

FROM DESPAIR TO RENEWAL:

Rebuilding

BELIZE

Central Prison



By John C. Woods

From as many as a dozen inmates crammed into a single cell, most of them sleeping without bedding on wet concrete floors, to two-man cells with a bed, sheet, pillow and blanket for every inmate. From slop stirred with a shovel and delivered to hapless inmates by wheelbarrow to balanced meals served in a mess hall next to a modern kitchen. These are just a few of the changes that have occurred at Belize Central Prison since 2002.

To understand the rehabilitation of Belize Central Prison, one needs to realize that Belize is an underdeveloped former British Colony the size of Massachusetts. It has never had an income equal to the problems facing it.

The previous penitentiary with a capacity of 300 inmates stood in Belize City in what is now a crowded residential area. Crime flourished and the prison population exploded. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the prison, the only one in the country, was forced to hold more than 800 inmates. It was in dire need of maintenance and upgrading.

To address its many problems, a new prison was begun at Hattieville, 15 miles west of the capital. The design of the new prison was good and

its objectives were commendable. However, financial resources were not available for professional completion of the facility. Corners were cut everywhere possible so the job could be completed. Sand and salt water adulterated the concrete and inmates themselves ended up building the prison. Housing the inmates rapidly — not housing them well — was the priority. Concerns for security, structural strength and integrity of the building, sanitation, and the welfare and safety of the inmates were shoved aside because money was not available to complete the prison as designed.

In 1993, the inmates were relocated to Hattieville although completion of the prison was at a minimum acceptable level. Buildings and cells were incomplete, and there were no sewage facilities and no potable water. Three hundred beds held 900 inmates and when it rained, cell floors flooded.

No proper kitchen or mess hall had been built and the shed used for food preparation was overrun with feral cats and cockroaches. In addition, staff stole provisions before they could be cooked. Food was prepared in great kettles on an open-air fire, was stirred by shovels that were tossed to the ground after use, and then was delivered to the inmates in wheelbar-

rows. If a man did not have a plate for his meal, it was slopped into his outstretched hands and he was forced to eat like an animal. Also, no arrangements had been made for disposal of garbage, there was no in-house hospital or clinic and administrative offices did not exist.

Addressing The Prison's Needs

By 2002, the government recognized that the prison was being mismanaged. Corruption was endemic and the government took the bold step of admitting the problems. In August 2002, management of the facility was handed over to the Kolbe Foundation, a private, nonprofit organization made up of concerned members of the Rotary Club of Belize. The government contract guarantees Kolbe 12 Belize dollars (\$6) per day per inmate to cover food and housing. Despite the paucity of funds, in two years the Kolbe Foundation has transformed the Belize Central Prison from an embarrassment to the government into an institution of learning and rehabilitation.

Kolbe's first job was ensuring that inmates were comfortable and secure.

Inmates at Belize Central Prison learn kitchen basics as a part of the facility's work program.



Photos courtesy Belize Central Prison

New buildings were added to the complex and gradually, the prison population was divided into separately housed groups — remand, minimum security, maximum-medium, super-max, females and youths. A separate unit held special inmates such as those with AIDS and mental or physical problems. Funds were raised to accomplish this through local solicitation from the government and local businesses.

Anyone familiar with U.S. penitentiaries would be startled at the openness of the Hattieville prison. Low buildings are widely spaced. Instead of blank concrete walls, steel mesh fencing surrounds the prison and divides the compounds. Inmates look out across playing fields to the open savannah. Most of the buildings face a wide grassy area and a large pond, the pleasant remainder of a pit dug to obtain fill material during construction. In addition, beds of bright flowers bloom just beyond the fences surrounding the buildings.

Cell doors rarely are locked and when they are, it usually is the inmate who turns the key to protect his or her privacy. When asked about this policy, three inmates simultaneously reached into their pockets, extracted keys and dangled them happily. One of them, Santiago Baeza, who runs the prison radio station, remarked, "Kolbe gives us so much trust." Sharp shooters brought from the village of Santa Marta man the several watch towers 24 hours a day. Correctional officers monitor the activity in and around the cells. In the two years preceding the takeover, there were 92 escapes. Since Kolbe took charge of the prison, there has only been three successful

escapes out of the 12 that have been attempted.

Linsberth Logan, a long-time inmate, served in the old Belize City prison, then in the unfinished Hattieville facility, and now is in the Kolbe-managed prison. He spoke about the congestion in the Belize City walled enclosure and termed the new prison "a fresh breeze." In Logan's opinion, there is a 90 percent increase in freedom. "It makes you feel like a human again," he said.

Well-prepared, varied meals now are served from a newly tiled kitchen. The prison kitchen is the largest "caterer" in the country, serving approximately 1,400 inmates and staff three times a day.

