

**Yokefellows**

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to engage inmates in Christian fellowship.

Yokefellows derives its name from Matthew 11:28-30, in which Jesus says "take my yoke upon you and learn of me" and promises to ease the burdens of those who do. The program's concept is that Christian volunteers and inmates "yoked together" will help both endure life's challenges and strengthen their faith. The local Yokefellows chapter is one of the many programs that the Forsyth Jail and Prison Ministries offers to engage inmates with the public.

The Bible studies are held in the prison's McGee Hedgley Chapel. Before the discussion begins, attendees fellowship and enjoy cake and coffee. With about 80 inmates attending most sessions, it's standing room only in the modest sized fellowship hall. A devotional song is played to set the tone for the evening. Some listen quietly, while others pray or mouth the words to the song. The crowd then splits into smaller groups for Bible study, with some staying in the fellowship hall, while others go upstairs to the sanctuary.

Chunn, who has volunteered at the facility for 30 years, said she's seen the Yokefellows program have a real impact on the lives of inmates over the years.

"The ones I've really bonded with have accepted



Shumate



Brunk



Harris

the Lord, and I have seen a big change in them," said Chunn.

Kervin Frazier is one of those inmates. He's been a part of Yokefellows programs at other prisons, but says the volunteers at the Forsyth Correctional Center go above beyond. Local Yokefellows volunteers often take inmates outside of the facility for events and activities by using so-called "sponsor passes."

"It's sort of like a spiritual cleansing for me to fellowship with them," said Frazier. "They're real interested in whatever is going to make you into a better person. They talk to you, encourage you."

Frazier is currently serving time for drug trafficking and expects to be released next year. A former heroine addict, Frazier says drug arrests have kept him in and out of prison for 30 years. He says that Yokefellows has helped to turn him around.

"I believed in God, but I had some other influences...but none of that worked for me until I got to sit with Mrs. Doris and some of these people," said Frazier.

Frazier says he's become a different person through his faith in God. He vows that when he is released this time, he won't return to prison.

"I can feel the difference; I feel the change every day," he said. "When you get in the habit of doing something that's good, I can tell the Lord's really doing work. My family sees a change. My wife sees a change. My children see a change."

James Brunk has been inspired to change as well. He has been serving time for drug trafficking since he was 21. Now, at 27, he's a chaplain's assistant at the prison and hopes to be a mentor to kids when he's released. He said spirituality is important to many inmates.

"(The Yokefellows program) is the main reason a lot of guys are still doing so well... because they have something to look forward to throughout the week," said Brunk.

The volunteers also look forward to the fellowship with the inmates. Kathryn Harris said she feels like she's made a real impact in the 25 years she's been a part of Yokefellows.

"I said I was going for

five years and I'm still here," said Harris. "I just thank God for it all."

Volunteer Ronnie Shumate is an ex-offender himself who's been out of prison since 1991. He remembered the hope he felt at Yokefellows meetings and now hopes to offer the same to current inmates.

"Lord told me, 'You need to go back over there, you can make a difference,' and I said, 'Lord I don't want to back go over there, I have got a lot of bad memories of prison,'" said Shumate. "Lo and behold, a couple weeks later, I came and I've been here for 18 years."

The Yokefellows meeting last Thursday ended back in the fellowship hall, where Rev. Robert Wolfe, one of the prison's chaplains, collected prayer requests from volunteers and inmates. Wolfe then led them in a prayer, asking God to intervene with each request. In what has become a tradition, seven of the volunteers formed a prayer circle around an inmate who was being released the next day. It is a way of asking God to bless his journey on the outside and praying that he'll keep his faith close to his heart.

To volunteer with Yokefellows, contact Wolfe at 336-759-0063.

**O'Conner**

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ment events and participate in leadership development projects. The program prepares young people to become informed decision makers and influential leaders who shape the world.

O'Conner is a member of WSSU's Ralph Bunche Society. Founded in 2007, WSSU has served as a model for future Ralph Bunche

Society chapters. The Ralph Bunche Society was developed by the Phelps Stokes Fund to create a broader base of undergraduate student participation in global affairs – regardless of a student's field of study – increase global and cultural awareness, develop language skills, hone student leadership skills, and increase minority student involvement in international arenas and the expanding global community.

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*Pictured left to right: Stephen Motew, MD, vascular surgeon; Robert M. Varnell, MD, interventional radiologist; Donald Heck, MD, neuro-interventional radiologist*

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Photo by Todd Luck

From left: The Food Bank's Daisy Rodriguez, Centenary's Rev. Abby Hedgecock, Schools Assistant Superintendent Toni Bigham, Clyde Fitzgerald, Betsy Scott and Jeff Faullin cut the ribbon to symbolically open Brunson's Backpack Program.

**Backpacks**

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in the entire country on the Food Hardship Index, so, yes, hunger exists here," said Fitzgerald, citing a recent study by the Food Research and Action Center that looked at the number of families that can't regularly afford food.

Second Harvest has Backpack Programs in more than 30 schools in the 18 counties it serves. Hall Woodward Elementary School also offers the program. Six other Forsyth County schools will soon offer it, Fitzgerald said.

Betsy Scott is the volunteer coordinator for the program. She said she inquired about bringing the program to Brunson – where her son, Paul, is a student – after her son's class sponsored a

Brunson family for Christmas.

"(The family) needed things like sleeping bags because the kids sleep on the floor and a pillow case and socks," said Scott. "It was things that were so basic; they didn't even ask for toys. It was heart breaking how much they needed."

Parent volunteers pick up the food for the backpacks from Centenary each Friday morning. The contents of the backpacks, which students return each week to be refilled, vary, but always contain two servings each of evaporated milk, grains, protein and four servings of fruit. All of the items are in kid-friendly packages.

The program costs \$2,000 a school year, a cost that is covered by individual donors and sponsors like Lowes Foods, Holy Family Catholic Church, Westbend

Vineyards, Fleet Feet Sports and the Diamondback Grill.

Scott said teachers have given positive feedback about the program since it started late last year. They say that they can tell their students are more nourished.

"(Teachers have) noticed a difference on Monday mornings already with the kids that are getting the food, how they're behaving," said Scott.

Brunson Principal Jeff Faullin said all students want to learn, but sometimes factors at home, like hunger, can distract students. He believes it is up to schools and the community as a whole to do all they can to support the children.

"That's what schools do... to support all of our families to make sure our kids have every opportunity to do the best they can," he said.

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