

## Building for Habitat house

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By: Amy McCullough, Staff Writer

Everything is gray concrete at Delta Correctional Facility, but the smell of sawdust and the color of wood reside in a certain back room.

There, 40 prison inmates attend classes on carpentry. The program with instructor Louis Lockhart, who has 20 years of carpentry experience, has been going on for about a year. A couple of months ago, the classes started building projects for Habitat for Humanity.



Inmates in the vo-tech program at Delta Correctional Facility in Greenwood and their instructor, Louis Lockhart, check out the plans for cabinets they are building for a Habitat for Humanity house on Church Street. From the left are Willie Triplett, Tommy Pinson, Jimmy Young, Rufus Ross, Lockhart, Andrew Rucker, Michael Argo, Steve Goodwin, Kelvin Thompson and Bennie Clark.

“We hope to expand the program with Habitat for Humanity,” said Charlotte Burns, an assistant warden.

The vo-tech class recently donated a storage building they had made to

the Greenwood Interfaith Ministries Community Kitchen for storage of their staple goods.

Their current project is a kitchen and bathroom cabinets for a Habitat house in Greenwood and one in Itta Bena, said Rocky Powers, who has done extensive volunteer work with Habitat for Humanity.

“It’s really top-quality stuff,” Powers said.

Most of the inmates would like to do something besides sit and watch TV, Powers said.

When those from the vo-tech program are released, he said, “they could walk out and find a job on the Gulf Coast tomorrow.”

People have a negative impression of the prison, said Richard Beattie, chair of fund raising and board member of Interfaith Ministries. “The relationship we have with them has been nothing but positive,” he said.

Lockhart said inmates must have a GED and must have had a clean disciplinary record for six months to qualify for the program. The class is extremely popular but can accommodate only 40 at a time, he said.

The program lasts six months. Two of those months are spent in the classroom learning construction math, safety, usage of hand and power tools, blueprints and rigging.

There are then four months of actual construction work. The classroom portion uses nationally accredited textbooks, and students graduate with a certificate, Lockhart said.

Some current class members have been kept on to work on the current Habitat project, however.

Program inmates also built the Greenwood-Leflore County Chamber of Commerce and prison floats for the city Christmas parade.

Lockhart makes two or three inmates, such as Jimmy Young, peer instructors.

Young, 42, has been in the program for a year. He said it helps keep his mind off other things.

“I enjoy it more than anything because I’m able to get out and do something ... It’s a better environment than other ones here,” he said.

So far, Young has built cabinets, computer desks, a card catalog and some book shelves.

He didn’t think he would like peer tutoring when he started, he said.

“There are some good guys over here,” Young said.

Kelvin Thompson, 46, recently completed the course. He was a wood refinisher before going to prison. “Now I want to learn how to build it,” he said.

The cabinets for Habitat will give him more experience, he said. “I like working with my hands.”

The class plans more projects, such as gazebos. The correctional facility can also keep them busy with softball, dominos, chess or other activities, Thompson said.

Tommy Pinson, 35, also did wood working before coming to the program. He has 15 years’ experience as a carpenter. “I’d rather sit in here than sit in the zone and do nothing all day,” he said.

Besides a computer course or the GED program, there aren’t a lot of other programming options, Pinson said. He said it is rewarding to stand back and look at something he has made.

Another student, Rufus Ross, 38, had nothing but good things to say about the program.

“I think it’s wonderful,” he said. “I think every man in the penitentiary should experience something like this because it will help them in the long run ... I think I could take this to the free world.”

Inmate Willie Triplett, 38, a vo-tech program student, has found one other program that has helped him get his life in order. It is led by chaplain David Henderson and helps inmates get their lives together, spiritually and otherwise.

“If anyone does get incarcerated to DCF, I wish that they would participate in the faith-based program,” he said.

Warden Raymond Byrd said the correctional facility would like to expand the program by adding a second class and continue doing more work for Habitat. They are trying to get another instructor, he said.

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