

- They moved here from CA 6 years ago.
- Jim is a corrections officer and volunteer at WCCF.

Peter Little: How did you get involved in the prison garden?

Anita Spence: Well, there was an open house for the prison in August 2005. Jim was already employed there, so I went. There was talk going around about starting a garden and every time gardening came up my name came up. We worked with David Hammonds who was head of food services at the time. He had no knowledge of gardening, so he thought I would be a good person to get involved. I said I would do it only if Jim could also be involved. So that is how it all got started. It really started in April 2006, and we now have about an acre [Jim jumped in saying it was really just  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an acre].

Jim Spence: Dave Hammonds was in charge of the kitchen, so that is how he got to be a part of the garden. He had absolutely no knowledge of gardening. What was nice about being there at the start of it, at the beginning, was that the prison started out with a big budget. The superintendent, Chuck Sealy, was really in favor of it. Basically anything we ran by David, we got. We didn't even see budget stuff, they just gave us what we wanted.

AS: So we began to work with him (David), and then they said we could also build a greenhouse. The whole building is geothermally heated, which was also great for having a greenhouse. We were able to start all our seedlings in the greenhouse. We can start 2,000 plants at a time. We have a real high-tech system with fluorescent lighting, grow lights, that is on a track system that moves up and down the table. We got a bunch of seeds donated from a company in Maine.

JS: Originally, the building we were going to use for the greenhouse was going to be used for industrial projects that were going to be contracted out to the prison. That plan fell through and we ended up getting  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the building. We annexed a third of it because it wasn't going to be used for anything.

JS: The inmates came in September, but we started the garden in spring of 2006 and the inmates put in all the irrigation lines and dig all the ditches. They put in rock beds and terraces and they did all the manual labor. We just designed and directed it. They do all the labor. We have a garden crew of about 20 now. We tell them what to plant and what to take care of.

PL: So the produce is used exclusively in the kitchen for the prisoners?

JS: 100% is used in the kitchen. It is only a small fraction of what is consumed. They don't feed them just food from the garden.

AS: We did harvest over 6,000 lbs this first year, and that was with a late start. We had 600 tomato plants. We did vegetables and flowers. We had rows and rows of things. We had flowers for them. We had pumpkins for them. It is a really good project and we are really happy to be a part of it. I figure if we can give something back to those men and therefore giving something to the community then we are contributing to society. We figured that if we can instill some good feelings and good things, like nurturing, instead of anger and wrath, that it would be a good work. It has been. They take pride in it. They are proud of it.

JS: Oregon Department of Corrections has about a 30% return of their inmates, which is phenomenal nationwide. ORODC relies heavily on programming and so rehabilitation is really strong. We just had a guy come up from Oakdale, California who used to

work with youth authority. The youth he was working with go up to 25 years of age and he had to constantly keep his back against the wall. Day in and day out he was worried about having feces thrown on him or urine. That is common practice in the California prison system. Right now he is just astounded about how good the prison-staff relationship is. Right now I am a housing officer and I spend the whole day in a housing unit with hundred inmates, my whole shift, with a hundred inmates. I am totally unarmed. I don't have a gun or pepper spray or anything like that. It's just me and a hundred inmates.

JS: The whole thing is to humanize these guys, not to institutionalize them.

AS: They have to know that you respect them.

JS: Yeah, the whole thing is based on respect. So we are trying to produce pro-social behavior.

JS: One of the staff here used to work in Georgia. He says that when an inmate walks away from the officer and is asked to stop and he doesn't stop, they will shoot him.

AS: Here if they walk away, they just walk away.

PL: Going back to the garden, did you look into other prisons that were or are doing this sort of thing to get some direction?

JS: There are other prisons doing this. What happened years ago, as is the case with ORDOC, they used to all be self-sustaining. They used to raise all their own livestock, they raise the feed for the livestock. They had vegetables and dairy. They supplied everything. It just used to be that way, until the public decided that everything they are making we can sell them. So they are taking dollars out of our pockets by producing their own food. So legislation was passed requiring the prison to buy from the local growers. So it absolutely makes no sense at all. It sounds like you would be putting money back into the community, but it really doesn't work out that way to good.

