

# LEMON CREEK JOURNAL

The background of the cover is a dramatic painting. It depicts a group of men in a small boat on a turbulent sea. One man stands in the center, holding a flag aloft. Other men are visible in the foreground and background, some reaching out or struggling. The sky is dark and stormy, with a bright light source on the horizon.

FRATERNITY OF SURVIVORS

INSIGHTS & IMAGES OF LIFE ON THE LAST FRONTIER

LEMON CREEK CORRECTIONAL CENTER

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## VOLUME XXVIII: FRATERNITY OF SURVIVORS

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### To our readers:

The Lemon Creek Journal is a quarterly e-Publication of Lemon Creek Correctional Center, Juneau, Alaska. The Journal’s mission is to inform, engage, and challenge Corrections professionals and the public to think critically about the challenges facing Alaska’s correctional system. So that we can be more responsive to our readers, please share with us your impressions and suggestions by emailing the editor at [daryl.webster@alaska.gov](mailto:daryl.webster@alaska.gov)

Cover Art: *The Raft of the Medusa*, by Theodore Gericault, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

## **Forward to Volume XXVIII**

**This is, without a doubt, the most emphatic issue of the Journal that we have ever published. Under the theme, “Fraternity of Survivors,” you will hear from current and former Alaska DOC employees who have come face to face with the life-changing realities of severe injury, illness, and death and learn where their struggles have led them:**

**A Superintendent and his father, stranded without shelter through an endless night on the northern plains, face hypothermia in a battle to survive until morning.**

**A DOC Lieutenant, on military deployment, survives a helicopter crash, only to awaken to paralysis and the long journey back.**

**A DOC Sergeant suffers a catastrophic brain injury and despairs of recovering the life he once had.**

**A DOC Criminal Justice Planner courageously battles cancer and finds strength through her faith in God.**

**A Superintendent whose young son committed suicide, wrestles with survivor-guilt.**

**Each of these writers detail their struggles with tremendous courage and no holds barred, sharing with you the fears and uncertainties they have revealed to few others. You will not reach the last page of this issue untouched by their stories.**



## Into the Unforgiving Night

By

### Superintendent Bob Cordle

In the fall of 1998, my dad and I took another of our many outdoor adventures together, this time hunting antelope in the far corner of Southeastern Montana. Our hunting destination was located roughly 30 miles south of the historic town of Ekalaka, population approximately 360. Rural Road number 323, from Ekalaka to our turn off, had more potholes than the Ekalaka ranching community had cowboys. We arrived at our desired location late in the day, set up the camper, unloaded the gear and four-wheelers from the trailer, and began planning out our long awaited seven-day hunt.

We were familiar with the area, having hunted it two years earlier. The days were sunny and overly warm, the nights were beautifully starlit, with lows hovering around 50 degrees. Our four-wheelers were strapped with packs, filled with emergency gear; a coat, extra clothing, food, water, fire starter and matches, a small blanket, first aid supplies, a headlamp, and a compass. The

terrain consisted of small rolling hills, bluffs, and coulees and was perfect deer and antelope habitat. We set up camp on one of the highest points around, making the truck and camper visible for several miles in most directions. We always hunted south of the old ranch dirt road, which ran slightly downhill, making it an easy return to the campsite every evening. One simply had to return north, or uphill on the four-wheeler, and once the dirt road was reached, a right turn would lead back to the camper.

On day four I returned to camp after an unsuccessful all-day hunt and found that dad was already there. I was hot and decided that the comfort of an old T-shirt was all I could stand. I removed my hunter orange jacket and boots, and slipped on tennis shoes, as we swapped stories of the day's outing, talked about what we were going to cook for dinner, and as usual, removed our emergency packs from our four-wheelers to be stored in the camper for the night. About half an hour before sunset, dad stepped out

of the camper to retrieve something from a tote and looking off to his left saw a herd of antelope about five or six hundred yards away, south of the old dirt road. He came back into the camper to get his binoculars. Once back outside I heard him exclaim, "That is a good buck!" Without hesitation I said, "We still have time, let's head that way." Dad, still dressed in his hunting attire, grabbed his rifle as I was putting on my thin, hunter orange jacket. Focused entirely on getting closer to the antelope, we climbed onto the four-wheelers, foolishly leaving behind our emergency packs, and headed off through the prairie grass to close the distance to the herd. Though the sun would soon be setting, we knew we still had about an hour of daylight before it would become completely black.

