

# The 'art' of giving: Simpson employee volunteers time at women's prison

By Jennifer Whitham

For most people, a prison is the last place they would volunteer to spend their time.

Perhaps then, it could be said that newly hired Simpson College Upward Bound director, Jane Parsons is not like most people; at least not when it comes to giving of herself. Parsons spends her Tuesday evenings teaching art to the inmates at the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women in Mitchellville.

Parsons' relationship with the inmates didn't start out on a volunteer basis. She was employed as a teacher at the prison for two years prior to joining the Simpson staff. She served as both a correctional and a curriculum counselor; teaching art, poetry, parenting, independent living skills and art therapy. Thus providing many of the inmates with creative outlets they wouldn't otherwise have and encouraging them to participate in healthy pastimes.

"If you just warehouse people and don't offer them an opportunity to learn and grow, you are just asking them to go out and commit the same types of crimes again," said Parsons. "Forming a community that focuses on something pro-social allows the inmates to see that they are part of something that benefits every person in the group and benefits the whole group 'society,'" added Parsons.

An assessment is done on each inmate in the prison's general population to determine their three top need areas before assigning them to specific classes. As a counselor, Parsons participated in this assessment and assignment process. Each inmate fills out a form asking them personal, probing questions. This helps measure such things as their level of victim impact realization, or the effect of

their crime on society and the victim. It also provides insight on their attitude, their independent living skills, such as their ability to find and keep a job after getting out and any family or parenting issues they may be experiencing.

"We would try to send them back out into society smarter than the average person looking for a job," said Parsons. "Obviously, once you have been incarcerated, you have a huge mark against you. We would conduct practice interviews, teach them how to write statements about their skills and abilities and work with them on ways to best explain their incar-

ceration." Parsons added that the parenting class is also a common area of placement since most of the inmates retain parental rights after their release.

Assessing the prisoners' needs and teaching classes were not the only projects Parsons involved herself in while working at Mitchellville. She also researched, developed and implemented a dog program in conjunction with the Animal Rescue League. This special project, which is still in place at the prison, involves inmates taking classes in learning to train dogs. They then bring dogs with behavioral problems into the prison from the Animal Rescue League and spend about 10 weeks training them in basic obedience and socialization.

"Many of these women are very interested in giving something back to society," said Parsons. "This is one way for them to do that, in an enormously positive way. They are saving a dog's life. Dogs that are well trained can get adopted from the league in two seconds," she added. This program ties into Parsons' first attempt to use pets as therapy for inmates. She frequently took her own golden retriever, Ayla to the prison as a therapy dog and is now trying to get her cleared to return to the prison as a volunteer. "Most of these women have enormous touch deprivation. It is helpful for them to be close to something," said Parsons.

Of course the positive interaction with other people (both other inmates and counselors) is just as helpful as working with animals. Taking a class and learning a new skill is not easy for anyone. The



*This image of Janis Joplin is part of a mural depicting 13 different women the artists painted in honor of their favorite historical woman.*

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# Mitchellville volunteer:

Continued from page 1

challenges are just as prevalent if not more so in an educational setting within a prison. "If you are in prison, chances are you have a low opinion of yourself, if you didn't when you got there then you



The above image of Mother Teresa is a mural painted by an inmate.

certainly do now," said Parsons. "Trying something new is risky, it's even more difficult in that environment. But some of the women have an absolute commitment to changing their lives, it amazes me," she added.

Most apparently, Parsons is also committed to helping the women of Mitchellville change their lives. In addition to keeping the art program alive at the facility, through her volunteer efforts, Parsons is also working on two separate grants that will benefit the inmates.

She co-wrote a humanities grant with fellow volunteer Dr. Rachel Williams, assistant professor of art education at the University of Iowa. The grant allows inmates to write their own autobiographies by exploring their culture and life before and during their incarceration.

They then create their own story and record it either via audio or videotape; the tapes are then made available at libraries throughout Iowa. This is in an effort to encourage others to learn from the prisoners' mistakes.

Another \$500 grant from the University of Iowa will fund the making of clay tiles and images that the inmates put together to form a picture. Once each piece is completed, the pictures will be hung in the new visiting room at the prison and in some of the units or cells. Additionally, Parsons contributed a chapter on art programs in prisons across the country, to Dr. Williams' book. Which is still in the works and not yet titled.

Parsons chose to leave Mitchellville as an employee in November 2001 due to state budget cuts and anticipated layoffs at the facility. Parsons said she is happy with her decision to join Simpson's Upward Bound Program and views her previous and current work at the prison as a definite asset to her Simpson duties.

