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Keeping Lunar New Year Alive at CCWF



Illustration by Canva AI

By Mimi Le

Happy New Year!

Approximately two billion people across the globe celebrate the Lunar New Year, principally observed in Vietnam, China, North and South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

My father immigrated from Vietnam in the 1970s at the end of the Vietnam War, and he was determined that his children would know the culture, traditions, and customs of his native country.

Growing up in Sacramento, California, I remember how we would celebrate the Vietnamese New Year.

The popping of red fire-

crackers and the smoke-filled air signaled it was midnight.

My siblings and I stood excitedly waiting for the long line of firecrackers to finish popping, at which point we screamed, "Chúc Mừng Năm Mới, Happy New Year!" This began our New Year's celebration. At midnight, we hung red firecrackers from the top of the door all the way down, and we lit them in the hopes that the sound would scare away the evil spirits from entering our home.

The Lunar New Year, also called Tết in Vietnamese, happens yearly in late January or early February. Most Southeast Asian cultures celebrate the Lunar New Year, as time is measured by the cycles of the moon. His-

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Comfort Care Celebrates Caring for Others

By Melissa Martin

On Dec. 19, 2025, Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) celebrated the second annual Palliative Care graduation, rolling in the next wave of Palliative Care workers and Comfort Care volunteers.

Comfort Care is a program that trains residents to support other incarcerated people reaching the end of life. Comfort Care workers learn day-to-day tasks for the Skilled Nursing Facility (SNF) and palliative care in the Transitional Care Unit, including helping residents in and out of bed, writing a letter, reading a book, cooking noodles, washing and folding laundry, filling out canteen forms, and putting the items away. However, the most important thing these individuals do is simply

being present while patients are in their end-of-life cycle, which can include sitting vigils for patients and grief counseling for anyone experiencing loss.

Some graduates go on to take paid positions in palliative care, while others remain volunteers.

The Dec. 19 celebration included 13 graduates, as well as many people who helped create and keep the program active.

Program co-founder Judith Barnett, who was formerly incarcerated at CCWF with a life without the possibility of parole sentence, attended, as did registered nurse Adela Perez, who oversees patients with dementia, cancer, and other diagnoses that require 24-hour treatment in the SNF. Fernando Murrilo,

...CONTINUED ON PAGE 3



By Mallissa James

On Dec. 12, 2025, volunteers and facility staff came together with the incarcerated population to celebrate the one-year anniversary of Central California Women's Facility's (CCWF) first-ever sports club, The Big Dill Pickleball Club.

"We are part of a club inside of a prison," CCWF Recreation Coach G. Martinelli said. "We are a community within the community."

The celebratory tournament and luncheon turned the gym at CCWF into a community sports center. The gym echoed with the sounds of balls repeatedly striking the pickleball paddles and floor. A mixture of 80's funk and R&B blasted through the speakers, giving the gym that authentic community sports center atmosphere.

There were three nets set up on the court. Six teams played at a time. Club members on the outskirts of the court placed their paddles

in stacks of four so they could get next.

In the winter of 2024, Martinelli, along with supporters for pickleball Anne Stuhldreher, Adelaide Hulbert, and Sunny Schwartz, began discussing the possibility of bringing pickleball to CCWF. The Big Dill Pickleball Club kicked off only a couple of months later, in February 2025.

Taryn and Zack Lamm, a mother and son duo, come to the gym every third Friday to participate in the

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EDITORIAL

Top 10 Traits of a Healthy Relationship

By Sagal Sadiq

Singer Jason Derulo said it best: “Everyone is looking for love.”

After 54 years on this earth, I’ve been there. I’ve had relationships both good and bad, marriage counseling, and therefore I have built up a personal reservoir of information regarding how to navigate healthy relationships. And granted, while I am not a license holding professional in this arena, these tips have helped to serve me through the years.

A vital first is to screen and select our potential mates carefully. The following are traits that will contribute to and enhance connection, along with relationship red and green flags.

Trust:

Trust allows both partners to feel safe and secure, reduces jealousy and anxiety, enhances emotional intimacy, and decreases the need for constant reassurance, thereby creating a strong foundation for emotional intimacy.

Communication:

Open, honest communication allows partners to express needs, feelings, and concerns without fear of judgment; helps prevent misunderstandings; and strengthens problem-solving as a team.

Respect:

Respect among partners helps to ensure that boundaries, opinions, and individuality are honored; encourages equality; and prevents manipulation, abuse, or control in the relationship.

Emotional Support:


Being able to rely on your partner during stressful or challenging circumstances creates security and strengthens the emotional bond. Feeling supported boosts mental and emotional well-being.

Healthy Conflict Resolution:


Disagreements are normal, but resolving them respectfully without blame, insults, and unfair fighting shows maturity and fosters growth in the relationship.

Red Flags


Controlling behavior.
Lack of communication or dishonesty.
Disrespect or belittling.

 “If you are always doubting the person because you feel you can’t trust them, there’s something not cohesive in your relationship.”

~Elizabeth Downs, Facility C

 “Whenever we would be out walking together, my girlfriend would be watching my eyes to see who I was looking at, clearly she didn’t trust me.”

~Cynthia Vargas, Facility C

 “Any calling you out your name, condescending behavior, attempting to manage where you go and who you go with, and also, hiding important information.”

~Tamekca Walker, Facility C

Shared Values & Goals:

Aligning on important life goals like family, finances, or lifestyle helps prevent future conflicts and strengthens the partnership, thereby also ensuring long-term compatibility.