Antelope possess extraordinary eyesight, and as we worked our way toward the herd, they steadily put more distance between us. We continued on, driving through territory we had never been before, crossed the same creek three times, and with stubborn determination to get within shooting distance of the herd, we ended up putting miles between us and our campsite. As antelope are apt to do, they kept on moving, and with daylight almost gone, we realized the short-lived evening hunt was over. It was time to turn around. As we did so, we immediately noticed thick, ominous, dark clouds forming on the horizon in the direction of camp, which was now over three miles away. We didn't think much of it, but within fifteen minutes of retracing our path, it grew dark, and headlights became a must. As we reached the first creek crossing, a chill wind began to blow out of the north. No cause for concern yet. We followed well-defined tire tracks that would eventually lead us right back to the camper. Before we reached the second creek crossing, a hard rain began to fall. It

became noticeably colder as the wind picked up, and we now had to squint to see tire tracks through the headlights, as wind-propelled raindrops struck our faces like miniature torpedoes. I was relieved when we made the second creek crossing, knowing that we only had one more crossing to go and maybe two miles more to travel.

Not long after crossing the creek we came to an abrupt stop, sitting side by side on the four-wheelers in disbelief. Before us in the dark were multiple sets of four-wheeler tracks running all directions. In our haste to catch up to the antelope herd, we failed to consider that other hunters using four-wheelers had been in the area before us. We had not paid attention to their tracks in the prairie grass during the pursuit of our quarry. We kept moving, doing our best to stay on top of the tracks we had made earlier that evening. It was difficult at times to tell which ones were ours and after about ten more minutes of following multiple sets of tracks going in the same direction, the tracks peeled off from one another. We stopped, with no idea which tracks to follow. We came up with a game plan. We knew the old dirt road couldn't be more than a mile away, so we decided to follow two sets of tracks that were fairly close together, in hopes that we had made them, and that they would lead us right back to the camper. Slowly pushing on, we finally reached and made the last creek crossing. We only progressed about a hundred feet past the creek before discovering signs of even more four-wheeler tracks in the soaked prairie grass, but now we had another problem, and it was one that would not be forgiving. The heavy rain had broken down the definition of the tire tracks, and the grass that had stood about six to eight inches high was all but flattened from the wind and forceful rainfall. It was now nearly impossible to make out any tire tracks at all. We sat drenched on the seats of the

four-wheelers not knowing what to do. By this time, we were so miserable that we decided that since it had been a relatively straight downhill drive from the camper to the first creek crossing, we would keep going in hopes that we would eventually come to either the old dirt road or the campsite.

We didn't drive far before realizing this desperate plan was a bad idea. Both four-wheelers were getting low on fuel and with no distinguishable tire tracks to follow we were simply driving blind. We were both pretty confident that the road and campsite were directly in front of us, no more than half to three-quarters of a mile away, but without a compass we couldn't be certain. After serious discussion we accepted our fate and killed the motors to face the pitch-black night, prepared with nothing more than what we were wearing. Within minutes, the rain turned to snow. My illuminated G-shock watch revealed that it was only 6:30 pm. Sunrise was more than twelve hours away and I was already shaking uncontrollably.

We wasted no time trying to get some warmth back into our bodies. We first tried sitting closely together on one of the four-wheelers in hopes we would combine body heat, but that failed. Our clothing was saturated to the point that I had to wring out the sleeves of my light jacket. We tried to encourage blood circulation by pacing back and forth in front of the headlights of one of the four-wheelers. That helped some, but we knew it would burn more energy than we could afford, and that we couldn't keep it up all night because we had to conserve what gas was left in the tanks. We had no food or liquids to replenish our strength, and neither of us had eaten nor drank much since noon.

We would huddle together on one of the four-wheelers until we could not take it any longer and then would pace for ten to fifteen minutes with the aid of headlights, which revealed little more than horizontally driven snow. It was a disturbing image that was not going to go away. There were times when I could not stop my teeth from chattering, no matter how hard I tried. Dad had on more layers than I did, and he tried to convince me that we needed to exchange upper clothing, because he was concerned that I would become hypothermic. I refused his kind gesture, as I could see he was completely soaked as well, and sharing clothing would only place him in jeopardy of experiencing the same thing.