"I have learned a ton about what makes people successful and a lot about what prevents people from being successful," said Parsons. "The students I work with in Upward Bound have a lot of barriers to their success. They also have many talents and abilities. It is my job to help them hurdle those barriers." Parsons added that the students' participation in pro-social groups such as Upward Bound will keep them from allowing other peoples' opinions about what they can do stop them from achieving.

As for the artistic achievements of the Mitchellville inmates that Parsons helped teach, mentor and mold, they are on display and for sale at several locations in downtown Iowa City. The funds from the sale of the inmates' original pieces are used to support Mitchellville's art program with 75 percent of the proceeds going directly back to the prison.

An artist herself, Parsons admits the time spent volunteering at the prison is not entirely altruistic.

"It feeds my soul. Being a part of an artist community nourishes me in the same way it nourishes the inmates," said Parsons. "It is an exploration of myself as an artist. I'm not trained to save them, but I am enjoying the experience."

## CALENDAR

### February

**Feb. 1-March 1-** "East Meets West," artifacts from the Non-Western world curated by Dr. Janet Heinicke on display in Farnham Galleries.

**Feb. 14-** Dr. Robert Johnson Philosophy Lecture-7:30 p.m. in Lekberg Hall.

**Feb. 15-** Professor Ron Albrecht, piano recital-Great Hall at 7 p.m.

**Feb. 21-** 2002 Carver Lecture-Leontine Kelly, minister-7 p.m. in Smith Chapel.

**Feb. 22-** Faculty-Student Concert, 7:30 p.m. in Lekberg Hall.

**Feb. 22-23-** Spring Music Weekend and Scholarship Auditions for Prospective Students-Amy Robertson Music Center.

**Feb. 26-** Tom Coates, director of Consumer Credit Counseling in Pioneer Conference Room at 12:45 p.m.

### March

**March 5-** Art Day-Little Hawkeye Conference featuring students from Knoxville, Grinnell, Boone, Oskaloosa, Pella, Pella Christian, Waukeo and Norwalk.

**March 3-** Simpson College Choir and Chorale in their Spring Concert under the direction of Rebecca Gruber. Smith Chapel, 2 p.m.

**March 3-8-** Simpson College Choir on tour under the direction of Rebecca Gruber.

**March 20-** Visiting artists: The Westminster Choir, well-known collegiate ensemble, often appearing with the New York Philharmonic, in a tour concert. Great Hall, 8 p.m.

**March 6-29-** Jan Freed- "Daring to be Me." Portraits of Women Leaders from Mexico- display in Farnham Galleries.

## Science department receives grant match

The Roy J. Carver Charitable Trust, Muscatine, Iowa, recently announced that they would match the \$123,407 grant awarded to the Simpson College Science Department last year by the National Science Foundation.

Pat Singer, biology department chair, Ron Warnet, division of natural science chair and Jackie Brittingham, biology professor; co-authored the NSF grant for the purchase of approximately \$240,000 worth of equipment, to enhance the biochemistry major. The \$123,407 awarded to the department was to pay for half of the desired equipment.

Consequently, the matching funds

from the Roy J. Carver Foundation will be used to cover the other half of equipment costs, allowing the science department to purchase the necessary items at no cost to the college.

Singer, Warnet, Brittingham and David Olsgaard, associate professor of physics worked together to write the grant request to the Roy J. Carver Charitable Trust. Singer said she was pleased with the groups' successful efforts.

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## Simp awarded for Sept. 11 coverage

The Iowa College Media Association recently honored *The Simpsonian*, student newspaper for its coverage of the September 11 attacks.

*The Simpsonian* was voted best among the state's private colleges for its coverage of September 11 events.

Brian Steffen, associate professor of communication studies at Simpson and *The Simpsonian* advisor commented on the award.

"*Simpsonian* staffers worked in the days after the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C. to cover in words and pictures the ways that the story was affecting students and faculty at Simpson," said Steffen.

Winning second place in the competition was *The Trumpet*, the student newspaper at Wartburg College in Waverly. *The Tack*, Buena Vista University's student newspaper received third place.

## LIFE AFTER FIVE



## A look at life with Mary Peterson

Peterson

**Title:** Information service librarian

**Family:** Two cats; Reed and Malloy

**Joined Simpson staff:** June 2001

**Likes best about job:** The people she works with

**Favorite author:** Ed McBain-law and order books

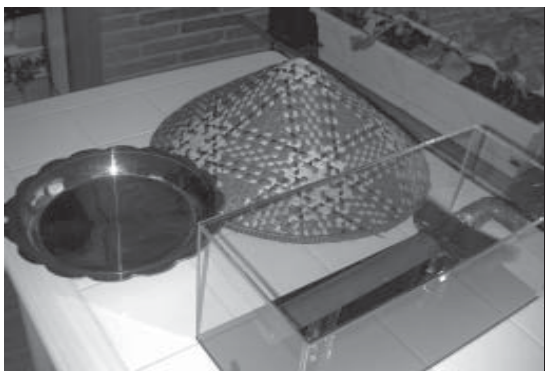
**Interests:** Trying out new restaurants

**Lives:** Indianola

**Recent vacation:** Salt Lake City, toured Olympic site while under construction

## 'East Meets West' in Farnham Galleries

A collection of artifacts and photographs from Malaysia, China, Japan, Vietnam and Africa is on display in Farnham Galleries this month.



