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Dodgeball helps inmates at Stone County prison prepare for life after prison

STONE COUNTY, Miss. (WLOX) — Opportunity is not a word that typically comes to mind when discussing incarceration, but that's what the administrators of Stone County Regional Correctional Facility believe they are offering both state and county inmates under their care.

Similarly, a game like dodgeball is probably not what someone would consider a prison-friendly program. It's competitive and, arguably, aggressive. What would the game look like when inmates are throwing balls and hitting each other? Will it cause more harm than good?

Despite those valid concerns, state inmates at Stone County Correctional participated in a dodgeball tournament. Administrators said they were surprised at the result.

"There was not one guy that didn't laugh when he got hit," said the facility's programs director Marc Calvert. "[Inmates] connected with one another and began to walk alongside each other where, otherwise, they wouldn't."

Calvert has worked at the facility for three years and has worked with the county's at-risk population even longer. He considers programs like the facility's basketball and dodgeball tournaments vital to inmate success.

"Prison and incarceration should be punitive in the environment, but the space should be reformative," Calvert said.

Calvert said tournaments like dodgeball have a powerful effect on inmates beyond just having fun.

"You got these guys connect with one another and begin to walk alongside each other where otherwise they wouldn't," Calvert said. "Sometimes people may see these things and say, 'they're supposed to be in prison, what are they doing having fun?' And I can assure you that being here is not fun. To be locked away and kept away from your family, from your loved ones for years in and years out, it weighs on you."

Warden John Moran said structured activities serve a purpose in reducing violence.

"Part of rehabilitation, part of structuring the confinement, is we have these activities and say, hey, this is where you're energy is gonna go," Moran said. "I'd rather them put their energy towards dodgeball and an activity that's fun, than put their energy towards fighting in the dorm. And if we know one thing about behaviors in prison, it's that structured activities reduce violence and reduce aggression. They just do."

Moran was promoted to warden of the facility in January. He said his focus has been on inmate rehabilitation. Team-based tournaments are just one piece of the puzzle.

"We have a great partnership with Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College. They run our building trades program as well as our pipe fitting program," Moran said. "But we also have partnerships with The Goodwill, which does work force development training. If you want opportunity and you're in jail, this is the jail to get the opportunity at."

Moran said giving inmates opportunities while behind bars will set them up for success when they are back in society.

"They really help you to rehabilitate and show that they care -- not just about locking you up for your crime -- but helping you change your ways and get out of here a good person," said inmate Charles Braddock.

Braddock is 51. He has spent 26 years — over half his life — behind bars for drug charges. He has seen plenty of correctional facilities across the state, but he believes Stone County is a special place.

"Coming to this facility and having these programs, it just shows you that they care about making a change in your life and not just putting you away and letting you out the same person," he said.

Fellow inmate Justin Goings is also no stranger to the prison system. He's on his third conviction for drug charges. The 36-year-old narrowly escaped a habitual offender conviction that would

have seen him serve 20 years in prison day-for-day, and any future convictions would have resulted in a mandatory life sentence.

Goings said the programs he is involved in at Stone County are helping him find the right path -- a path that he hopes will prepare him to be the father his kids deserve.

"I'm thinking about that and reevaluating my life," Goings said. "I wish I did better the last couple times instead of just saying it. I'm actually gonna do it and prove it, you know? Instead of disappointing my family."

That mindset is a reminder for an administrator like Warden John Moran that his duty to these inmates goes well beyond punishment.

"Punishment alone isn't gonna work. You can't beat someone down and then not build them back up," Moran said. "We don't want it to just be a place of confinement and condemnation. We want it to be a place of freedom and rehabilitation."

