

20 years later, his prayer is answered every day

• Part 1 of a 2-part series

By MARK MILLER

Christmas Behind Bars was incorporated as a 501(c)3 non-profit in December 2009, but Lemuel Vega traces the organization's birth to a hospital room in the fall of 1996. Hence, he is marking the ministry's 20th anniversary this year.

"I've been clean for 19 and a half years," he told more than one group of Wells County Jail inmates on a Wednesday night in January. "I've taken two Tylenols during all that time." That is quite a change from the first 35 years of Vega's life.

Raised in Chicago, he had a troubled childhood. That's putting it mildly.

"I really don't remember much about school after the third grade," he says. "I was pretty well disconnected from any learning after that." He recalls being tied down to chairs, of being kicked out of schools too many times to count. "I was unmanageable as a child," he says matter-of-factly.

He was once sent to a boarding school in Wisconsin, but was expelled from there as well. Drugs were pervasive. He was buying, selling and taking drugs, but cannot recall at exactly what age it became the total focus of his life.

Vega can recall times that he was robbed and times of robbing others. At one point, "I knew I had to either kill someone or be killed," and remembers actually planning the event.

Vega's grandmother had a small farm just east of Ouabache State Park; he and his brother Kevin spent summers there. It was at this point in his life, at age 18, that "I came here looking for a better life."

But no sooner had he arrived than "I got into all this trouble."

Current Wells County Sheriff Monte Fisher remembers the night he fingerprinted and helped interrogate and book Vega, his brother and two others in September 1979. The four had been involved in a theft ring, burglarizing homes, trailers, barns and businesses. Fisher recalls one of the businesses was Terry's Cycle Sales south of Ossian; Vega remembers taking things from LaVerne Troyer's business south of Monroe.

"They were also involved in drugs," Fisher adds, "acid and PCP." Fisher had been a deputy for just more than two years. Nyal Frantz was the sheriff at the time

"He was really a likable boy," Frantz, now 90 and living at River Terrace Estates says. "I took him into my office and had several chats with him. I thought he had a lot of potential — he could sell the Brooklyn Bridge, the way he could talk," he adds with a chuckle.

Vega was able to earn a "trustee" status in the jail, yet "we caused the sheriff a lot of problems." He related that they set the jail on fire, his brother helped a couple inmates escape, and Vega stole evidence, mostly drugs, from the evidence room. Frantz does not recall that they ever "really knew for

sure who all was involved, but it wouldn't surprise me to hear him say that."

When Vega's theft of evidence was discovered he was put in isolation. It was during this time that he got his first exposure to an alternative.

Representatives from Gideons International came to the jail. He did not come out of his cell for their presentation. But he listened. He knew he wanted something different.

However, he continued to get and take drugs in jail as they awaited trial. "I was eventually taken to a psychiatric hospital in Fort Wayne," he relates. He was able to post bond, which was \$100,000, but instead of staying in the county, "I went back to Chicago and did what I knew" — dealing and using drugs.

He returned to the county to sell drugs but was pulled over for a traffic stop and was soon back in jail. Sentenced to eight years, he was eventually transported to the state's Pendleton Correctional Facility, but not without incident. Vega had secreted a number of sleeping pills into his toiletry kit and took them in the back of the police car on the way. He woke up in a hospital in Indianapolis.

"Why did you try to kill yourself?" a doctor asked him. Vega told him that was not his intention. "I was scared," he says now. "I was scared about going to a state prison and somehow I thought this would make it better."

Soon transported back to Pendleton, he did not exactly change his ways.

"I went to chapel services pretty regularly," he explains, "but for the wrong reasons." It was at the chapel services that he could interact with prisoners from other cell blocks, buying and selling drugs. He recalls one minister's sermon inspired him to say a prayer: "Jesus, if ever you can use me I want to be used by you."

He also remembers that day for another reason. "As we were leaving the service, there was a 20-pound box of roasted peanuts there," he recalls. He stuffed as much as he could into his pockets, eating them as he returned to his cell. What he

had left he carefully stored away and got one peanut out each day to enjoy.

"Those two things: the Gideons' visit in the Wells County Jail and the gift of those peanuts," Vega says, "that's what Christmas Behind Bars represents."

