

Area woman honored by state prison society

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Pennsylvania Prison Society board president Tom Innes presented the Visitor of the Year Award to Huntingdon resident Rebecca Mitchell May 8 during the society's 231st annual meeting at the Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia.

In the past 40 years, the state's prison population has increased by 850 percent, increasing from seven to 25 prisons despite the state's overall decrease in crime rate.

With the number of incarcerated inmates rising, it is often hard for an inmate to find the light within their incarcerated sentence. However, through the mission of the Pennsylvania Prison Society and local member Becky Mitchell, they are bringing hope and light inside of prison walls.

May 8, the Pennsylvania Prison Society hosted its 231st annual meeting at the Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, honoring those who bring light to those who are incarcerated, commemorating this year's theme of "Celebrate Impact." Mitchell, who has been a member of the society for six years, was presented with the Official Visitor of the Year Award, nominated by Huntingdon chapter convener Harriet Kaylor.

"Mitchell has had a significant impact on the lives of the incarcerated people she reaches out to," said Kaylor. "Through her tireless visits, letters and encouragement, she has been an influence on the prisoners she interacts with, many of whom will be returning citizens."

The prison society itself has advocated for sensible criminal justice policies and humane prison conditions since its establishment in 1787, operating statewide. They provide bus transportation to families to visit incarcerated family members as well as mentoring for individuals transitioning from the prison to home life. During the annual meeting, they presented an Official Correctional Professional Award, Prisoner of the Year Award and the Official Visitor of the Year award, which Mitchell is still honored to have received.

"I have visited seven prisons throughout the western and middle section of the state," she began. "I try to visit seven prisoners every two weeks. I advocate for their just and humane treatment. It is a joyful time when I go in to see them and I can meet their friends and family."

Mitchell is devoted to the prisoners she visits, often following them if they are moved to another prison. Having traveled as far as SCI Houtzdale, Mitchell is currently visiting several prisoners within SCI Huntingdon and SCI Smithfield. "Some who move farther away I will visit once a year," she said, "but no matter what, I try to write letters to them. I travel across the state and country a lot, too, so I often mail those I visit brochures of pamphlets from where I've been. I like to keep them informed of what is happening outside of their walls."

Also a member of SCI Huntingdon's Lifers Board, which hosts meetings every two weeks, she discusses and encourages inmates who are sentenced to a life behind bars to educate other prisoners and lifers about taking responsibility for their actions and to help others.

As for the prisoners she visits, Mitchell explains the Prison Society sends out notifications to members regarding prisoners who want visitors. "I often don't know why the people I visit are in prison unless they tell me or it comes up," she said. "Some of them are in there for various reasons, like connection with drugs, others are for robbery, some are even for murder.

"It's rewarding to see the self confidence in the prisoners I visit and talk to increase as time passes," she said, noting she has interacted with several prisoners right up until their release date. "Seeing them being released is one of the happiest times I've had. It is so joyful to see them go on out on their own."

Humbly honored to have received the award from the society, Mitchell said she plans to continue visiting and writing letters to prisoners for years to come.

"I am a pretty good listener," she said, "and I love to listen as they tell me their concerns and joys of prison and home life. Through talking to them, I also love to see when they increase in self-respect.

"I see or hear how a prisoner has the wish to help and do good for others, and that is a big step for them," she concluded. "It indicates to me they have accepted responsibility and that they are ready to leave prison."

For more information about the Pennsylvania Prison Society, visit prisonsociety.org.

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