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COLUMN Inmates prize instruments of change

BILL NEMITZ February 22, 2009

What would you do if you suddenly found yourself with one free day a week?

Clean the garage?

Read a book?

Grab your guitar and head for the nearest prison?

Meet Jim Svendsen of Gorham, who chose the latter.

Svendsen, 52, works as a project manager for PM Construction of Saco. Late last year, he volunteered to reduce his work week from five days to four, figuring he and his wife could afford the cutback better than some of his younger co-workers struggling to make ends meet.

Around the same time, Svendsen heard about the proposed \$2 million cut in Maine's Department of Corrections budget. It got him thinking about all those people behind bars – especially the ones who were there because from the day they were born, they "just never had a break."

"As a culture, we have come to expect the government to do everything that needs doing," Svendsen said last week. "But recent events have shown that we need to rethink that mind-set and start doing things for ourselves."

Things like sharing our talents – which in Svendsen's case happens to be playing the guitar.

Last month, Svendsen fired off an e-mail to the Department of Corrections offering to spend an hour or two a week teaching guitar to inmates at the Maine Correctional Center in Windham.

Talk about timing.

"I couldn't believe it," said Noreen Dunphy, who coordinates the 350 volunteers at the prison. "I'd had six brand-new guitars sitting in my office for about a month, but I had no teachers."

It seems that long before Svendsen came along, inmate Dan Mutty (an accomplished guitarist) had been lobbying for a guitar program for some time. Among those who agreed it was a good idea was Kristen Stevens, who teaches reading and "work ready" classes at the prison.

Stevens, in fact, had come across a program in the United Kingdom called "Jail Guitar Doors." Founded in 2007 by British musician Billy Bragg, it provides prison inmates with guitars as rehabilitation tools.

Stevens e-mailed Bragg and asked if the program's reach extended across the Atlantic.

"He wrote back instantly and said he'd see what he could do," Stevens said. "And one week later, just before Christmas, the FedEx truck dropped off six new guitars from the United Kingdom."

The brand-new Gibson Epiphones were donated by Gibson Musical Instruments. Stevens wrote back to Bragg asking what he needed in the way of paperwork to document the donation.

"He said, 'Don't worry about it - we operate on faith,'" she recalled.

Which brings us back to Svendsen, who for the record grew up in foster homes around New York City and thus understands the fine line between what is and what could have been.

Friday afternoon, he pulled up to the prison in his pickup, unloaded his own Martin travel guitar and headed for the first of many locked gates.

Fifteen minutes later, Svendsen sat in a circle with six inmates - including Mutty, now his teaching assistant - for the fourth of 12 weekly classes aimed at teaching them the basic chords, strumming techniques and ... who knows?

This lesson focused on one song - Bob Dylan's "Knocking on Heaven's Door." Svendsen chose it not so much for its irony, but because its four chords - D, A, E minor and G - are all relatively easy to play.

Or not.

"My fingers don't want to do it, but I think I've got it," said Jordan Bennett, 22, as he struggled to keep up. His goal, he later said, was to play for his 3-year-old daughter when he heads home to Bethel this spring.

"Her name's Brook," Jordan said with a smile. "When I get out, I'm going to teach her how to play."

A few seats down, an inmate who identified himself only as "Joe" was already flying through the chords he'd learned only three weeks ago. In fact, Joe has already written a song of his own called "Silhouette" - it's about him and his 17-year-old son, to whom he sang it over the phone last week.

"It gives you something to be proud of," Joe said, still strumming. "And it really transports you. It seems to get out a lot of emotions."

Svendsen harbors no illusions that his 12-week program, which he intends to repeat indefinitely, will save the world. And he knows there are some who will dismiss what he's doing with a cynical shrug and mutter that prison inmates have no business feeling good about anything.

But he also knows if he manages to steer just one inmate in the right direction with a six-string, his free Friday afternoons will be time very well spent.

Just ask Anthony Shane, 31, of Boothbay. When he gets out of prison late this summer, he'll now have two things to show for it.

"I got my GED," Shane said. "And I'll know how to play the guitar."

Even as Shane prepared to head back to his cell, Svendsen was still hard at work showing another inmate how to master a C chord.

"That guy's excellent," Shane said. "There should be more people like him."

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