Independence:

Maintaining individuality and personal interests prevents codependency and allows each partner to grow personally, which enriches the relationship.

Affection & Appreciation:

Regular expressions of love, gratitude, and affection strengthen the emotional connection and make both partners feel valued and cherished.

Mutual Effort:


Both partners contribute actively to the relationship from planning quality time and resolving issues to balancing child-care and household duties. Mutual/equal efforts help to prevent resentment.

Forgiveness & Compassion:


Everyone makes mistakes. However, being able to forgive and showing your partner empathy can promote relationship resilience and increase emotional safety and eventually long-term satisfaction in the relationship.

Green Flags


Being reliable. Keeping promises.
Respectful of boundaries.
Celebrating your partner’s successes.

 “Respecting each other’s boundaries, adhering to agreements.”

~Crystal St. Mary, Facility C

 “Compassionate, understanding and accepting.”

~Milani Larrea, Facility C

 “Feeling safe in expressing your emotions, supporting each other’s individuality.”

~Leylani Simmons, Facility C

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**COVER STORY: LUNAR NEW YEAR...
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1**

torically, Tét is celebrated between the autumn rice harvest and the spring rice planting. This celebration shows appreciation for the previous harvest and hopes for future crops.

Days before the New Year, our house was cleaned from top to bottom in preparation for the coming celebration. Preparing the feast was a family affair. We formed assembly lines as we cooked mounds of noodles, rice, egg rolls, vegetables, pork dishes, beef with mouthwatering sauces, bán tét, traditional sticky rice cakes made with mung beans, fatty pork wrapped in banana leaves, sweet bean desserts, sticky rice with sweetened coconut, and fresh fruits with salted chili sauce.

Red envelopes were stuffed with crisp new dollar bills. Our ancestral altar was cleaned off and adorned with fresh fruit. We were never allowed to fight or argue - nothing that could be negative was allowed on this auspicious day, as it would invite bad spirits upon our household for the coming year.

As the day began, my siblings and I lined up from oldest to youngest in front of our parents. In great anticipation of the money we would receive, we stood with our arms folded across our chests, saying: "Chúc Mừng Năm Mới," meaning "Happy New Year," as we received red envelopes. The amount inside the envelope ranged from a \$1 bill to a \$100 bill as a wish for success, longevity, and growth in the new year. It is considered a sign of disrespect to open the envelope in front of the person who gave it to you, so we ran off into our rooms and ripped open the envelopes to see how much money each of us got.

In the morning, we loaded the ancestral altars with the prepared dishes. My father began by lighting incense in order to summon our ancestors home to celebrate the new year with us and bring blessings. Once my father finished his prayer ritual, we all lined up to light our joss incense sticks. Once the joss sticks burned down completely, the feast would begin.

Around noon, our relatives arrived, and the same routine was enacted all over again. The adults sat around huge tables sharing food and alcohol, while we kids played a game with six objects: a crab, a shrimp, a lotus shell, a rooster, a fish, and a Yin Yan symbol, and we would wager with coins as we shook the dice playing the gambling game.

At sunset after the first day of the New Year celebrations, we lit a bonfire in our backyard with paper money and paper items we purchased especially for our ancestors. As their living relations, it was our duty to provide for our ancestors during their afterlife, since they intercede on our



Photo courtesy of Mimi Le



Art by Canva AI



Photo courtesy of Mimi Le

Top Left: The paper money used to light a bonfire in honor of ancestors.
Bottom Left: Red envelopes stuffed with crisp new dollar bills as a wish for success, longevity, and growth in the new year.
Right: Ancestral altars loaded with prepared dishes.

behalf in this life.

Here at CCWF, the Asian population is quite small, yet there is commonality in the memories shared and the importance of this holiday among the variety of nationalities.

CCWF resident Jacqueline Ma, born in Korea, shared her childhood memories of the lunar celebration. She recalled visiting family members in her traditional garment called "hanbok," as well as receiving the red envelopes after bestowing good wishes for the new year.

"I remember feeling so excited counting each envelope," Ma said. "Eating traditional family dishes and spending time with grandparents, aunts and uncles was amazing."

Another resident, Mei Li, born in Hong Kong, fondly remembers that the lunar celebration consisted of a great deal of preparation before the event, which lasted for many days afterward. There was often no school for the children and no work for the elders. These traditions are very similar to the celebrations of the Vietnamese and Korean New Year.

"About a month before the Lunar New Year Day, my mother took me to various stores to shop to find the best clothing. It was throwing the 'old' away to welcome the new. On the midnight before New Year's Day, right before 12 o'clock, my mother made me change into new pajamas to go to sleep," Li said.

Celebrating Tét is very different and difficult to do while being incarcerated. But, nevertheless, I do celebrate.

I stay awake the night before until midnight, reminiscing on the past year and manifesting my hopes and wishes for the coming year. Usually, I fall asleep immediately afterwards because I must work the next day. I always make a sweet dessert; I am partial to pie and share it with my closest friends, who are just like my family.

I do not argue. Instead, I make sure I spend time in quiet reflection on my ancestors and my appreciation for the past year while I ask for their intercession in the coming year.

I boast about the New Year as I walk the yard and extend my greetings to all as I say, "Happy New Year."

**COVER STORY: COMFORT CARE...
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1**

a formerly incarcerated advocate for hospice care in the men's facilities, was also present. Additionally, friends and family of the graduates came to show their support.