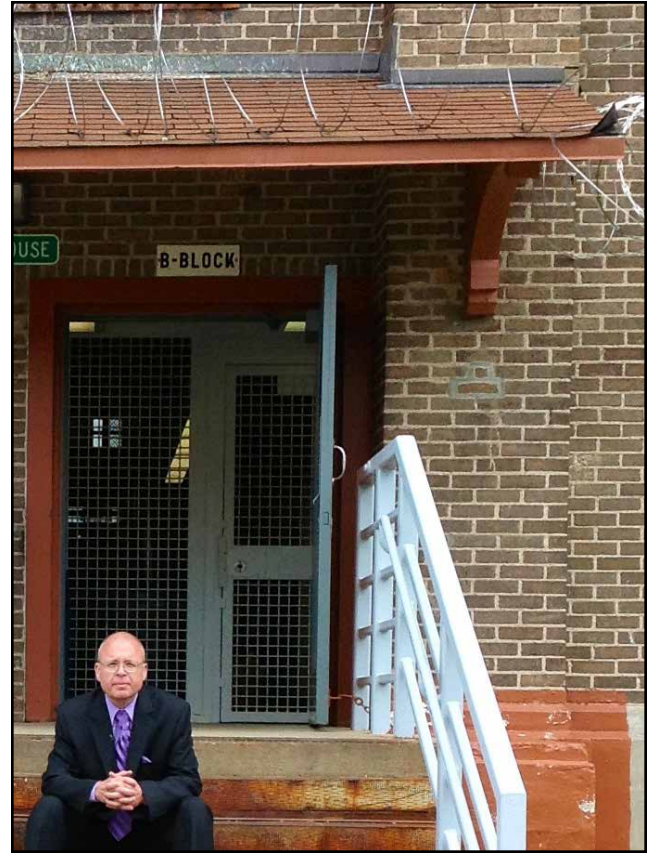
Out of prison in April 1984 after four years with good behavior credit, "I tried to do the right thing," he says. Vega had met Donna Drayer — he was introduced to her at church by Dan Pfister — while he had been out on bond. She had sent him letters of encouragement during his three years in the Pendleton facility. The two were married Dec. 30, 1984 and he joined the Apostolic Church. "I tried," he continues, "but somehow I got my focus on material things. I saw others who had things and I wanted them, too. And I knew how to get stuff."

He was soon taking drugs back to Pendleton; he had found a way to smuggle them into the prison. And he began using drugs again as well while holding down several jobs. He began working at his wife's family dairy farm on U.S. 224, and then worked two factory jobs in Fort Wayne at the same time. Yet his life was spinning out of control.

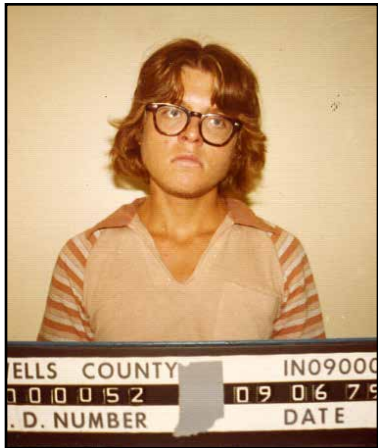
He was selling a smorgasbord of sorts: "crack, cocaine, heroin, uppers and downers, anything I could get my hands on," he says, but his addiction was to cocaine and heroine.

"I hated drugs and what they were doing to my life and my wife..." his voice trails off. He shares that he doesn't understand how she stayed with him during this time. "She got me into Lutheran Hospital for treatment," he recalls, but he overdosed on sleeping pills again in the facility "because I was scared."