After what seemed like half the night had passed, I looked at my watch and was devastated to see that it was only a little after 8:00 pm. What seemed like six hours had only been about an hour and a half, and we knew then that this was going to be the longest night of our lives. Wind and a mixture of snow and rain tormented us relentlessly. When the lights of the four-wheelers weren't on, it was pitch black. It was so dark that unless we constantly touched the four-wheelers, we had no idea where they were. Sitting on them was the safest way to prevent us from becoming separated from them.

Time dragged painfully on, and by 11:30 pm I knew that my core body temperature was dropping. I had been soaking wet and exposed to heavy winds, rain and snow for more than 6 hours. I was so tired that I began dosing off while sitting closely behind my dad on the quad. Every so often, he would nudge me and ask if I was okay. At some point I asked him to turn on the headlights so I could start pacing again. As he did so, I awkwardly climbed off the seat and found it difficult to maintain my

balance. I leaned into his shoulder for a moment before being able to stand firmly upright. Exhaustion was knocking at the door, and I was aware that I was struggling to maintain simple coordination. I had never been this cold before. I resumed unsteadily pacing, but simply walking seemed to be such a burden. I couldn't keep it up for long and had to return the seat behind my dad. He kept the headlights on, and I surrendered to sleep for a short while. I awoke to see a truck up on the hill in front of us with its headlights on, beneath a sky turning a soft blue to welcome the morning. I pointed at the truck over dad's shoulder.

"There! Look there. Someone is parked right over there!" Dad only asked what I was talking about. Still pointing I repeated, "There!"

"Son," he said, "There is nothing there. There is no road and there is no truck."

And just like that, the image faded, replaced by windblown raindrops falling from the surrounding darkness into the lit-up mushy grass. I rechecked my watch to see that it was well after 1:00 am. I was drowsy and confused. The truck had seemed so real, how could it not be there anymore?

Dad asked me not to go back to sleep. He told me he was worried that I was not going to wake up. I slowly dismounted, careful not to lose my balance, and resumed painfully pacing. I couldn't take my mind off what had just happened, and I knew I was in the early stages of hypothermia. My muscles were stiffening and moving my legs to walk was becoming more difficult. I went back to sitting behind dad, placing my hands around his waist, while leaning my head onto his rain-soaked coat. I desperately tried to remain awake, but I could not. Every so often I would hear him

say, "Son, please don't fall asleep," and I would come to, but only for a moment.

At one point, I woke to the sound of children playing and laughing. I could literally hear the noise of a playground, the squeaking of the swings' chains going back and forth and the soft quiet sound of a merry go round, as it spun in circles. I couldn't see it, but I was clearly hearing it, and I knew I wasn't dreaming.

Recalling I had recently hallucinated, I cautiously asked dad, "Do you hear that?"

"Do I hear what son?"

"Can you hear the noises from the playground?"

"Bob," he said, "We are still outside in the storm. The wind has died down but we are still stuck here in the rain until daylight arrives."

He told me we only had about five hours to go and asked me again to do my best to stay awake. He then begged me to take his coat, but I refused and told him it would make no difference. I promised him I would be okay until the morning and let him know that I wasn't going to pace anymore because it was not helping me to warm up.

I sat on the four-wheeler trying desperately to stay awake. I struggled for several minutes at a time shivering and shaking so wildly that I could barely hang on to my dad. Try as I might, I could not stop drifting in and out of sleep. Dad had to continually wake me over the course of the next few hours. I was experiencing strange dreams and could not make sense of our circumstances.

The last hallucination I recall took place a little after 4:30 am. In high school, my friend had a poster of New York City, with the twin towers silhouetted against the dark evening sky. The photo used for the poster had been taken from across the Hudson River and the lights from all the buildings and skyscrapers were magnificently displayed. I awoke to my dad's voice, as he gently squeezed my hands, which were still around his waist, but I could not understand what he was saying. I forced my eyes open and looked over his shoulder, and there before me was the exact same image from the poster that had hung in my friend's bedroom all throughout high school. This time, I did not share with my dad what I was seeing because I knew that it wasn't real. I blinked multiple times before the image slowly faded into the black night. I told my dad I needed to get up and pace some more. I could hear him respond but still struggled to make out what he was saying. It took a great deal of effort to get off of the seat and stand. Once I did, I was able to process what he was trying to convey to me. He was now shaking tremendously as he told me it was just after 4:30 am, and we only had to wait a couple more hours until it would be light enough to see. I slowly began pacing.