The visiting area was filled with laughter and tears as the ceremony took place, and many speakers shared experiences and words of wisdom.

Alistair Shanks, the Palliative Care Program Manager of the Humane Prison Hospice Project, expressed his gratitude to the people who helped shape this program. He addressed the graduates and said, "It is about witnessing each other with compassion and dignity."

CCWF Licensed Clinical Social Worker Sarah



Current and graduating Comfort Care participants posing with outside volunteers during the ceremony

Photo courtesy of CDCR

Salonen spoke with pride when she said, "The work of caregiving is the most meaningful thing we can do for our fellow human beings."

Perez spoke about what it was like to be a caregiver. "It's not small, it's not easy, but it means a lot," Perez said. "It's about showing up to provide comfort when

medicine is no longer helping."

The graduates who spoke shared their stories about how just two weeks of

“It is about witnessing each other with compassion and dignity,” Alistair Shanks said.

training has changed them, and the way they view life and death. Graduate Cheryl Busch expressed why she felt compelled to become a comfort care worker.

"A while ago, my friend was dying, and I couldn't be there for her physically," Busch said, "so later, I decided to apply for Comfort Care. That way, I could be there for others who are suffering through similar situations, like my friend in the community."

Diving Deep Into Your Story

Lifesc scripting has been challenging women at CCWF to become the director of their own lives for 14 years

By Nora Igova & Kristin Rossum

Teresa Patterson has been home since June 2024. Since then, she has successfully reunited with her family, works two jobs, bought a car, and soon will move into her own place for the first time in her life after spending 35 years in prison. She credits her journey home in good part to a unique therapeutic, positive psychology-based program offered at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) called LifeScripting.

Illustration by Canva AI

"LifeScripting helped put me on a path of healing," Patterson said. "It taught me how to reframe difficult moments in my life by looking at them from a different perspective. And by doing that, I was able to find understanding and forgiveness."

Patterson utilized what she had learned through LifeScripting to prepare for and ultimately pass her suitability hearing before commissioners of the Board of Parole Hearings. She still uses it to maintain her freedom, both physical and inner.

Patterson is one of many. More than 5,000 women have graduated from the program – including this article's authors – in the 14 years that LifeScripting has been offered in California's women's facilities. According to the program's sponsor organization, Women 4 Change, graduates boast a recidivism rate of less than 4%, compared to the 62% national average. Participants have gone on to achieve other significant accomplishments, too, like earning college degrees, opening small businesses, and the best one of all, finding their purpose in life.

In a world of prison programming built largely for the needs of men – who make up roughly 90% percent of the prison population – LifeScripting is unique for being specifically for women. To understand why that's the case, and why it works, it's important to know something about its creator, Virginia Dunstone.

Dunstone was born in Bismarck, North Dakota, and grew up in stressful home circumstances. She moved away from her hometown shortly after high school, with her diploma in one hand and a train ticket in the other. Dunstone married and quickly became a mother of five who welcomed all children into the family home and became a chief volunteer at church.

Then, after a life-altering event she couldn't get past, she embarked on a journey of personal discovery. Afterwards, Dunstone enrolled in college and valetted cars to support herself. She received a bachelor's degree in psychology and then a master's degree in counseling in the mid-1980s, both from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Dunstone was deeply influenced by the theories of Alfred Adler, a late 19th-century psychotherapist and the founder of Individual

Psychology, who based his practice on the understanding that childhood beliefs have significant meaning in our adult lives. "Our core beliefs are formed by the age of six," Dunstone said.

People hold on to these beliefs solidly, well into adulthood – beliefs about safety, worth, and belonging. Behavior stems from our beliefs. Dunstone said she became obsessed with the idea of unlocking our belief system so we can use it as a source of power instead of pain. By understanding negative beliefs and reframing past experiences, "your past can talk to your present to impact your future," as Dunstone often says.

Dunstone honed her method in private practice in Nevada and later in Arizona. She eventually

mother and give her a toolbox, she will then pass it on to her children," Dunstone said.

Then, in 1992, a friend invited Dunstone to do a women's conference at Arizona State Prison Complex Perryville. The response was overwhelming, with women telling her they had never looked at their lives that way before. It became clear that a LifeScripting curriculum inside a women's prison was needed and wanted.

The 80-hour program offered to incarcerated women is no different than the courses offered to women outside. As its website describes, the program educates participants on four key areas – self, family, relationships, and society – and gives women strategies to "make healthy personal choices and therefore alter their

“By 2011, Dunstone was able to bring the program to California with the help of Women 4 Change, first to Valley State Prison, when it still housed women, and then to CCWF. The program became so popular that the waiting list swelled to over 500 people, Virginia Dunstone said.”

wrote a book about her learnings called "Why Do I Do What I Do" and became successful as a public speaker for women's conferences and political campaigns.

Women have always been at the center of Dunstone's work. When asked why, Dunstone said, "Women are life-givers and nurturers; they're tender-hearted. If you give a woman a recipe, she wants to share it with someone." That's true of life wisdom as well as food. After a pause, she added, "My heart is with the women."

Her interest in serving incarcerated women developed later in her career. Dunstone's first experience with people in custody was volunteering with juvenile offenders, who she realized would be sent to mothers who didn't know what to do with them, and that mothers needed the most help. "I realized if you change a

behavioral patterns."