The above items are included in the "East Meets West" display in Farnham Galleries

Dr. Janet Heinicke, professor emeritus, is the curator for the show. She is bringing

together works, which have been given to the state of Iowa, and works that she has collected on travels to the Far East and Africa.

A diverse array of objects used in everyday life, as well as objects used for ceremonial purposes and special occasions are included in the exhibit.

Specifically on display are wooden tops, kites, ceremonial brass bowls, candleholders and incense burners used for weddings. Also included are silk batik for which Malaysia is famous, ready-made costumes like the "baji karong," men's wedding suits and "country" cotton batik.

The Malaysian part of the show is funded in part by the Iowa Arts Council and made possible through the efforts of Iowa Sister States.

The exhibit will tour the state of Iowa for the next 15 months after making its debut at Simpson College.

## FOOTNOTES

**Ron Albrecht**, professor of music, recently finished a series of recording sessions with Sandra Wacha, an outstanding flute player, and Trifecta Recording. The result will be a CD featuring an hour of beautiful and relaxing music for flute and piano. The CD will be available sometime this spring.

**John Benoit**, associate professor of music, was one of three judges at an “in-house” concerto-aria competition held at Central College on January 20. On January 23, his Des Moines-based trombone ensemble, Resonus, performed a program in the St. John’s Lutheran Church Wednesday Noon Recital series.

Two works by Benoit, an arrangement of Duke Ellington’s “Creole Love Call” and an original composition titled “C Street Shuffle” (no reference to Hillman Hall) were premiered on the program.

**Patricia Calkins**, assistant professor of

German, has been selected by the American Association of Teachers of German into a program called TraiNDaF, the purpose of which is to train future leaders for German education in America. As part of this program, she will be mentoring younger colleagues and work to strengthen the position of German in American education. As part of the award, Calkins received a stipend to attend a three-week summer seminar in Germany.

An article by **Frank Colella**, professor of economics, entitled “Disintermediation and European Financial Markets” has been published in ‘Selected Papers: European Studies Conferences 1993-1999’.

**Jennifer Hedda**, assistant professor of history, spoke about Islam at the Rotary International Club on November 30, 2001.

**Fred Jones**, professor of sociology and Applied Social Science has been appointed by the Indianola City Council to serve on the Civil Service Commission. His term will terminate on April 2, 2004.

**Scott LaGraff**, instructor of music, performed “Songs of Don Quixote” on the Indianola Concert Association’s 2001-02 season Sunday, January 20, and will perform the same recital at Baylor University and McLennan Community College in Waco, TX in February and at the University of Tulsa in March.

**Jeff Parmelee**, assistant professor of biology, was a delegate at the 4th World Congress of Herpetology in Bentota, Sri Lanka from December 2-9, 2001. He moderated a session on Herpetological

Conservation, presented a poster on rattlesnake ecology in Iowa, and gave an oral presentation on tropical frogs.

**Tobias Winright**, instructor of religion, gave a presentation on “Catholic Perspectives on War, Violence, and Terrorism” for the adult education program at St. Thomas Aquinas Church in Indianola on December 4. At Waukee United Methodist Church on Sunday, December 30, he preached at two morning worship services. On January 11-13, he attended the annual meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics in Vancouver, BC, where he convened a Breakfast With an Author session with author Dr. Ronald Stone of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, discussing his new book, *John Wesley’s Life and Ethics* (Abingdon, 2001).

In addition, Winright is teaching the ethics component of Des Moines Police Department’s in-service training for police officers this spring, and this year’s focus is integrity.

**Ruth Weatherly**, associate professor of management, has been certified as an arbitrator by the Council of Better Business Bureaus for their “AutoLine” program. Consumers who have complaints about “lemon” vehicles typically must use the BBB program under terms of the manufacturers’ warranty provisions.

A poem by **David Wolf**, instructor of English, entitled “The Exchange” has been selected for the Voices on the Prairies series, a radio broadcast of poems by poets with Iowa roots and connections. Poems for the series are selected and read by poet Michael Carey.

### THE CORNERSTONE

**Editor: Jennifer Whitham**

*Art Director: Carol Carder*

*Production Assistant: Carole Schipper*

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