My leg muscles felt like they were made of concrete and I struggled to coordinate my movements. As I paced clumsily in front of the quad, I felt disoriented and lost. Thoughts of my sweet wife and children ran through my head. I was having trouble focusing and was in a state of strange confusion. My shivering had stopped, and I felt an almost slightly warm sensation coming from my body. At one point, I heard Dad talking loudly and I slowly turned toward him to find that he was not as close as before. I could see him above the headlights, motioning for me to come back to the front of the four-wheeler, which I did.

He said, "You need to get back on the seat behind me because you are starting to wander too far away from the headlights." I did what he asked and with little strength left, we huddled together in complete and utter misery. Though I do not remember what I was trying to say, I tried speaking to him. He kept telling me that I wasn't making any sense but asked me to keep talking and to not fall asleep. I made every effort to not close my eyes as I kept trying to think of things to say.

Eventually, the snow and rainfall, that had plagued us all night, slowly came to an end. Off in the darkness appeared a thin blue line and we knew the sun would rise soon. It only took a few minutes before we could see the detailed outlines of rocks, wood, and finally the horizon that would lead us back to the road. We now could see that directly in front of us, about a quarter mile away, was the old blue Ford truck and camper. All that time, it had been so close but concealed from us by a night as black as coal. Now, I wasn't sure if what I was seeing was real. I remember seeing the details of Dad's face for the first time since the sun had set the night before. A small shimmer of relief was barely noticeable on his pale, expressionless features as he waited for me to start my four-wheeler. He made sure that we rode side by side as we made the three to four minute drive back to the campsite. In a short four minutes, we arrived and entered the sanctuary of the camper.

Taking shelter in the camper was a joyous moment. Or was it? I still didn't know if it was real. I couldn't process if being back inside of it was reality or if I was lost in some imaginary place, trapped in my mind, never to escape. With great difficulty, we removed our drenched clothing to put on dry ones. While doing so, my eyes went to the emergency packs sitting on the floor of the



camper, directly under the table. Dad fired up the heater, and we crawled into our sleeping bags, though I do not remember doing so. I woke up around 1:00 pm feeling strangely odd and nauseated. Though the camper was very warm, I was not. I drifted in and out of sleep before eventually going outside. Stepping out of the camper and onto the prairie grass was the most tangible thing I had ever experienced. For the first time since the onset of becoming hypothermic, I felt hope. My balance was still off, and my head greatly hurt, but I began to feel that things were going to be okay. The distinct smell of sagebrush was therapeutic, there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the air was again overly warm. I looked down toward the area that had held us captive in horrendous conditions for more than twelve hours. In the distance I saw a ranch house, that at one point we had to have been close to during that long miserable night, but we were unable to see its lights through the punishing storm.

Both dad and I knew better. I was his hunting partner from a very young age. On each outing or trip, he always took time to talk about safety and would stress the importance of avoiding hazardous conditions that could lead to potentially life-threatening situations. He had worked in law enforcement for many years and had aided Search and Rescue several times, helping to find lost hikers and hunters and to locate those who were not as fortunate in their discovery. I had been a scout master for quite a few years in Oregon and in Alaska, and had driven the, "Be Prepared" motto into my scouts' heads. I had taught first aid and survival courses, and specifically what to do and how to treat hypothermia. We knew better than to leave the campsite without the proper gear.

It is a hopeless feeling to recognize that you are in the early stages of hypothermia, with no ability to do anything about it. On that night, the weather did a complete 180 with no warning. The comfortable cool breeze, while riding the four-wheelers, changed to nearly freezing temperatures in under an hour. The heat was sucked from our bodies and there was nothing we could do to get it back. Our poor collective decision to pursue a short hunt without our survival gear was beyond unwise. It was reckless. The consequences of our actions could have easily told a different story.