By 2011, Dunstone was able to bring the program to California with the help of Women 4 Change, first to Valley State Prison for Women, when it still housed women, and then to CCWF. The program became so popular that the wait list swelled to over 500 people, Dunstone said.

To increase access, Dunstone got permission from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to make videos of her instruction and train facilitators through an intense two-year course. Facilitators are interviewed by Dunstone, as well as the LifeScripting team, to ensure they meet the rigid standards required to join.

Currently, there are 11 LifeScripting classes run by seven facilitators occurring simultaneously

every four months at CCWF. This schedule includes three classes on Facilities B, C, and D, a class in the Skilled Nursing Facility, and a class in the Accountability Change Transformation program on Facility A, where new arrivals are received.

Dunstone's expertise and personal charisma are a big part of the program's popularity.

"Virginia taught me to master my heart, live my passions, view my parents and all others as teachers, manage my expectations, and to forgive myself and others," LifeScripting graduate Jessalynn Graham said.

The curriculum's memorable teaching devices also resonate with women who went through the program at CCWF, like the now-free Patterson.

"Lifescripting taught me about the iceberg effect," Patterson said, referring to the iceberg analogy as a person where most of the person is under the waterline, and what is shown to the world is just the tip of the iceberg. "What you see on the surface is only the beginning. There is so much beneath the surface."

What stuck with former Death Row resident Socorro Caro is Dunstone's use of the number 186 and what it signifies about the heart. When LifeScripting students say "186," they are referring to the fact that positive thoughts and love travel at the speed of light, which is approximately 186,000 miles per second. It is like a secret code among LifeScripting students.

As a condemned prisoner on the Row, Caro didn't have access to self-help programs like LifeScripting. Things are different now that she lives with the general population. And though her path isn't as clear as Patterson's, she's grown

as a result of the class. After taking LifeScripting, Caro said she now knows where her strength is.

By empowering any and all women to rewrite the script of their lives and reframe their pasts, they become the directors of their own lives and take charge of their belief systems. Once someone understands why they do what they do, they have all the power in the world to change the patterns that no longer serve them. As Dunstone often says, "once you know, you can't unknow."

To all those who have completed LifeScripting, and to those who have not, we send you 186.

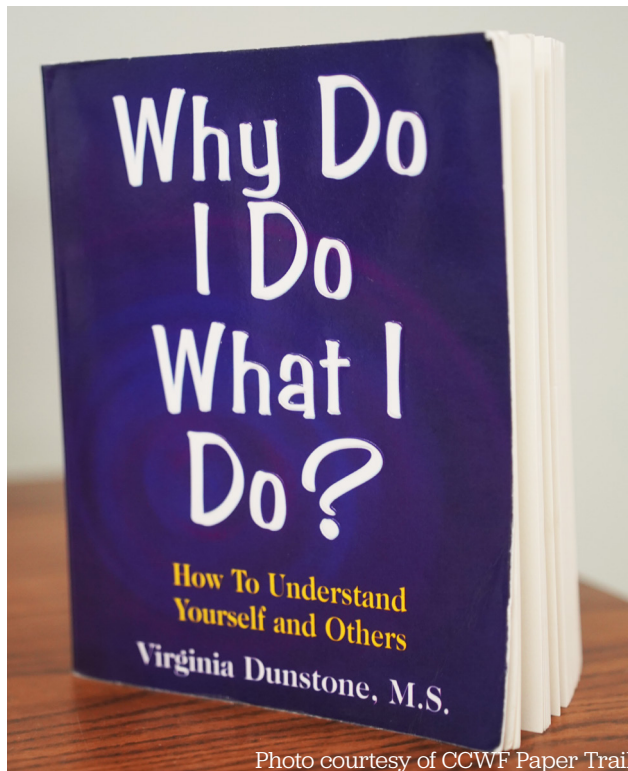


Photo courtesy of CCWF Paper Trail



Photo courtesy of Virginia Dunstone

Virginia Dunstone, author of Why Do I Do What I Do and creator of LifeScripting.

**COVER STORY: PICKLEBALL...
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1**



Photo courtesy of Robin Quinlan

Above: CCWF's Pickle Ball team. Below: From left, CCWF Warden Anissa De La Cruz, Head Coach at HQ Heidi Wippel, PIO Monique Williams, and California Training Facility-Soledad Acting Warden Cynthia Rojas.



Photo courtesy of Kim Komenich

Big Dill Pickleball Club. Zack Lamm said the first time he came, he was nervous, but soon said he "saw the human" in all the players. Taryn Lamm said she "feels lucky to have the experience."

Many of the club members expressed their enthusiasm for this first-of-a-kind club at CCWF.

"The court is a magic carpet that you can come onto and be normal. You can make friends on the pickleball court that you keep outside of the court," Hulbert said.

Pickleball can be an extremely competitive and active sport. Just ask Peer Literacy Mentor Program Director M. Speir, who comes to play with the club: "I have a burning desire to win, within the realm of ethical play."

But pickleball can also be a relaxed, fun, back-and-forth game that anyone can enjoy.

Resident Chelsie "Chad" Fee, a newer club member, said, "I like that you can exercise and play a game at the same time."

Around noon, everyone quickly worked togeth-

er to set up tables so they could sit down as a community. Incarcerated club members and free-world participants took turns at the podium to share their gratitude.

"No color lines here. We come here to forget about prison. The gym is the best thing in the institution," resident La Tasha "Blacky" Williams said.

