

THE JOURNAL RECORD

Tuesday, March 2, 2010

journalrecord.com

Vol. 115, No. 42 • Two Sections

Engineering firm finds inspiration in prison chapel

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The Journal Record

OKLAHOMA CITY – A new set of walls designed to make it tougher to get into prison has gone up at the Eddie Warrior Correctional Center in Taft as part of a statewide prison chapel project.

It's been open for less than a month, but Glenn Short, who helped design the chapel, said 14 baptisms already have been held inside the brick structure in Taft. And, he said there's a waiting list for more at the minimum-security women's facility.

Short's architectural and engineering firm, Frankfurt-Short-Bruza Associates of Oklahoma City, is collaborating with World Mission Builders, led by R. Joe Wilson, and the Oklahoma Department of Corrections, to build chapels as one way to give offenders a reason to seek a better life.

The Taft chapel has 4,800 square feet, three classrooms, a library and computer lab, card shop, two offices and a 176-seat auditorium, stage and baptistry.

Including its furnishings, the chapel is valued at about \$300,000. Even more impressive is what it took to put it there.

Along with dozens of inmates, the chapel was erected with the help of more than 40 volunteers from six states, who came by motor home and stayed on the job for two weeks to install prefabricated wall components on the slab and complete the interior.

"They raised the bar, or the building, so to speak," Short said.

Area businesses also got involved by providing more than \$130,000 in donated goods and services, while churches and individuals donated more than \$100,000.

In addition to offering nondenominational services, the chapel was built to provide needed space for educational



Eddie Warrior Correctional Center in Taft. COURTESY PHOTO

and counseling programs designed to help offenders stay out of jail once they are released.

The programs, which also have long waiting lists, provide a range of reintegration services, including career training, education and drug and mental health treatment. Oklahoma's 26-percent recidivism rate among offenders is below the national average, but state budget cuts have impacted community re-entry programs lately, along with the need to replace chapels with more prison beds as the prison population expands.

"We don't begin to address all the needs of offenders," Justin Jones, director of the state's prison system, said. "Some finish their entire incarceration and never go through their biggest need area."

That's why he welcomed the chapel construction program, provided security concerns could be overcome.

"We knew that for quite a few years

that our chapel space was insufficient," Jones said. "Most were built on grounds when they were a third of their present size, and we never had funding for expanding the areas for religious services."

With a goal of building 15 chapels in Oklahoma, Short said his company already has started designing chapels for the Dick Connor Correctional Center in Hominy and the Mack Alford Correctional Center in Stringtown.

"It's a longtime commitment that involves a lot of benevolence and community contribution," said Short, who got involved with World Mission Builders after he met Wilson, the founder, at church.

While Short's firm does other work for DOC, he said the chapel project fits their calling as faith-based owners.

"All companies have responsibilities to their community and society," Short said. "This has a greater return because it involves the lives of these people."