For almost six weeks after the longest night of my life, I still felt off at times, experiencing moments of brain fog, and often getting chilled, even in the comfort of a warm room. At the conclusion of our hunt, Dad and I promised each other that we would never place ourselves in a situation like that again. Since that long unforgiving night on the prairie, no matter where my outdoor adventures take me, I always have an emergency go bag, and I will never be without one again.

This life-threatening event happened over twenty-seven years ago. Writing this article proved to be difficult as it brought back vivid memories of distress, worry, and despair. As I committed this story to paper, I relived both physical and emotional sensations that I thought were buried deep inside of me. When I wrote that it was a little after 8:00 pm when we realized we were in for the longest night of our lives, I didn't share how the conversation that followed helped get us through that most terrible of nights. As we huddled together on the quad, knowing we had to survive the next ten hours. We both knew there was no relief in sight, there was no way to generate body heat, and no one was coming to save us.

Shivering profusely, and with emotion in his voice Dad said to me, “We just buried your grandpa a few weeks ago and I am not going to let you die. Tonight isn’t how our story ends. We will fight through this, and we will see the morning. I refuse to let this be our end and I will not let you die.”

I responded, “I love you Dad, and I will not let you die either. It will not happen.”

That short talk gave us more than hope, it gave each of us the drive and sheer will to make sure the other would survive the night. In my mind, it made all the difference in getting us through that long and almost impossible hardship. It determined whether

we would survive or surrender. We were stranded in the dark and stuck in one of Mother Nature’s merciless storms. We had inadequate clothing, had nowhere to shelter, and no survival gear, but we had each other and we were going to ensure that no matter how our situation worsened, we would not allow the other to succumb from exposure to the elements.

Life is precious and can be unpredictable. A grateful heart, a positive attitude, and always being properly prepared for each day should be a must in our lives. Dad will turn 83 this coming year. We have had many more adventures since that perilous antelope hunt so long ago, all of them carefully planned and executed. He always was and always will be my hero.

## LEMON CREEK CORRECTIONAL CENTER

### Employee of the Quarter – Officer Randy Parker



Officer Randy Parker began his career at Lemon Creek Correctional Center in February 2007 and soon became a Prisoner Transport Officer. As a PTO, he has conducted countless inmate transports, often with very little notice and many times after being awakened at home with the call to service. Officer Parker has trained and mentored many LCCC officers, past and present, all of whom will attest that he is no-nonsense and direct, mainly because he has seen it all and done it too. And he still cares.

Lemon Creek Correctional Center is proud to honor Officer Parker as Employee of the Quarter.

**LEMON CREEK CORRECTIONAL CENTER**  
**2025 Fred Dugdale Employee Of The Year**  
**Officer Levi Chilton**



Officer Levi Chilton began his career at Lemon Creek in September of 2022. Look up “Self-starter” in the dictionary and you’ll find a picture of him, taking the initiative and consistently going way above and beyond. Officer Chilton often trades his sit-down posts with other officers so that he can be on the floor to participate in shakedowns of the living units. He frequently finds contraband in locations that others would not consider searching and has developed a reputation, even among inmates, for being a bloodhound.

Officer Chilton is a charter member of the LCCC Officer Advisory Council. He actively represents officers in this role, bringing their concerns to institutional leaders and acting as a change agent. Officer Chilton has also been an active patron of the Lemon Creek Holiday Awards Banquet, crafting handmade jewelry for auction.

Officer Chilton’s professionalism, positivity, and self-motivating energy is inspiring and infectious. We are honored to name him the Fred Dugdale Employee of the Year.



# On Top – Until You're Not

By

Sgt. Tricen Headings, DOC, Retired

**M**y name is Tricen Headings. You may not recognize the name, but for many years I worked as a Correctional Officer and Sergeant at Lemon Creek Correctional Center. I started my career in Corrections in 2009, when I was just 21 years old, still celebrating the birth of my first child. With job in hand, I was on top of the world. I started out working the floor, then moved to Post 1. Along the way, I earned Employee of the Year.