The Big Dill Pickleball Club members received a gift bag with healthy snack items, headbands with their club logo, and certificates of competitive play. Whole Foods donated the items for the gift bags, and a young lady in high school held a fundraiser to pay for the club's celebratory lunch.

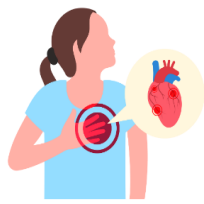
After lunch was over, everyone started packing up the tables so they could squeeze in a few more rounds of pickleball before the event ended.

Resident Michelle Souza, who has been playing pickleball for a few months, said she's excited to continue playing: "I leave here feeling energetic and good about myself."

Broken Hearts

In honor of American Heart Month, learn how to protect yourself from heart disease

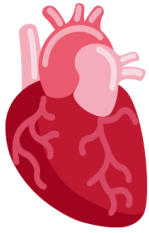
KNOW THE SIGNS OF A HEART ATTACK



Roughly every 40 seconds a person in the U.S. suffers a heart attack.

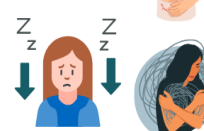
Signs and symptoms of a heart attack include:

- Uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain in the center of your chest. It may last more than a few minutes or go away and come back.



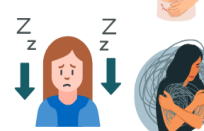
Pain or discomfort in:

- Arms (one or both)
- Back
- Neck
- Jaw
- Stomach
- Shortness of breath, with or without chest discomfort.



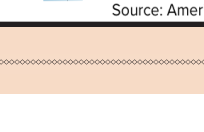
Other signs, including:

- Breaking out in a cold sweat
- Nausea
- Lightheadedness



Women may have symptoms not typically associated with a heart attack such as:

- Anxiety
- Shortness of breath
- Upset stomach
- Pain in the shoulder, back or arm
- Unusual tiredness or weakness



Source: American Heart Association

Infographic by Emma Rosenberg

By Markeesha Dixon

When you're a young woman under 40, you believe that a heart attack isn't possible. The idea of a heart attack is only for "old people." According to the American Heart Association (AHA), "an American has a heart attack about every 40 seconds." However, heart attacks do not discriminate, and women are more likely than men to die from one, according to the AHA.

In fact, heart disease is the leading cause of death for women in the United States and globally. And one of the reasons is that people do not recognize the symptoms of a heart attack.

A heart attack is an acute myocardial infarction caused by the sudden occurrence of coronary thrombosis (blood clots), which obstructs the blood supply to the heart and leads to necrosis (premature death) of heart muscle tissue, according to Wikipedia.

As a woman who has experienced a heart attack at 21, I understand the importance of being aware of the cues your body is trying to say to you. I, too, had the belief that my youth was a safeguard against a heart attack. But when I ended up in Pomona Valley Hospital emergency room, my age didn't matter; a heart attack can happen to anyone.

Signs of a heart attack in young women get missed because of how common they seem. While the typical symptoms of a heart attack include chest pain, tightness, or discomfort, the AHA reports that women often experience atypical symptoms such as sharp or aching chest pain, shortness of breath, weakness, fatigue, and indigestion, to name a few. Most people would confuse these basic signs and symptoms with a common cold or eating something that their system doesn't agree with.

Every day, I watch young women make the mistake of ignoring the pain or discomfort they feel, assuming that those signs and symptoms were simply stress or anxiety, rather than seeking medical care. If the symptoms were more publicized, then we might be more aware.

The call for awareness is imperative. Educating yourself and others about the risks and signs of a heart attack, taking steps to decrease your risk,

and increasing access to information about the warning signs are all key to ensuring that more people survive them.

The heart is a vital and complex organ and if we don't take care of it properly, it can lead to various heart diseases or even death. In order to obtain the proper preventative measures, equip yourself with your family's medical history, learn your risk factors, and seek medical assistance without delay.

It's even more important that women in CCWF prepare for the possibility of a heart attack, as we are at a greater risk for higher stress, poor diet, and lack of exercise - all of which are major contributors to heart attacks. Though our resources in prison are very limited, there are a variety of things we can do to help prevent heart disease.

CCWF employs a nutritionist whom residents can see for advice on wise food choices. Residents can submit a Form 22 if they would like to speak with him. The nutritionist can advise on food plan options, canteen choices, and even vendor packages. Residents may also talk to their registered nurses and primary care providers.

Stress is unavoidable but can be managed. GTL tablets offer mental health, stress management, and anxiety management information under the free facility info icons or Edovo.

A. Gonzales, a primary care provider at Central California Women's Facility, advises residents that exercising regularly is one of the number one tools for fighting heart disease. Residents can fill out a Form 22 to sign up for the gym.

Coach G. Martinelli and his gym workers help residents to reach fitness goals and design routines for the gym, dayroom, or cell. Martinelli and other health experts recommend 40 to 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity four to five days a week. Martinelli and his team maintain four pieces of cardio equipment: aerobic steps, yoga mats, ab balls, and resistance bands in the housing units.

At the end of the day, it's up to each and every individual to make healthy choices. We only have one heart, and it works hard. We should do what we can to protect it. You have lots of resources, but they only work if you utilize them.