AS: So thru the years it has really evolved to that.

JS: Now with budgets of prisons everywhere, they have to buy the cheapest products they can. So there is a menu that is the standard in each institution. For one fourth of the year there is this menu, and then it rotates. The menus rotate with the same food coming around each time. Now, all of a sudden, you have fresh vegetables everywhere. Fresh cucumbers, spinach, lettuce, tomatoes. They have veggie trays. Bell peppers. Especially the tomatoes. We have so many tomatoes. You know what it is like to pick a tomato right off the stem and eat it, this is what the inmates get. They get fresh produce and they just love it. So really, you have just a general boost in moral. They are like, "hey we have fresh vegetables and fruit." That is huge. That is just huge.

AS: It is things like that to me that make me feel like we are contributing to something worthwhile. They are getting better produce than you can get at Safeway. They don't get produced that is wilted. So the nutritional value is great. Just the idea that they grew it themselves is just great. They take real pride in it. They are weeding it, fertilizing it, growing it, harvesting it, and eating it.

PL: How many inmates work in the gardens?

AS: We have about 20 inmates working and it has worked really well.

JS: You know, some of these guys don't have just the fundamental work skills. Many of them have just never worked. So you have young guys coming in who have never done anything.

JS: I did landscaping for 28 years before working here at the prison. I used to work with crews of guys who had very little knowledge of how to do basic things, like making all your garden beds in a straight line. I would leave the work site and come back and all the beds would be snake like and the posts would be all different sizes. This all was because nobody told them how to do it. When I came to the prison I made sure that they knew what they were doing. It was not about telling them what to do, but the reason that we do it this way. This is the result you will get if you do it this way. So we taught them. Now that they are taught, everything is absolutely perfect. These guys are so proud. They will do it, just if you tell them how.

AS: Yeah, so they are eager.

JS: One inmate came up to me the other day and said "this has been the most productive experience in my adult life." He said "alls I ever did was sell drugs. That is all I ever did." It was just tremendous for him.

AS: You can see the pride in him. He is learning.

JS: They do everything. So, when they put the institution in, it is kinda hilly, so they grades it flat, and all that soil is in a huge mound. It was all really pretty good top-soil. We got dump truck loads of manure from ranchers and we have got guys who can operate tractor. We mixed that tops soil with the manure from ranchers. This is what the beds are made from. Two loads of top soil and one loads of steer manure. The beds are all mounded up, except for the terrace beds.

JS: So the inmates do all this. They put all the dirt in. They put all the rock in. We start the plants. In the spring time we have all the plants on the tables in the greenhouse and it is just solid. It is just so beautiful. They then take those little plants and bring them outside and they just get really excited because it starts to look ore and more like a garden. And then when they start hauling hundred of pounds of produce to the kitchen, they are just elated. They started just these little plants and they have hauled all this stuff to the kitchen and here it is on their trays.

AS: I think it has been really good for them. A few of them have said that they would like to pursue this when they get out. We tell them that there are opportunities and that the organic farming businesses is getting popular. There is a real market for this organic thing.

PL: What are the differences between working in the prison garden versus working in the community garden in Lakeview?

AS: In a way it is not easier, because everything has to be ok'ed and regulated. It took us longer to get things going and to get our supplies.

JS: But, the prison garden has already been successful and the community garden will probably struggle.

AS: Yeah, the community garden will be maintained by volunteers and the prison garden will be maintained by the prisoners. So in that aspect of it, we can have all the labor we could ever want. So that is not a problem.

JS: In the prison garden you have a lot of men and a lot of young men, whereas in the community garden so far it is mainly of older people who are volunteers. Very older people. So the workforce is minimal. So what has to happen is that you have a few individuals from the rotary club and the Master Gardeners Association, they are helping out with it, buy nobody from the community who is not attached to one of those organizations.

