

“The program has been a beacon of light in a storm. It has created hope within an institutional setting.”

**Earl Pride**, Ironwood State Prison Braille coordinator



PHOTOS BY JUAN CARLO/THE ST

Inmate Andy Enriquez watches Marlene Nord, who is blind and works as a proofreader for the Alternate Text Production Center, as she reads a book he has just completed. Enriquez is one of several inmates in a Braille program run by the Camarillo-based center.

# A textbook plan on prison training

# Program produces materials for blind

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**BLYTHE** — When Casey Tuley leaves Ironwood State Prison in January after nine years of incarceration, he will be the first of 21 inmates in a training program to walk out as a certified Braille transcriber.

Tuley, 26, works at the Blythe prison as a contractor for a Camarillo-based production center that specializes in making Braille and electronic books for blind and disabled students in California.

"It seems like everybody is struggling out there, and it's really hard, so for me to be able to leave here and actually take away something from

**See BRAILLE, 2A**



Alternate Text Production Center employees pass through several fences to enter Ironwood State Prison in Blythe. About 20 inmates are part of a Braille program run by the Camarillo-based center. The inmates help produce books for blind and disabled students across the nation.

## FROM THE COVER

## BRaille

from 1A

all of this — it's huge," said Tuley, serving time for assault with a deadly weapon. "This is the only program I've ever heard of where you can actually get something out of it and use out there."

The Alternate Text Production Center Braille program, considered the cream of the jobs crop at Ironwood, is in a row of bungalows near the main prison yard. Sheltered from the sweltering desert heat, which can reach 120 degrees in the summer, the center resembles a computer lab.

On a recent weekday morning, inmates worked on three rows of computers that displayed an image of the neighboring Colorado River and read "Inmate Access Approved." The work stations had software that allowed inmates to transcribe, format and proofread Braille. They wore uniforms of blue chambray shirts and sweats. Some wore beanies and jean jackets and had tattoos covering their arms.

Through a grant, the production center pays the inmates 55 cents to \$1.35 an hour, depending on their level of expertise.

During the five-year program, inmates can eventually be certified by the Library of Congress in literary Braille and learn specialized Braille texts like math and science.

The center, based in Camarillo but run under the auspices of the San Bernardino Community College District, has worked with Ironwood inmates since 2008. The center previously was at Ventura College and overseen by the Ventura County Community College District.

Seven inmates have been certified in literary Braille so far, and 13 Braille and 148 electronic books for the disabled have been produced, according to the prison. Those materials go to community colleges across the state and other institutions nationwide. The center also works with Avenal State Prison in Kings County.

If the inmates are paroled, like Tuley, they can do the work as independent contractors from wherever they live. The center will lend Tuley hardware and software so he can do the work from his planned home in Hemet.

Model inmates must take a test to get into the program. Many said it has helped transform their lives and taught them a trade they can use in a work world that often shuns ex-convicts.

Earl Pride, Ironwood's Braille coordinator, said the program helps in the rehabilitation process and can mean a job in a rough economy and reduce recidivism. Finishing the tedious program in a prison environment shows tenacity and dedication, he said.

"The program has been a beacon of light in a storm. It has created hope within an institutional setting," Pride said.

### HELPING INMATES HELP OTHERS

The men in the back row of the bungalow worked on a project: Each was in charge of a section of "The Little, Brown Handbook," a fixture in college English courses. Those in the middle row had finished a Braille lesson plan and were waiting to be certified. Sitting in a circle toward the front of the classroom, near a whiteboard, were inmates going through the Braille curriculum.

Among these imposing tattooed men was a petite woman with glasses who read from "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," an 1841 short story by Edgar Allan Poe. Saralyn Borboa, a Braille instructor based in San Diego who visits the prison twice a month, said a story involving a murder is more likely to keep the inmates focused and intrigued.

She helps inmates understand the nuances of Braille translation and how to convey an author's message without changing the words. On this day, Borboa, a literary specialist with the National Braille Association, discussed how to deal with foreign words that are italicized and what to do if a word cannot be found in the dictionary.

Marlene Nord, a proofreader for the production center, visited the prison for the first time last month. She showed the inmates the newest technology for blind or visually impaired people.

"I think it has made them more aware of how to make things easier to navigate because they were asking a lot of questions related to those things," said Nord, who has been blind since birth. "Everybody was so kind and so welcoming, and I was really glad I came."

Glen Kuck, an administrator for the San Bernardino college district, said he was impressed by the inmates' professionalism and dedication.

"Seeing the level of work, the education, the training and the red tape that they have to commit themselves to get through — that's huge. ... The amount they are able to do is overwhelming," Kuck said.

"It's one thing to produce Braille, but there are stories behind the people who do it as well as the

people it goes to. This is an awesome project that really touches everybody."

### THE STORIES BEHIND THE DOTS

Timothy Malone, 31, of San Jose, said the program has expanded his knowledge and helped him get away from the typical prison life.

"At first, it was just dots to me, but to actually see what goes into it makes every single dot that much more important," Malone said.

His day, like the other inmates', starts at 5 a.m. Breakfast is served at 6 a.m., and the work starts at 7 a.m. The inmates get a lunch break at 10:30 a.m., and the workday usually ends about 2 p.m.

Malone said that sometimes at night, while watching TV, he'll realize he made a mistake on a book.

"I can't wait to get to work the next day and change it," he said.

Rolando Rodriguez got the best birthday present he could ask for three days before he turned 36. His 16-year-old daughter, Leslie Denise, called to say she was proud of him.

"She told me something beautiful that really touched my heart. She said, 'Everything that you do encourages me to be better,'" Rodriguez said with a big smile, his voice breaking.

Rodriguez credits his daughter, who was 7 when he was incarcerated for assault with a deadly weapon against a police officer, as the reason he joined the Braille program.

"She is my motivation behind my efforts," he said. "I have to find a way to do good."

He said he sends her \$50 every month with the money he earns in the program, which not only helps him regain his life but also helps students

across the nation.

"It's the ultimate feeling that you can have: making a difference for someone else," Rodriguez said. "It's amazing to know the feeling that we're taking the taxpayers' income by being here, but we're actually giving back to the community. I feel useful."

Andy Enriquez grew up with the wrong crowd and got into a life of crime at a young age, he said. At 18, while in a gang, he shot and killed a person "without even thinking about it," he said. "That was the worst choice of my life."

Today at 32, he is studying the ministry and trying to steer his younger brother down a different path. He has been in the Braille program for three years and was recently certified in literary Braille.

Aside from learning how to read Braille, Enriquez said, the program has taught him how to organize files, work on deadline and multitask. He hopes one day to produce Braille books for a Christian printing company.

David Rey, 31, hopes to open a drug counseling program for troubled youths and teach them how to translate Braille.

"Having a trade like that and giving them the proper counseling will show them another way, so they don't end up here like us," said Rey, who is in prison for murder. "We took from society and now we're trying to give something back, instead of dropping dead."

When Tuley leaves prison on Jan. 11, he also plans to work as a roofer and get married. He said that after nine years in prison, he never wants to return.

"I'm going to hit the ground running," Tuley said. "I've tried to not let this place change me for the worse and tried to stay as normal as possible."