New Laws Benefit Incarcerated Firefighters

Governor Newsom signs five bills recognizing incarcerated firefighters' value

By Amber Bray

In March 2025, I wrote about the wildfires that ravaged Los Angeles County and how the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) could train more incarcerated firefighters. Hundreds, if not thousands, of incarcerated firefighters helped combat the deadly blazes early in 2025 and are consistently called upon to assist with wildfires and many other disasters.

Now, the efforts of incarcerated firefighters will be recognized in a variety of ways thanks to several bills that were signed into law by California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Oct. 13, 2025, which went into effect on Jan. 1, 2026.

The five bills signed include pay raises for incarcerated firefighters (Assembly Bill "AB" 247); require CDCR to pay a death benefit for the death of an incarcerated firefighter (AB 799); mandate CDCR create a pathway for resentencing for incarcerated firefighters no later than July 1, 2027 (AB 812); require CDCR to make the Youth Offender Program Camp Pilot Program permanent and allow the Secretary of Corrections to expand it (AB 952); and streamline the process to expunge criminal records for formerly incarcerated firefighters (Senate Bill 245).

These bills help recognize the contributions of incarcerated firefighters during critical periods for Californians. In a

written statement in October, CDCR Secretary Jeff Macomber agreed, saying, "The work of our incarcerated firefighters and staff is an essential part of this effort, and their commitment to protecting lives and property during these emergencies cannot be overstated."

According to Assemblymember Lowenthal's Facebook page, "AB 812 will result in more justice, save the state money, and is in line with California's desire to end mass incarceration."

AB 247 will allow incarcerated firefighters to earn the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour while actively fighting a fire. Previously, incarcerated firefighters would earn "between \$5.80 and

\$10.24 per day... During active emergencies, Cal Fire pays them an additional \$1 per hour," according to CalMatters.

While recruitment of incarcerated firefighters still remains lower than in past years for a variety of reasons, it is possible these bills will help boost interest amongst those eligible to participate in fire camp programs.

According to CalMatters, the author of AB 247 Asm. Isaac Bryan (D-Ladera Heights) said, "This is a historic and momentous day. The governor signing the bill is an incredibly powerful reminder that all labor is dignified and anybody willing to put their lives on the line deserves our gratitude."

How to Endure Yard Downs

Ground time can be found time with a little creativity

By **Melissa Martin**

Here at Central California Women’s Facility, we are rarely idle. We constantly stroll along to our numerous program assignments, medical appointments, and more. It is important to be on time, but just like the free world has traffic jams, we have “yard downs.”

For those of you who may not know, a yard down is when an alarm sounds that requires additional correctional officers to respond. Yard downs can be because of something small, like a porta-potty truck, or more serious, like an altercation or a medical emergency.

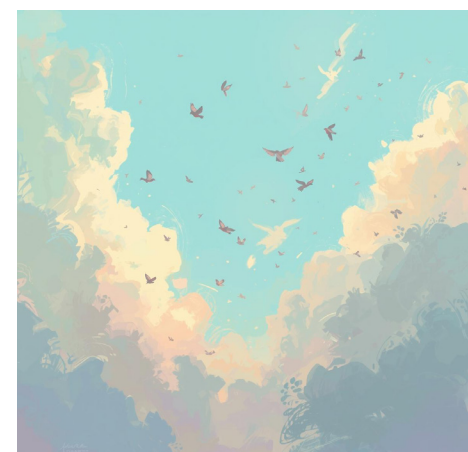
When that alarm goes off, all incarcerated people on the corresponding yard(s) must get down into a seated position immediately, rain or shine, and stay there until officers announce, “Normal on the yard.” CCWF is often plagued by alarms. Not a day goes by where we do not experience at least one yard down.

This can be disheartening when you have a busy day ahead of you and even irritating when you wait for longer periods of time. The longest yard down I have personally experienced is two hours. My go-to to get through yard downs is to always carry a book.

I asked a few people, “What do you do to get through or cope with yard downs? And do you stay motivated to get to your destination?”



Illustrations by Canva AI



“Most of the time when the yard goes down, I’m already working out, so I utilize that time to continue to work out. I do sit-ups, Russian twists, and so on. If I’m not working out, I’ll take a seat and focus on the beauty of nature, just practicing mindfulness.”

Christina Francis, Facility C

“I never leave without something to do; I make a mental checklist as I am leaving my room. Do I have water? Do I have something to do like homework, a book, or a crochet project? Oh! And shade if it’s hot.”

Holly Davidson, Facility C

“I sit in my wheelchair and laugh at everyone; I only get unmotivated when the yard is down ‘too long’ to continue to program.”

Menique Lashon, Facility D

“I start to really notice things of nature, like the birds, the clouds, the rain, and the moon. And I don’t let anything alter my course.”

Stephanie Oliva, Facility B

Felon’s Alphabet

By **Sagal Sadiq**

The word opportunity feels like it doesn’t belong in the same sentence as prison. For many people, incarceration is defined by loss: loss of freedom, identity, relationships, and control. Opportunity sounds like something far out of an incarcerated person’s reach, something foreign, something that belongs to the free world. After all, isn’t opportunity something akin to freedom? Doesn’t the word conjure up images of all things wonderful: choices without restrictions, a job, a car, a home, a romantic partner, and a happy, fulfilling life?

“O” is for opportunity.

Webster’s Dictionary defines opportunity as “a time or occasion that is right for doing something; a good chance.”