AS: We started working things out with the Boy Scouts and we started a junior master gardeners program. They planted a section there self, so they will be working on that. We are actually going to work it out so they can get community service credit by working in the community garden.

JS: Another aspect of it is that the food from the community garden goes to the food bank and the recipients of the produce get it and they don't know what to do with it. They don't know what to do with produce. They don't know how to prepare it or cook it. Then they have to get classes to teach them how to cook.

AS: Yeah, last year we put on a class to show these people what to do. These people are used to cooking macaroni and cheese from the box. That is hard to believe for me. I mean that is just foreign to me, but I guess there are many many people who just were not brought up to cook these things.

JS: You would think that this kind of gardening knowledge would be second nature in a rural community, but it is not, especially in these areas where you have low income families.

AS: You know, prefab food is more expensive than growing it yourself. I guess that is just how they have been raised.

[Anita leaves to go to the kitchen to get coffees for all of us]

JS: It seems like all over the country, those basic skills have disappeared with the changes in the generations. More of the people coming up are more and more subject to technology and technical entertainments and less work, and so they are more removed from those things [like gardening], so they don't know what to do.

PL: So at the prison, the cooks don't have this problem?

JS: Yeah, at the prison, if you need to get a job done, they are there and if one of the inmates is an electrician we have working as an electrician, we get a guy with plumbing experience to do the plumbing, and we have cooks also. We have a lead baker, a lead cook, and just people cutting and doing the prep work. So it is a pretty organized system there. Then we have food services coordinators who are not corrections officers who supervise inmates.

JS: We have big freezers and coolers. The new food services manager bought a big industrial size dehydrator so things can be preserved for the winter. The work that the inmates do in the prison has a certain point. They do a job that has a certain amount of points. If you clean the bathrooms, that might be a 4 point job. The guys working in the gardens are looking at a 14 or 15 point job. So an inmate can make up to \$77 per month. Usually the more physically demanding the work the more points for the job.

JS: The garden is a very good job. It is a very coveted job.

PL: Are there prisoners who would like to work in the garden, but can't because those jobs are already filled?

JS: There is a huge waiting list. It is very sought after. They are out there with the vegetables and the flowers. Now we have bird houses that the inmates just love.

JS: So because we are dealing with a prison, there are a lot of regulations on what you can do. For the bird houses, we had to put them way high up because of contraband issues, so inmates couldn't put stuff in them.

AS: That is what I mean when I say it is easier to work sometimes at the community garden. If you want a bird house you just put in a bird house. If you want to grow a 12ft sun flower, you put it in.

JS: When the guys put the bird houses in, the birds were fighting to get in. The inmates were just fascinated. For these guys who are convicted felons, they are just like little kids over just simple things. So it is a huge tool to use to get these guys to see just another aspect of life.

AS: The bird houses act a natural bug repellent. We can't use any chemicals also, because that is another issue. Basically anything that is a liability is regulated. We can use soap water, but we can't use other chemicals to spray them. That's a good thing, even though we legally can't.

JS: You also have time limits. At 11:30, everyday, we have a count where you count every inmate in the institution. So the garden crew can't be out later than 11 because they have in their housing unit and in their bunks by 11:30. Also, every garden tool is inventoried and has to be accounted for. That is part of the security issue. If a pair of pruners that were checked are not checked back in, it is a lockdown situation. It could get very complicated.

AS: Oh yeah, definitely. But they have all been very, very good and haven't done anything like that and they are very respectful of me.

PL: Are the tools checked out to inmates different from other garden tools?

AS: Any of the tools could be used as a weapon, but they allow them to use it. There were some fence posts that were not ok'ed.

JS: This is a release facility and the most time an inmate will spend here is 3 years. Some will be sent of to a drug rehabilitation center, so there is a lot of turnover, which means you have to train new people all the time.