Rehabilitating Inmates

Once the most glaring of the prison's physical needs had been met, Kolbe launched its program of healing inmates and helping them gain the skills they need to become productive members of society. The first change was treating inmates as individuals with dignity instead of as numbers. Most of the inmates committed theft or drug-related crimes, and their average sentence length is five years.

Rehabilitation efforts are centered in the new Rotary Learning Center built with funds from the Rotary Club and augmented by private donations and government help. It houses the clinic, radio station, classrooms, library, conference room and the Bible study room.

The Wagner Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in Wisconsin, and Michael Singh, a Kolbe board member, donated funds to build the

Wagner Youth Facility on the grounds of the Belize Central Prison. Young offenders are separated from older, hardcore inmates. The youth program is a cross between boot camp and school. Rather than being in cells, the boys sleep in a large dormitory with bunk beds. Heavy chests provide private storage for each person's possessions and do double duty as daytime seats.

An inmate with exceptional talent in working with youths is in charge of the youth facility. Mervin Reyes, better known as "Ranger," had extensive military training, took drugs and wound up in prison. While he was imprisoned, Ranger devoted himself to Christianity. His background and ability to work with youths is the reason why Ranger was chosen to run the youth facility, reporting to the board of directors.

Ranger says his two-prong program of regimentation and of teaching life skills is designed to prepare the young offenders "to survive in the real world." Ranger explained that the boys must be occupied for 16 hours a day. Within reason, they may choose academic classes, one of the seven trades offered, or computer literacy, depending on demand. Classes in English and math are held in the facility with special teachers exclusively for the youths. Ranger says he is hoping that someday they may also have their own trade program inside the facility. "These boys are at a crucial position in life," Ranger said, adding that his discipline is designed to break down street-learned rebelliousness with sternness tempered by love.

Ministers from the various denominations hold services in the Chapel of



Inmates learn computer skills and repair in the computer lab located in the new learning center.

Hope. Most of them provide counseling services to inmates during their visits to the prison. The dean among them is Father John Stochl, a retired Jesuit priest in his 80s. While the churchmen reinforce the message of God's love, proselytizing is discouraged. Lay counselors are available to help inmates with their private concerns, an important facet of the rehabilitation mission.

Kolbe projects a Christian message; the force of faith permeates the institution. The prison radio station is on all day long, broadcasting religious music, sermons by people the caliber of Billy Graham, educational material and, to suit the preferences of inmates, some popular music. Baeza runs the station with first-rate equipment and an impressive library of CDs. His studio in the learning center is an air-conditioned corner room overlooking the pond.

While Baeza was raised in a Catholic family and attended Christian schools, he gave into a now-regretted street life. "I hope the entire thousand in this prison will change as I did," Baeza said. He termed the Kolbe-run institution "a washing machine of society."

Education and Training

The literacy project is Kolbe's key to equipping inmates for life beyond prison. Minimum-risk inmates study English and arithmetic. Classes range from teaching the ABCs to second-year high school level instruction. Not only are the inmates attentive students, they clamor to take advantage of the classes. New teachers have joined the staff to meet the increased popularity of this basic education.

In the beginning, only a handful of students passed local exams. Now Kolbe is gearing up for a dramatic increase in the number of successful students. Kolbe acknowledges both the increased responsibilities and the potential successes of equipping an ever-larger percentage of inmates with the skills they need to reintegrate into society when released.

The jewel of the prison's educational facilities is the computer lab. This year, the Wagner Foundation donated 21 computers and materials for a computer maintenance workshop. Two young men from the United States teach computer skills and computer repair. Inmates realize that the computer is the most powerful tool currently available to the average person. As a result, the inmate response has been overwhelming and they race to sign up for classes.

Inmate Anthony Craig recruits for the educational programs in the prison. He is a member of the EMT team and helps conduct inmate and staff surveys of activities. He also is a poet. "Part of my work is finding potential teachers," Craig said. Inmates at the prison attend special classes where they are taught to teach so that they can help with academics. "My job is to pluck out talents that we have here so that we can utilize them," Craig said.

The clinic in the learning center is a neat, well-equipped medical complex of several rooms, including an isolation unit. A nurse is on duty during the day and a doctor keeps regular hours in the clinic. Mark Thompson, a well-educated capable man and trained emergency medical technician, manages the clinic. He, too, is an inmate. Thompson explained that he and

other graduates of the 65-strong prison EMT class are available to cope with minor problems or illnesses at night. If the problem is beyond their competence, they can quickly transport patients to the hospital in Belize City with the prison ambulance.

Most AIDS patients obtain better treatment in prison than they would on the streets. They receive needed medicine, regular doctor visits, special diets and counseling. There also is a support group for them. Furthermore, one of Kolbe's educational projects is teaching the prison population at large to understand AIDS, avoid infection and to be kind to those carrying the disease.