I loved my job, made friends easily, and treated them all like family. As an old time Juneauite, when I wasn't working, I was out on the water or in the woods. At one time or another, most of the people I worked with wound up fishing on my boat. We fished and hunted together and I opened my home to my many friends at Lemon Creek. We even had a regular evening poker game in my garage (Superintendent Webster was a PO at the time and an awful card player, by the way). I was ambitious too. I didn't make it obvious, but deep down, I hoped to be Superintendent one day, where I could use my experience and relationships with LCCC staff to be a good leader. But there were things I needed to do to make that happen.

I worked hard and took responsibility for anything that needed to be done. I passed the Time & Accounting class and became Records Sergeant. At that time, our turnover rate was very high, and we had difficulty hiring enough people to fill vacancies. At Superintendent Cordle's request, I took over the hiring process at LCCC and did everything humanly possible to make sure that applicants were processed quickly and made it into uniform. Our vacancy rates dropped dramatically. After a few years, the Property/Disciplinary Sergeant position opened up, and I took that on and ran with it. I was on my way. Then it all fell apart. And that is where the real story begins.

November 5, 2020 was the day that turned my life upside down and my family along with me. I'll remember that date as long as I live. It began like any other day. I got up, dressed, kissed my family and went to work. I remember driving in my truck and then... I returned to consciousness to find an IV in my arm, my wife weeping beside me. From utter confusion came the realization that I was in the hospital and something terrible had happened to me. I have no memory of how that came about and though I've pieced it together from others around me,

it really doesn't matter. I severely injured my head, and it changed my life forever.

For several weeks, I kept returning to the emergency room, my brain feeling like it was being twisted and pulled from the back of my skull. I was miserable, barely able to walk, every noise sounded like a freight train running between my ears. Every ray of light drilled into my eyes like a massive spotlight, forcing me to wear sunglasses everywhere. I suffered intense migraines with immense pain. Nothing helped.

Then, as if it couldn't get any worse, the pain intensified and visited me every single day, from the moment I woke until I managed to fall into a tortured sleep. Periodic pain shots helped, but soon, my liver began to show signs of damage from the range of medications I was on, so the pain shot was reduced to once per week, then every two weeks, a month, and eventually had to be discontinued entirely.

Sleep was my only temporary refuge, but I feared it, dreading the night terrors that visited me every night. My face began to look wrinkly and worn, I was always dizzy, my eyesight deteriorated along with my memory and balance. Nothing about me worked anymore. That was when depression kicked in. I'd been a competent, independent man my entire life. But suddenly, I wasn't self-sufficient anymore, having to rely on other people to drive me everywhere I needed to go. I

couldn't work. I was unable to attend my kids' events and felt like a prisoner in my own home. It was all so humiliating that I began to disconnect from family and friends. My breaking point was rapidly approaching, when I would end it all. I desperately needed help.



My good friend, "Blue." No love was more true than his.

It was time to get proactive, so I turned to mental health therapy. It couldn't solve the whole array of problems facing me, but that therapy and the help of two special friends saved my life. Without them, I know for a fact that I wouldn't be here today. My search for a remedy led me to "Cognitive FX," in Provo, Utah. The program looked promising, but it wasn't cheap, \$10,000, not including airfare, lodging, rental car, and food. I had no way to pay for it. Times like that reveal the hidden treasure of friendship. An amazing coworker and friend started a

GoFundMe account on my behalf and though I was uncomfortable with what seemed like taking hand-outs, in no time at all we hit the financial goal. My family and I were at a loss for words, overwhelmed by the love we felt. I underwent the treatment, but though it wasn't exactly a failure, it was far from a complete success. My balance somewhat improved and I was at least able to board my boat without getting sick and having to sit on the dock and watch a cherished lifestyle pass me by.

I tried physical therapy but saw little improvement. In fact, I seemed to begin slipping backwards. The harder I tried, the worse I felt and the less improvement I saw. By then, it was 2022 and I had to face up to the hard reality of giving up my cherished career at Lemon Creek Correctional Center. I turned in my badge and keys and it seemed that a lifetime of dreams went with them. My career was as much a part of me as my right arm. Without it, I lost much of my identity. I gave up.

Time crawled slowly by and in 2024, stuck at home with nothing better to do, I began listening to a podcast, the "Dale Jr. Download." One day, when I was only half paying attention, I heard the show host talk about a book he wrote about his head injuries, "Racing to the Finish: My Story," by Dale Earnhardt Jr. The way he described his injuries was nearly identical to my own. He wrote about going to the University of Pittsburgh Medical Sports



Returning from one of many ER visits. My dog, Rex is not a lover but he sensed my pain and comforted me.