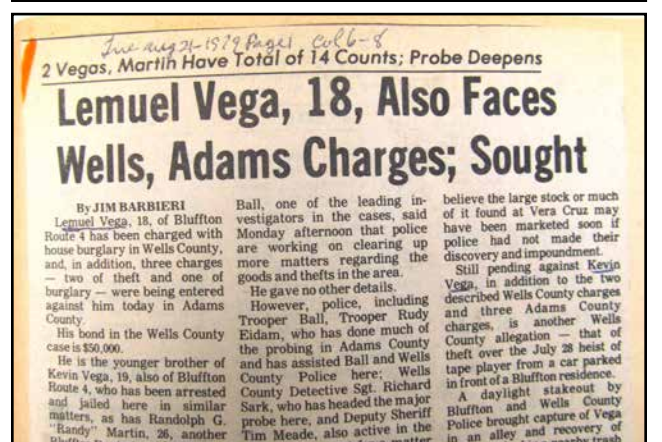
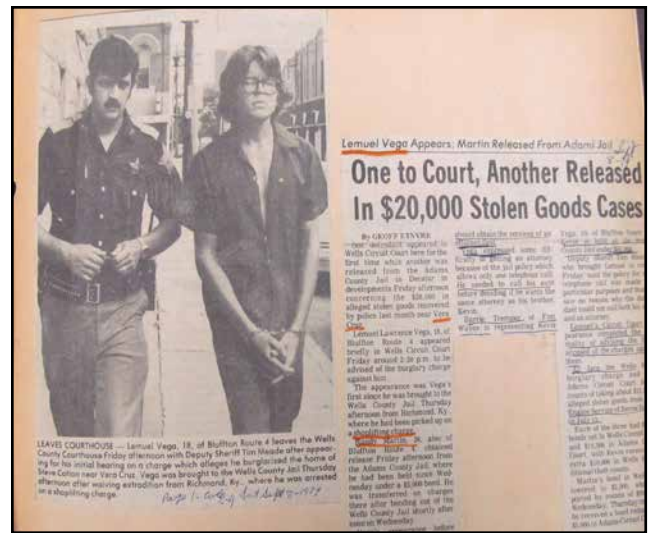
But no one asked him why this time and a doctor summarily released him "for non-compliance," as he phrased it.



Lemuel Vega at the entrance to the cell block in which he was an inmate from 1981 to 1984 at the Pendleton Correctional Facility. (Photo provided)



An 18-year-old Lemuel Vega poses for his mug shot upon being booked at the Wells County Jail in Sept. 1979.



Newspaper clippings from 1979 document Lemuel Vega's episodes with the law. His grandmother had kept a scrapbook that Vega would later discover.

There were other attempts to get help at other facilities. He reached out a few times on his own to group or agency phone numbers he had found, but he always hung up out of fear.

In the fall of 1996, he found himself in Fort Wayne's Charter Beacon Hospital. When he walked in "I gave them all my Valium and other drugs." The first doctor he saw was the same one who had released him from Lutheran, and the advice and counseling he received was not making sense. "There's got to be something greater," he recalls thinking.

"I wanted peace and hope but they weren't able to help me so I went into my room and put the bed against the door. I was in the valley of decision," he says.

It was a Friday evening. The sunset he could see from his room's window "was the most beautiful I had ever seen." It triggered a memory from third grade.

"I remembered something about no two snowflakes being the same, and I thought that if God can paint that picture in the sky that will never be the same, then somehow, He can help me." Vega shares. "So I got down on my knees in the room and my only prayer was 'Dear Jesus, please help me.'"

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

A heart for ministry

• Part 2 of a 2-part series

By MARK MILLER

After a difficult childhood in Chicago, Lemuel Vega came to Bluffton in 1979 to live with his grandmother and start a new life. But he soon found himself involved in drugs and burglary. Arrested and sentenced to state prison, after his release he found himself once again in a downward spiral in the mid-1990s. Seeking treatment in a Fort Wayne facility in October 1996, he said a simple prayer on a Friday evening alone in his room: "Dear Jesus, please help me."

Released from Charter Beacon that same evening, Vega began looking for work. He could have gone back to a factory job in Fort Wayne but knew the environment there would have put him back on a self-destructive path.

LaVerne Troyer, one of his victims in 1979, pointed him towards a pallet maker in Allen County. He began transporting Amish workers and working at that plant. He had bought some pears from Troyer and Vega had shared them with people at the Allen County plant, who then asked him if he could bring them more.

He began delivering and selling pears door-to-door to Amish in Allen County, adding groceries until he and his wife Donna soon had a van and a route "hustling groceries," he says and then laughs at the phrase.