For people in prison, the concept of opportunity takes on a different meaning. It becomes something intrinsic, something that dares to grow in spite of being in a state of perpetual uncertainty. Opportunity becomes a shift in one’s perspective; it becomes a willingness to see possibilities where others see dead ends. It is the choice one makes to focus on the light when your world is eclipsed by the darkness of incarceration.

In prison, opportunity is not doled out. It is a commodity that requires mining, and like precious ore, it needs to be accrued incrementally, hoarded and then utilized. It may show up as small at first – in a thought, a book, a conversation, or even a self-help program. In those moments of startling clarity, even the smallest opportunity can become life-altering turning points.

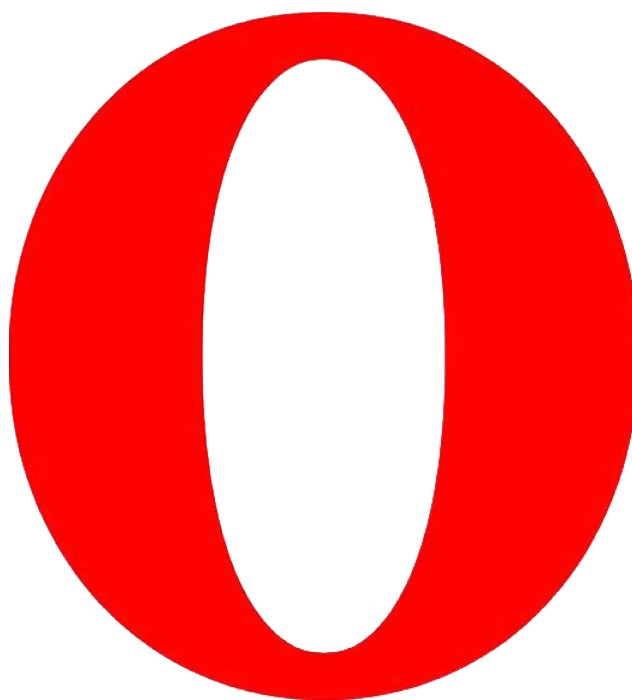


Illustration by Canva AI

Many incarcerated people look back on their time inside and can pinpoint the exact moment where something clicked, something cracked wide open, something shifted. That shift often becomes the beginning of transformation.

One of the most unexpected opportunities in prison is time to reflect. In the free world, life moves quickly. People get caught up in the proverbial rat race, and that often leaves little room for introspection.

Inside prison, time slows. A person is left with their mind, their memories, their regrets, their hopes, and their fears. This level of intense reflection is not an easy task, because intense reflection can feel like confrontation, but it can also be the most powerful opportunity a person will ever have – the opportunity to transform the self from the inside out.

Having passed up a lifetime of opportunities in the free world only to end up in prison, it is vital that we now avail ourselves of the opportunities that are available here. In order to get a chance at a life 2.0, we need to do everything we can to not let chances at rehabilitation pass us by. Today, if we want to be different, we have to choose differently by seizing the opportunities that practically knock on our cell doors daily.

Because let us face it, opportunities abound here in Central California Women’s Facility. Opportunities for rehabilitation in the form of education, vocational training, self-help groups, peer mentors on every yard and every hallway, opportunities to seek recovery from substance use by attending Integrated Substance Use Disorder Treatment, and even spiritual opportunities at our Chapel. The converse is also true; opportunities to do bad also abound.

Let’s face it, life, even a life behind bars, is rife with chances and choices; the question is whether or not we choose to take the chances when they arise. Remember, there can be no homeruns without corresponding big swings for the fences. Isn’t your one life worth swinging for?

FEATURES

Anyone Can Be a Hero

Does my grandma count?

By Vegas Bray

Everyone has a hero or someone they've looked up to during their childhood. Maybe they didn't become the role models they intended to be for us, but they were what we had. Whether we realized it at the time or not, we've had heroes around us our entire lives.

It doesn't take Black Panther, Wonder Woman or Superman to save people and make a positive change in their lives.

As I look back on those who tried to be a positive influence during my childhood, my aunt is the first person who comes to mind. My aunt's super traits are her confidence and her ability to make sure her family comes first. She didn't care how up to date her own style was; she did the best she could to keep her children well-groomed and dressed. You could immediately tell my cousins ate well and were cared for. My brothers and I still talk about the birthday and Christmas gifts she gave to us. I've always admired her for that, even though I hated when she disciplined me.

To this day, I still believe my aunt's greatest superpower was her spankings. Anytime my cousins and I misbehaved, it was her spankings that kept us in line. I didn't understand my mom's and my aunt's generation. Their number one saying was, "A hard head makes a soft ass." Here I sit, in all my soft glory, thinking back on the many ways my aunt tried to show up and save me from me.

Whenever we went out to play, we weren't supposed to cross certain boundary lines, especially without asking for permission. As kids, that's exactly what we did. We wanted to explore more of the neighborhood and see what was out there. Of course, we were in so much trouble when we got back. Back then, I didn't understand how concerned she was for our safety and welfare - I thought she was just another overbearing family member.

Upon reflection, it was easy to consider my aunt as a hero. I wish I paid more attention to the messages she tried to give me. At the time, we viewed spankings as a harsh punishment for not listening to our family's stupid rules. As an adult, it's easy to see that my aunt wanted better for me. She reminded me to be easy on myself. I didn't understand it then, but I get it now. This revelation led me to ask a few of my peers about their hero and the super traits they possess.