Medicine Concussion Program, and the tremendous impact it had on his life. I bought the book and on February 24, 2025, I found myself in Pittsburgh, waiting to visit UPMC.

The night before my appointment, I was too nervous to sleep. I got to the UPMC offices so early that the receptionist was still eating breakfast and hadn't even booted up his desk computer. I was checked in and soon, a man in a running suit, covered in sweat, came and got me. He introduced himself as Dr. Burley. He said that he had just finished his morning workout and that I was so early that he hadn't had time to clean up. He kindly took me to a room and got me started on testing. I was sporting my ever-present sunglasses, orange, like something Elton

John might wear. Dr. Burley took one look at them and said, “How about you take those off. Actually, how about you don’t ever put those back on again. Just throw them away.” So much confidence radiated from him, that I knew he was the real deal. That was when I began to realize that I was in a pair of amazing hands.

Later, I was with the physical therapist when the occupational therapist handed me a big packet with the workout treatment plan she had made for me. Once again, I was shocked by how smooth, fast, and confident the clinicians were. After about two hours with the physical therapist, she put me on a treadmill and told me that studies had shown that fast walking for just 15 minutes often settled a migraine better than medication. Sure enough, my migraine began to dissipate and within 15 minutes was significantly gone. I was blown away.

Doctor Burley determined that I had a Vestibular TBI and he was confident that if I faithfully followed the treatment plan, I would see major improvement and most likely a full recovery! Returning home, I followed the plan and busted my butt for months, 6-8 hours each day. Within weeks, I saw massive improvements. On May 12, 2025, I was successfully discharged from the program. My recovery has been undeniably amazing.

You can’t go through an experience like mine without learning a great deal about yourself and being fundamentally changed. I learned that when you are at the lowest of lows, without even a speckle of help or relief in sight, you must not give up. There is always help somewhere out there and there is hope. Always.

I also learned that when you need help, you must ask for it. The memory of finding myself at rock bottom is still fresh in my mind. Looking one way on the outside, while feeling lost and helpless on the inside. Trying to understand what was going on when nothing made sense. Trying and failing to perform the simplest tasks, when not even the words came out as I intended. On those bad old days, and for the longest time those were the only days I had, I was so insecure that I stopped answering the phone. I hid from the doorbell. My emotions and my anxiety level were all over the scale, laughing one moment, then in the next, feeling as if there was no help for me.

I’ll confess, I never used to believe in depression or anxiety. I was the last person to accept that such things were real, until I found myself crying for no reason at all, my emotions out of control, and living in a dark pit. Let me tell you, those feelings are real. If you find yourself in that black hole, it is not an indictment of you as a worthwhile person. Ask for help. Talk to someone about what is going on inside you. Call a friend. Call me.



As I write this, it is November 4, 2025, just a day short of the fifth anniversary of my Traumatic Brain Injury. After more suffering, debilitation and denial than I ever want to feel again, I have survived my crazy, hard journey. I have my life back. I have new dreams and goals and I won't take them for granted because I learned the hard way that life can be turned upside down in an instant. Take my advice and live it to the fullest. And God forbid, if you ever find yourself where I have been, don't give up.





## Spiritual Wellness – Solid Rock

By

Kacy Lockhart – Criminal Justice Planner

One in eight. I never would've thought I'd be in the 13% of women diagnosed with breast cancer at some point in their lives. But that all changed for me this past July when I was diagnosed with cancer as a healthy 47 year-old mother of four.

Where do you go when life throws you a curveball? What role does spiritual wellness play? Spiritual well-being is an inner experience that goes beyond just physical and mental health. It encompasses an expanding sense of purpose, meaning, and connection in our lives – whether through religious practices, personal disciplines, or a deep appreciation for the natural world around us. It involves the cultivation of a sacred relationship; for some that involves a connection with God, for others, a profound sense of self. This spiritual dimension can have a significant impact on our day-to-day lives, influencing our ability to cope with stress, maintain inner peace, and find true fulfillment. I'm sharing my personal story because of how deeply affected and intertwined with spiritual wellness it has been.