"Someone had the idea to put together some packages to take to prisoners at the Grant County Jail," he says, "so we started donating things from our van." And his suppliers donated some goods as well. He and Donna made up 400 small packages right before Christmas. "We were told there were 350 prisoners but we wanted a few extra just to be safe," he says.

On the way home "I told my wife that you couldn't give me a brand new Corvette for the blessing I'd received that night," he says now. "We were coming back into town, right past the (Wells) county jail, and we pulled in with the leftover packages and asked them if I could leave these packages and ask the sheriff if each inmate might get some of this," he says.

The next year, the couple took packages again to Grant, as well as the Wells and Adams county jails. The next year they added Huntington "and maybe Wabash," Donna Vega interjects. Each year the count would grow and each year they would start a little earlier, always wrapping up right before Christmas.

The couple was funding the ministry for the most part and still selling and delivering groceries. Lemuel would get some summer work in addition to the grocery route. Their suppliers would also donate some goods.

The Vegas credit Dan Pfister for giving the ministry its name. "Dan called me one day and asked me to write out what we do," Lemuel Vega recalls. "So I sat down and wrote — I don't know — six or eight pages of stuff. Lo and behold, he comes up with this brochure and a name." He believes this was 10 or 12 years ago when that name, Christmas Behind Bars, came into being.

Soon, people were calling and asking to help. The ministry grew, but neither Lemuel nor Donna Vega can quite explain it. "I didn't go out and ask people for things," Lemuel Vega says, "people came and helped out. They see the value of what we do."

Looking back, the Vegas cannot pinpoint a time when they quit the grocery route and other ventures, such as hauling Amish groups on summer trips and Lemuel's seasonal jobs. Donna gets a pension from a 30-plus year career as a technician at what was Taylor-Nickel Medical Center and began drawing Social Security income when she turned 65. An aunt provides some direct financial assistance.

All the donations made to the ministry go directly to that. "We take no money to live on from Christmas Behind Bars," Donna Vega says quietly in response to a question.

"We don't eat out, we live pretty simply," Lemuel explains. "A few years back, we needed a new roof on our mobile home and the cost was about \$5,000. There were some different people who helped with that expense and that was so appreciated." He recounts other times when someone was willing to help them get a new water heater, or a local eye doctor that provided new glasses. "We couldn't continue this ministry" without that help, he notes. "We are so very grateful."

"However, we do not get paid by the ministry nor does anyone else," he adds. "We are all volunteers. So every dollar that is donated goes directly to the mission and vision."

The couple does not own or watch a television. And "if we go anywhere, it's just out to the state park." Besides their trips to jails and prisons, of course.

How many jails do they visit these days? The couple doesn't keep a specific tally although Lemuel maintains an appointment book and could, if needed, come up with some numbers.

"My aunt figured out a couple of years ago that we'd had contact with 50,000 inmates," Lemuel says.

They go to prisons in Arkansas and Tennessee and have prepared packages for other missionaries to visit prisons in Kansas. Just as the Christmas spirit can be celebrated year-round, the group's visits are now year-round. Wells County's annual visit was in mid-January and the couple had 130 volunteers lined up for their annual visit to the state prison in Michigan City in late May.

A continuing stream of donated goods flows into a warehouse on Bluffton's southwest side that is provided to the ministry at no cost. Forklifts and trucks are maintained through cash donations and gifts-in-kind from local businesses and others from the area and even out of state. The list of businesses and professionals that provide services and materials is a long one, Vega shares.

And the volunteers — to unpack the donated groceries and goods, to stuff the gift bags and to load the trucks and to make the prison visits. "One year down at New Castle we had 200 volunteers for a three hour program," he continues. "There are many Amish and Mennonite, hundreds who have come to help as well. So this is actually a national ministry based out of Wells County, Indiana," he summarizes.

And Lemuel's "third-grade education" manages it all, although his wife and others helped him earn his GED diploma from Ivy Tech in 1987.

They find it all hard to explain yet are quick to say who gets the credit. "The Lord provides. It just continues," Lemuel says as he looks at Donna, who, he often mentions, has stuck beside him now for more than 31 years.