JS: These guys are actually so enthused that they are actually teaching each other, so everybody knows the why and the how of the garden and this knowledge is just passed on.

AS: Other prisons I know have gardens, but not like the one we have. I think we were supplied with a lot more. We had a great superintendent who was really enthused about the garden program. That was perhaps the greatest asset to the garden program. Many of the staff know nothing about gardening, so we are really involved. So they have basically allowed us to tell them what to do. It has been a neat experience and just to see the success of it in just the first year is really amazing, especially with the late start we had.

JS: We have both gardened for almost 40 years and growing around here is a lot different than growing down south in California. When we came here we had a lot of experience, but it is totally different around here. We had to learn how to grow things here. It took us a number of years to get things dialed in. When the prison came, we had enough time and experience living and gardening in the area. We said, "Ok, do this, do this, and do this," and low and behold, it worked. It was a no brainer. It would have been a disaster if we tried to start the prison garden right when we got here.

AS: When I came here I had to stretch my growing knowledge. With the climate being colder here, and the freezes, I had to learn trick here and there. Once you know how to do it it is fine. It is just about adapting to the environment to make it work. It can work.

JS: Just a little bit of variance can change things. The weather in Pine Creek, which they call the banana belt, has a different climate than that at the prison. The lake effect makes it a little warmer.

AS: There are over 250 soil types in Lake County, and the soil here is drawsloane, whereas the prison is like a zone 4 where it is a lot cooler and more wind.

JS: We use the buildings to block the wind, and we also plant the tomatoes near the south facing wall to the sunlit wall can help warm the soil.

AS: We are hoping to expand and because we are proving to them that it works, this year we were given the west side to use. We eventually want to get stuff growing outside the fence.

JS: The guys are earning the confidence of the administration more and more, so we will tell them that they can't mess this project up. We tell them not to do anything stupid, like try and grow medicinal plants in here amongst the tomatoes.

AS: They have been really good and they don't really need to be disciplined at all.

PL: What other jobs can inmates do that get them outside, like the garden crew?

JS: We have guys on outside work crews. They go out to La Pine and other places, and they really like that. Their ability to go outside the fence depends on their custody level.

AS: Almost all of our garden crew does not have outside clearance, so they can't leave the facility. So for them to be able to work in the garden is just great. This is why it is such a sought after job.

JS: A lot of guys here can't go outside the secure perimeter.

[We then discussed the variety of vegetables grown in the prison garden. Vegetables grown include: tomatoes (Oregon Spring, roma, cherry), squash (acorn, crook neck, yellow, hubbard), cucumbers (lemon, straight A), pumpkins, cantaloupes, watermelon, snow peas, carrots, bush beans, onions, garlic, chives, basil, thyme, cilantro, peppers, , etc.]

JS: As I said earlier, the guys can earn up to \$77 a month and they can buy items from Canteen [warehouse in Salem, distribution center for Oregon's correctional facilities]. They can purchase everything from radios, CD players, cookies, donuts, and other stuff. The cryovac machine we have, which can be used to preserve produce, as well as the dehydrator, is great because we hope to eventually have goods (jerky especially) that inmates can purchase off canteen instead of purchasing it from a vendor.

JS: We also have 3 worm bins that is now on a pretty small scale, but can eventually be turned into a real big project. One of the inmates I talked to has a family member who made about 20 bins to raise worms and he sells the worms to landfills to breakdown the organics. We think we might be able to do something like that, but one of the difficulties we have is that as an institution we can do something that is a possible job for someone in the public. If we do something that takes away a job from someone in the community, it becomes a problem.

[Anita pulled out here list, about 7 pages that detailed all the seeds they purchased for the garden]

JS: The whole concept of the garden is not to be the only food source for inmates. It is a really small portion of the food consumed. They are feeding 400 inmates a day.

AS: Adding flowers to the garden boosts moral. The inmates love the flowers. I have found that a lot of the guys will tell me, "oh, my grandmother used to grow this," or "oh, my mom had a garden," you know what I mean. I think it evokes good memories. It is neat. Last year we had two black inmates who wanted to grow collard greens, because this was the kind of food their mothers and grandmothers would cook for them.