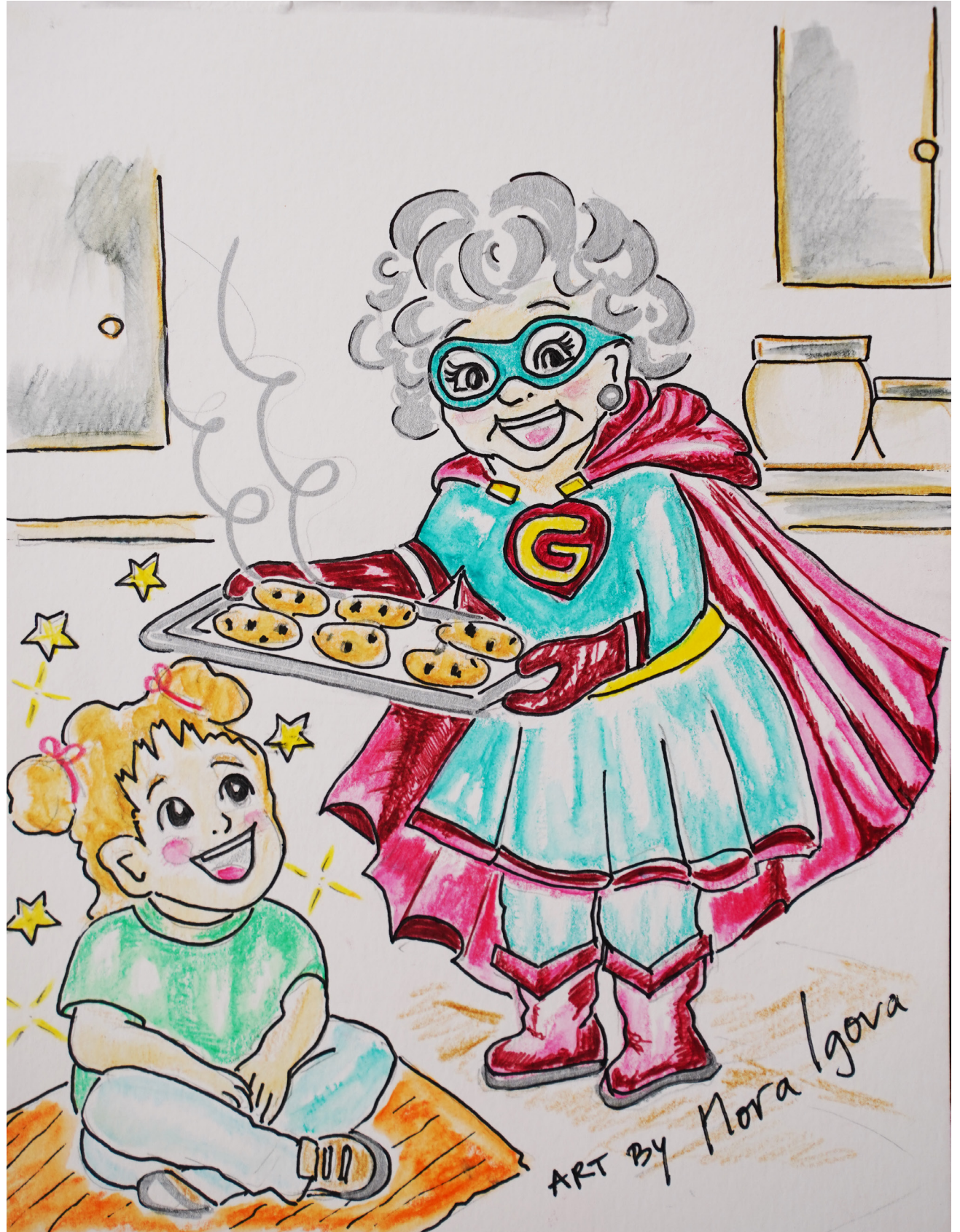
"My heroes are my peers, Stacy and Katie," said resident Rebecca Braswell. When I asked Braswell about her peer's super traits, the words confidence, self-esteem, knowledge, and emotional intelligence came to her with ease. "Plus, they have the patience to deal with me!" Braswell said with a laugh. "That's very important."

But how have these traits made a significant impact in her life? Braswell said she uses these traits to be an advocate for those who feel they don't belong.

For resident Janessa Kic, there's no one who can out-cook her biggest hero. "It's my grandma. She was an amazing cook. You could have the worst day and when you smell her food, all you feel is loved." Kic also acknowledged that her grandma inspires her to pay it forward. "Being as supportive as she was, I remind people of how strong and resilient they are," she said.

After recognizing the way that family has tried to show up in their lives, many people named a family member as their number one hero.

"I've seen my mom's struggles and everything



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she tried to accomplish,” said resident Monica Vasquez as she cast a light on her mother's heroism. “My mom is powerful and she's been through her own trauma, too.” Vasquez's message is to inspire others not to take life for granted, spreading the word that “while we sit here, we have to want something else.”

Central California Women's Facility Fire House resident Shalana Buycks had her father in mind when asked about her hero. As she battles obstacles as a first responder and firefighter, Buycks remembers her dad setting goals and

not making excuses. “No matter the obstacle, he takes every challenge as a lesson,” she said. Buycks encourages others to “just keep swimming until you make it to shore, even when you feel like giving up.”

In a world where hurt people hurt people, it's important to remember the second part to this message: Healed people heal people. As we make better choices, take the time to reflect on the positive messages others tried to imprint onto you. What can you do to be a hero for someone else?