



Lemuel Vega, founder of Christmas Behind Bars, loads bags filled with packages Monday that will be given to inmates at prisons in Minnesota. The Bluffton-based charity turns 20 years old this year. (Photo by Matthew LeBlanc)



Joe Brickley, right, works with his son, Cory Brickley, to prepare packages Monday that will be sent to inmates at a Minnesota prison. Both men were working as volunteers for Bluffton-based Christmas Behind Bars. (Photo by Matthew LeBlanc)

They're showing they care

Christmas Behind Bars puts together packages for inmates across nation

By **MATTHEW LeBLANC**

Lemuel Vega moves quickly down a long row of folding tables inside the Red Gold Inc. building in Bluffton, tossing candy and other goodies into paper bags.

He's gotten good at the drill over the past two decades, working to provide food, toiletries and other essentials to inmates at jails and prisons in several states through his Christmas Behind Bars charity.

Monday, Vega and eight volunteers paced the open space inside the building, gathering items and putting together packages bound soon for male and female inmates at prisons in Minnesota. Nearby, finished packages are put into black plastic bags and placed inside a white trailer that will be used to transport the items to the prisons near Minneapolis.

By the end of the afternoon, Vega said he hoped to have about 1,000 finished packages ready to head north.

"I think we can get 'em done," he said, smiling. "Lord willing, we'll get this done."

A former inmate himself, Vega is celebrating the 20th year of his charitable ministry in 2016.

He was released from Indiana's Pendleton Correctional Facility in 1984, after serving a sentence for drug, burglary and arson charges. After spending some time outside prison walls, searching for purpose and meaning, Vega started Christmas Behind Bars.

Now, decades later, the simple packages have found their way to inmates here in Indiana, Illinois, Arkansas, Virginia and Ohio. Vega said the fledgling effort began with visits to county jails in Grant and Wells counties.

The packages are filled with things inmates can use — reading materials, food, toothbrushes — but they are also a source of communication between inmates who might have little human interaction with the outside world.

Vega said he knows how valuable that can be.

"I remember the volunteers that reached out to the inmates," he said. "I remember the volunteers, the church groups.

"It's letting them know they're not forgotten."

Among the handful of helpers there Monday — there would have been more, but single-digit temperatures stopped cold a bus that would have brought them — at least three have connections to the packages other than volunteering to put them together.

Joe Brickley and his son, Cory Brickley, each received one while incarcerated.

Joe Brickley said he first met Vega while at the Wells County Jail. He did not want to disclose the charges, but he said he's worked with Christmas Behind Bars to bring packages to inmates in two states, and he is planning on making the trip to Minnesota this week.

"It gives me something to do," Joe said. "I do a little bit of everything."

Cory said the package was inspiring.

"I received one of these packages in jail," he said. "It gave me hope."

Brandi Bywater's husband, Richard Bywater, is now at the New Castle Correctional Facility, south of Muncie. She doesn't get to see him much, but she said he has been using the materials provided to him in one of the packages.

"He savors it," she said.

Vega said the growth of the charitable ministry over the past 20 years is a testament to its effectiveness. He said it is a way to provide help, both spiritual and physical.

"By faith, I believe it is touching hearts," Vega said. "It's an opportunity to give them hope. It's an opportunity to let them know they're not forgotten."

matt@news-banner.com

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. (We are a 501C3). You may call us at 260-827-8835, or email us at 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.

Who We Are

TUESDAY, JUNE 28, 2016

A Special Publication of *The News-Banner*

Wells County, Indiana 2016



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. ♦