PL: Are gardens popular in other prisons throughout the country?

JS: Oh yeah, they are all over.

AS: I have spoken to other people working in other prisons and it doesn't sound like they have anything like we have. This is only what I have heard, so I don't know for sure.

JS: I am a corrections officer at the prison, but when I come to work in the garden I am coming in as a volunteer. Thirteen of the inmates in the garden crew is in my housing unit, so I get more respect from them because I am volunteering my own time to work with them in the garden. They know full well that I am a cop, but they also know that I am a volunteer. In the housing unit I am the cop. In the garden I am the volunteer with his wife. I end up with a little more respect than other officers, because I volunteer my time in the garden.

AS: The inmates really respect the volunteers, because they know you are here when you really don't need to be. They really respect volunteers.

JS: In one of the facilities years back there was a riot and the inmates nearly burned down the whole building. In the middle of the building was a filing cabinet and a radio on top of it and these things were left totally untouched. That filing cabinet and that radio belonged to the volunteers and it was like a sacred item.

AS: It is a good example of how much they appreciate volunteers and respect them. If you think about it, it really makes sense, because they are probably spending most of their time thinking that the whole world is against them.

JS: For us to make this program successful, I don't let her do this by herself. We have to always remember that this is a prison. She usually plays the role as the technical advisor when we are out in the garden. What I am getting at is that if I was a person that the inmates had no respect for, it would not work.

AS: It really is true. If you treat them with respect, they will treat you with respect. If you don't, things don't work well. They are human beings. Even though they are criminals and they really have been awful people, they still, inside them, they want respect. It is a human trait I guess.

JS: For so many of these guys, self worth is a huge issue. These guys are there because of a lot of awful things that have happened, but I wasn't hired to punish inmates. I was hired by the state of Oregon to be a pro-social individual and to impart some life skills to inmates and to be able to relate to them, and to show them how to interact with normal people. I am not there to make their life miserable because they are criminals. I am in charge of their safety, and to some degree their health, and to make sure everybody is ok and that nobody is sick. So, I am really there for the safe keeping of the inmates.

AS: It has been said that we are not there to punish them. There being there is their punishment. That is kind of an interesting thought and it is true.

JS: Right. I am not there to judge them. Being there is there payment for the crime. You know, being taken out of society. That is not my job. I am not there to make their lives miserable.

AS: One inmate has asked to get more gardening books.

JS: These inmates read all the time. That can backfire on you [laugh] because you be out there in the garden doing something and they say, “well that is not how they say to do it in the book.”

One inmate is working on this BLM native plants project and he knows so much that he is keeping some of his knowledge to himself. He says, “I ain’t going to show them all my notes.” So this inmate has a lot of knowledge and is building a trade that can be a major asset when he gets out.

PL: What are some things that you would like to see happen in the prison garden in the future?

JS: We have less of a role in the garden now that it is going and the inmates are working and running it. But the inmates like to see us and bounce questions of us. We are sort of at the point where we are saying, “do we get out of it,” because we have a lot going on ourselves. So I don’t know.

AS: We talk about getting out of it and still being a part of it.

JS: We have stuck with it because we started the thing and it sort of has our name on it. But, one of the things that I see happening is that for the people who inherited it, they think it is a simple thing. So, I think there is a feeling that we are needed less and less. It isn’t a competitive thing, like this is our garden now, because if that happens I just walk into the superintendent’s office as say “hey, we gotta talk.” One of the things the superintendent stressed when the guard started was water conservation. He didn’t want the community to start thinking that the institution was wasting water. He was very concerned about that so we use soaker hoses and mulch.

JS: In the first year, we had a difficult time getting the inmates to understand watering. You would go out there and there would be puddles in one spot with algae growing and then spots that were totally dry.

