tangible gift, and if you get the opportunity to tell them that you care about them, you're praying for them, then they have the opportunity to receive more."

On top of delivering Bibles and other reading materials, the care packages include hygiene items and food.

But even though the toothbrushes are eight cents apiece, buying 30,000 of them costs \$2,400.

For this reason and for so much more, Vega relies on community donations and sponsorships.

Zurcher Tire, for example, donated a box truck. Steve Gerber of Outdoor Concepts rallied support for a 24-foot box trailer. Inventure Foods donates food items and Pretzels Inc. had donated product before CEO Steve Huggins even went on a trip. He was instrumental in donating 10,000 pounds of pretzels for the care packages.

"I believe everybody needs to hear the message of Christ," Huggins said.

To name a few more, sponsors also include International Truck and Tractor, Selking International and National Oil and Gas.

"There are many people who've come together who believe in this program and the opportunity of

Above left: Four Bluffton men, from left, Dan Lantz, Bob Jolloff, Gene Reinhard and Stan Isch, prepare to enter the Indiana State Prison for a visit in May. Above: The organization's van in front of the Indiana State Prison in Michigan City.

these people behind bars," Vega said. "I believe that this is an opportunity greater than most ministries around the world. These men and women have tried all their lives to change. They're facing circumstances they don't want to be in and they can be free in that relationship with Christ."

Gerber has been involved with the ministry for about eight years and has gone on both prison and jail visits. He knew Vega before the ministry began. He considers the access Christmas Behind Bars has and the amount of packages that are delivered to be amazing.

He believes the ministry brings hope, even though 99 percent of the inmates deserve to be there.

"Who on Earth hasn't made mistakes and messed up?" Gerber said.

It's a learned behavior and they are trying to show the inmates a different way because "they've never been taught any different."

The packages are a resemblance of God's love, Gerber added.

"There's hope out there. God is willing to help you if you put your faith and trust in him."

Twenty years ago, Ted Pfister's now-50-year-old daughter was a part of the singers who visited Vega when he was behind bars.

Now he's become a volunteer for Christmas Behind Bars because he says he has a heart for reaching the incarcerated.

It's not only good for the inmates but Pfister also considers it a blessing onto himself. They are there to show the inmates someone cares about them and Pfister believes Christmas Behind Bars is making a difference.

The ministry's goal is to "change people's lives from the inside out."



Care packages are loaded and ready to be delivered at the Indiana State Prison in May. (Photos by Jessica Williams)

Bob Troxel calls Vega "the real deal" who has an ability to bring people together for the cause.

"(Vega) talks their talk and gets their attention" because he walked in their shoes.

"He touches a lot of people," Troxel added.

Troxel provides the warehouse space that the ministry operates out of and he also connects Christmas Behind Bars with businesses to provide products. He's been involved since the beginning.

It's important to share faith with even the "lost and forgotten," Troxel said.

Trout Moser, executive vice president of National Oil and Gas, has been involved for several years and has gone on multiple trips to county jails and state prisons in Westville, Michigan City and Pendleton.

He considers it an opportunity to share the message of the importance of building a long-term relationship with Christ. To Moser, the ministry has a promising future.

"Helping other people, that's what it's all about," Moser said.

Moser encourages others to get

involved, either through prayer, donations or through writing letters to show the inmates they are being thought of on the outside.

"There's hope," he added.

The most recent trip to the Indiana State Prison in Michigan City in May included about 100 volunteers from the area. Dan Lantz, Gene Reinhard, Stan Isch and Bob Jolloff went as volunteers and they're all from Bluffton.

"For 100 volunteers to show up at 3:30 in the morning, that's huge," Vega said.

The roughly 2,000 packages for the inmates arrived the day before to be checked by K-9 units. Vega said it took about 80 volunteers approximately five or six hours to assemble packages. Before that, it took 10 volunteers about two weeks to sort through the items to be included in the packages.

Jolloff became involved just this year and said his purpose for going to Michigan City was to visit death row and to tell those without hope about Jesus.

But it's more than a care package, it's the message.

"My job is to plant the seed," Jolloff said. ♦

Jesus said, "I was in prison and ye came unto me."

Christmas Behind Bars/Free Indeed, is endeavoring to do just that...

**Will you invest today,** for the furtherance of the kingdom of heaven? Rewards are paid throughout eternity. **Your sponsorship is making it possible** to visit more people behind bars with the pardoning love of Christ and of his magnificent power to transform their lives. **Will you partner with us today in making that reality come forth in living color?** Please send your tax deductible donations to: Christmas Behind Bars, PO Box 474, Bluffton, IN 46714. You may also donate online at [www.ChristmasBehindBars.org](http://www.ChristmasBehindBars.org). (We are a 501(C)3). You may call us at 260-827-8835, or email us at [Contact@ChristmasBehindBars.org](mailto:Contact@ChristmasBehindBars.org).

We are in need of Bibles and devotional books to include in the gift packages.

A lot of our volunteers have been in prison and do not have a driver's license. We are in need of a good used mini-van to pick up our volunteers on a daily basis. We also need a 24-foot enclosed trailer to help transport packages to different prisons. In addition, we are in need of a semi-tractor and a refrigerated trailer.

Last year we visited over 60,000 men and women. **As this program continues to grow in different states, we are in need of your prayers and financial support.** We thank you in advance for your help in forwarding the missions of Christ: "Go ye into all the world..."

Sincere love and prayers,  
Lemuel and Donna Vega.