Errol Fairweather is the HIV-AIDS counselor. An AIDS patient himself, Fairweather was admitted to the prison on a stretcher weighing only 100 pounds. Thanks to the dedicated care provided at the prison, including diet and medication, he now weighs 190 pounds.

Funds are limited at the prison, so hiring staff to take over the responsibilities that Baeza, Craig, Thompson, Fairweather and some of the other inmates have is not feasible. When Kolbe first took over the prison, board members found extremely qualified inmates to help run different aspects of the facility and formed an inmate advisory board. The board of directors meets with the advisory board weekly to discuss the management of the prison. Kolbe's main goal is to help the inmates get their lives together and become productive members of society, and the inmate advisory board is one way in which the Kolbe Foundation is accomplishing this.

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Employment

Inmates work at a variety of jobs around the institution. Recently, the rules were changed that made enrollment in schooling in the prison learning program a prerequisite for admittance to the work program. Inmates cooperated enthusiastically. About 300 minimum-risk inmates currently act as apprentices to the maintenance staff. They are learning several trades, including plumbing, block-making, masonry and electrician.

The work program teaches inmates work etiquette. The concepts of reporting for work on time and of signing in and out are new to most of them. The majority never have held an honest job or known what it is like to work for wages.

Inmates working under this program earn 20 cents to 35 cents per hour, averaging 3 Belize dollars (\$1.50) per day. Rules of the program ensure that half of their wage is deposited in a savings account. This money cannot be withdrawn except for a compelling reason such as family emergencies. Gradually, more and more inmates are learning the advantages of saving. The funds accumulated through the work program give inmates a cash cushion upon release.

Inmates also work in various farming projects. The farm surrounding the prison offers a chance for the mostly urban inmates to immerse themselves in the unfamiliar area of agriculture. Inmates learn the care and precision needed for livestock and fields to flourish. They tend the gardens where corn, squash, tomatoes and other vegetables are grown to supply their own kitchen. Banana and plantain trees provide fruit for the mess tables. In addition, caring for the pigs teaches inmates animal husbandry along with

the pride of providing meat for the prison table. Their work in the chicken house keeps the kitchen supplied with both eggs and meat.

In the kitchen, inmates, with their hair confined under tight caps, shape large rolls formed from the 600 pounds of flour needed to supply bread for each meal. They learn kitchen basics that later may help them get jobs in the burgeoning tourism industry.

Teachers in handcraft workshops train inmates in the arts of making jewelry, needlecraft, woodcarving and other handcrafts. Their handsome creations are placed on consignment with the National Handcraft Center, a tourist Mecca. Inmates receive a share of the proceeds and the rest is used to equip and maintain the workshops.

The new PAWS project is a stripped-down Belizean version of the dog training programs promoted in several U.S. prisons. Working with the Belize Humane Society, inmates nurse to health and give basic training to street dogs and puppies. Eventually, the restored animals are placed for adoption for the community.

In addition, the prison's inmates may be among the best-dressed inmates anywhere. When customs officials confiscated a container with \$600,000-worth of counterfeit clothing, Kolbe asked that it be donated to the prison. Inmates now sport "designer" jeans and shirts while working or attending classes.

A Secure, Humane Facility

The Kolbe Foundation's name honors Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Nazi inmate. On July 31, 1941, in reprisal for one inmate's escape from Auschwitz, Nazi guards chose several men at ran-

dom to be executed. Kolbe offered his own life in place of a young husband and father. Kolbe was the last of the group to die after enduring two weeks of starvation, thirst and neglect. The inmate originally picked to die survived Auschwitz and lived to age 95. In 1981, Pope John Paul II canonized Kolbe, who has become the patron saint of all inmates.

The board of directors of the Kolbe Foundation is drawn primarily from members of the Rotary Club. The board brings a wide array of skills to the task of running the Belize Central Prison: accounting, engineering, construction, military, corporate management and tourism. Further, the members offer a wealth of worldly experience; but more important, they offer common sense.

The board of directors feels that there is something special going on in the prison. This is proved through the government's ongoing support, and even through the prime minister's two visits to the prison.

The foundation's approach is unorthodox; however, it seems to be working. The recidivism rate since Kolbe's takeover has fallen from 60 percent to 25 percent. And as mentioned before, the escape rate has decreased dramatically. The penitentiary already lives up to the Kolbe motto as a "secure, humane facility geared toward meaningful rehabilitation."

John C. Woods is chairman of the Kolbe Foundation Board of Directors. Woods immigrated to Belize as a pilot in 1969 after having served in the U.S. Army. In 2001, Woods was asked to chair an advisory board for the prison. Disturbed by the conditions he found there, with the help of fellow Rotarians, he formed the Kolbe Foundation.