AS: Again, it is a problem of a lack of teaching. I want to see the Education Program start teaching gardening classes. That will extend the garden program that much further, especially if the inmates are asking for it. Also, we could extend the composting program more or try and get to the point where we could start selling our compost.

JS: Again, we can do anything that won’t take away jobs from people in the community. For example, we can have inmates go and shovel the Safeway parking lot. Someone in the community can be hired to do that.

AS: We can’t, for example, start selling petunias. That would take business away from the local nursery.

JS: We can’t sell our tomatoes to the community, because Safeway does that. We can donate anything. For example, we could donate pumpkins to the Boy Scouts and have them sell them to raise money for the Boy Scouts. The DOC is really trying to strengthen partnerships with community. The prisoners cleared some overgrown softball fields that you could hardly see because they were so overgrown. They can do things that aren’t going to get done unless they do it.

JS: When they needed to get the community pool going, they got a crew of inmates to scrape and repaint the pool. The community really just loves this.



JS: Before the prison came in there was a lot of hostility towards having the institution come in. There were a lot of horror stories in people's minds, and that is what they thought was coming to town. Not just concerns about the inmates, but also the corrections officers. There is a joke: the only difference between inmates and corrections officers is that inmates are behind bars while corrections officers are not. But, now that you have them volunteering for the fire department and managing the school baseball team, for example, you have people saying this isn't so bad.

AS: Just from an economic standpoint, it is really good.

JS: One thing we need to do is put all the information on gardening, like watering and planting, in writing. We need a manual.

AS: Even the inmates who don't get to work in garden just have been really enthused about it. They like to see it. The staff now comes to us asking how to start a garden or how to plant certain things.

JS: We are guessing we will triple the harvest we had the first year, which was 6,000.

AS: This year we got stuff in a lot earlier.

JS: Things start to crop up in a prison when there is a lot of idleness, when there is not a lot to do. Now all of a sudden there are jobs for 20 guys to work in the garden. It is beneficial to the prison and to the community when these guys get out.

AS: It is more than just helping one inmate and teaching one inmate how to garden. When they leave here they can spread what they know and do good with it. That is what my goal for the garden is. They can take these skills with them. This gives them a possibility when they get out. It could be a good job source for them.

PL: Is the inmate population ethnically diverse?

JS: It is mostly white, but we have Native Americans, African Americans, and there is an expanding Hispanic population.

AS: As we got more into the program, the inmates started to request certain plants. We had several Hispanics asking us to get more chili peppers.

JS: We had this one guy who had a pepper plant that he made his own. We had a freeze and it was hit real hard. He worked to keep the pepper plant alive and when it came back he was really enthused. That's his pet. He was encouraged when he saw this plant come back to life.

AS: We have a guy who does all the herb beds, and you can tell that he is really proud of his herb bed. Some people may say "Big deal." But, like I said, it is a good work.

JS: It is huge.

AS: It is not only good nutritionally, but it is good for their souls.

PL: So you think just having green space in the facility has a positive effect on the inmates?

JS: I think it has a huge effect. Here they are in a prison and they have flowers, color, birds inside an institution. It breaks down that institutional entrapment and the feeling that "I am in prison." It is kinda like moving into a park.

AS: We had this group of inmates who asked if we could take a picture of them in front of the flowers. This, I think, shows that there is still something inside of them aside from the hardened criminal. They are people with interests and emotions, like us. The garden brings that stuff out.

AS: I work at the community garden, and like here, it is something that draws people together in a place where there is not a lot to do. You reach to get people involved. The ripples go out.

JS: We are pretty much going until it is bed time. You know there is just that little pause at the end. That little brief pause.

AS: We raised our kids without a TV, so we have all leaned to fill up our days. Today's technology is an entrapment.

JS: No, but for young people growing up here it is hard, because there isn't much to do. Drugs are a big problem among youth in rural areas. For a lot of the kids here, ranching doesn't keep them here.

AS: But, at the same time a lot of them leave and come back to raise a family.