Former sheriff Nyal Frantz lost track of Lemuel Vega after he went to Pendleton, but often wondered about him. When his wife died in 1988, "I was standing next to the casket and here comes this young man in a suit and tie, kneels down in front of me and told me how sorry he was to hear the news," Frantz recalls, adding that his wife had also taken a liking to the young man.

And then he offered to make Frantz a deal. "He was always making deals, you know," Frantz says with a chuckle. "If you take care of yourself," he told me, "then I'll go straight." And as far as I know, he kept his word."

Vega treasures a photo of the two taken in front of their home in 2006.

Frantz remembers Vega once telling him he had a goal of passing out 5,000 bags of gifts to inmates. "I'm sure he surpassed that long ago," he adds. "I'm pretty proud of him."

Current sheriff Monte Fisher's next encounter with Lemuel Vega after fingerprinting and booking him in 1979 was "some time in the late 90s" when he came to the jail with packages of fruit and a message for the inmates.

"In '79, he was on the wrong path," Fisher recalls now. "He was a typical teenager who had his own ideas about how the world should work. It's really neat to compare that to today. He has a good heart and you have to give him credit for trying to reach out to these people."

"It's good for them to see someone who has turned their life around," the sheriff says.

Jail Commander Karen Thompson concurs. "A lot of the inmates feel they've been labeled for life. Lemuel shows them, in person, that there's still chance for them."

The jail visits are not without problems. The security needs create overtime expenses and invariably, the bags of treats the ministry brings cause some problems. Exactly what is allowed has had to be changed over the years. Lemuel Vega says fresh fruit was stopped long ago "because prisoners made hooch with it." The list of allowed treats continues to change as inmates' creativity has found destructive and sometimes dangerous uses.

"It can be a problem," Fisher and Thompson share, but they see the value.

"We want to give the inmates every opportunity we can to see there is an alternative," explains Fisher, who has given a good reference to more than one county sheriff or prison administrator inquiring about Vega's program.

In fact, the local jail's calendar in that regard is pretty full and can sometimes stretch Thompson's ability to fully accommodate. She juggles "nine or 10" church services a week, plus "Pastor Neil (Ainsle) comes every Sunday and Tuesday" while Community Corrections has four "Prime for Life" programs each week in addition to GED classes.

Fisher and Thompson see the Christmas Behind Bars visits'



This stack of more than 2,000 gift bags were ready to be taken to a prison in Arkansas in January. (Photo by mark Miller)



Lemuel and Donna Vega inside the state prison at Pendleton during a Christmas Behind Bars mission earlier this year. (Photo provided)



Former county sheriff Nyal Frantz is shown with Lemuel Vega in 2006. (Photo provided)

impact more so on first-time offenders. "(The jail) is a revolving door" for many of the inmates there, says Fisher, "but you never know."

Today, Lemuel Vega is thankful he was sent to the maximum security block of the Pendleton Correctional facility. "I could see the depth of the consequences of wrong choices," he says. "It was a nightmare in there but I am thankful I can go back there and share hope."

The Pendleton facility was the first state prison the ministry visited after going only to county jails for the first six years or so. The ministry has returned each year and during their visit to Pendleton in February, they were given a \$1,250 donation from the American Legion post that is attached to the facility.

"Every year, I still see guys who were there when I was an inmate," he says.

"The more (Christmas Behind Bars) grows, the more inadequate I feel," Lemuel Vega shares. "The more it grows the more need I see and it almost feels like we're doing less because, I guess there is such a need for hope out there."

He recalls the story of the young boy who was throwing starfish back into the ocean after finding a beach full of the stranded fish. "You can't possibly make a difference; you can't possibly save them all," a passing adult told him. "No," the young boy replied, "But I can save this one and it makes a difference to him."

There's more to it than just that, Lemuel continues, more than this ministry that has sprung up and evolved and grown in ways he and his wife could have never imagined.

"How can we energize people to be of service that they would begin to taste and see that serving the Lord is more than just going to church on Sunday?" he asks. "There are lots of needs in our community that people could be reaching out."

"It's not about Christmas Behind Bars, it's not about what the Lord has done in this ministry. We appreciate all the volunteers and sponsors, but how is it we could work, to gather, to spread it further?"

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 have been praying for a 24-foot refrigerated box truck.

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.