It's been a daunting four months.

Appointment after appointment, invasive procedure after invasive procedure, second opinions followed by third opinions, scans, biopsies, surgery, researching risk percentages, trying to choose the lesser of the evil treatment options, weighing the side effects, genetic testing – what about our two daughters? While walking through large cancer centers in Seattle, I saw sons accompanying their mothers, young newlyweds walking hand in hand, women with head scarves and chemo eyebrows, and some of them facing the reality that time is running out. On many occasions, I'd make eye contact with these women; exchange a subtle empathetic smile, knowing we are all a part of a club we don't want to be a part of.

It's been both humbling and heartbreaking. And yet, there is a sweetness in sharing this deep human experience that has softened me. I know God allows trials and tribulation in our lives so we can share in the sufferings of others. I also believe these same trials can draw us closer to Him, to our loved ones, to our values, and to our purpose. I

absolutely had (and sometimes still have) moments of doubt, anxiety, and fear. But it is my faith in God that has and will sustain me. Knowing I'm not in control and trusting that He is good, I have a peace that transcends understanding. I've been intentional about cultivating my spiritual wellness by going outside in nature, appreciating the beauty of His creation, choosing to be grateful, connecting with church family, praying, listening to deep sermons, singing praise songs while doing the dishes, and meditating on favorite

verses. My spiritual beliefs and disciplines strengthen my personal relationship with God and provide direction and reassurance in my life.

And so, as we embark on this spiritual wellness campaign, it is my hope that we all cultivate that sacred relationship. That we reflect on the importance of what really matters, of pursuing meaning, purpose, and engaging in spiritual practices. So that, when the ground gives way, we've got a solid rock to stand on.

**Don't miss upcoming issues of**

## **THE WELLNESS CONNECTION**

**Official Newsletter of the DOC Wellness Unit**

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# Lemon Creek Correctional Center Wants YOU!



Lemon Creek Correctional Center in Juneau, Alaska employs Correctional Officers, Food Service & Maintenance Specialists, Nurses, and Administrative & Clerical Staff. Check out [Governmentjobs.com/careers/Alaska/](https://www.governmentjobs.com/careers/Alaska/) for job opportunities at DOC's Juneau facility.

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For information, contact Sergeant Green at (907)465-6202. We look forward to working with you.







# Just When I Thought It Was Over

By

Ed Irizarry, Lt. DOC Retired

**I**t was another normal night under the night vision goggles, performing the most normal duties one comes to do while conducting aerial operations. The rotor blades chopping the air, the humming of the turbine, and the normal radio chatter all blended into a harmonious song and rhythm I knew all too well. What a job! The best in the world. Just as I settled into this moment in time, it was shattered by a sudden vibration and loud pops, indicating a compressor stall. Master caution lights, engine out light and mayday radio calls all happened at once. Looking for a place to land, there were only trees in sight. Trees come fast as altitude is lost and you realize it's the trees... big trees. It sounded as if some giant was continuously crushing an aluminum can forever, so loud and in slow motion. Then all was quiet. It was peaceful and I was sitting in my high school bleachers looking down at a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon. Man, what a wonderful smell and I was hungry. Everyone was relaxed and eating. Someone was asking me my name over and over. I just wanted to eat. Then I

tried to stand, but I was in severe pain. "Why? Why can I not move? WHY DOES IT HURT!"

The scenery suddenly changed. The lights were bright, the room was bright, and there were people looking at me. One lady kept asking my name. How did I go from eating a great breakfast to here? Where am I? Why can I not move and why am I tied down? What seemed like an eternity lying there was not actually long until I began to figure things out. I was in a hospital, and I was hurt badly. But how bad and why? Slowly memory began to return, and I was reliving the event. My mind raced back to "HOW BAD?" Over and over again, "HOW BAD? WHERE IS MY BUDDY? WHERE IS HE? WHERE AM I?" Fear and disbelief began to settle in. I was in panic mode because I couldn't get the answers I wanted. I wanted them now! I was going to get the answers, and I was getting up from that bed. Of course, none of that was possible. The pain thrust with my every move and only worsened. All I could do was lay there and cry like a

child. And this sucked as well because I could not tilt my head to let the tears run down my cheek. So, my eyes just burned. I begged the Lord to let me go, to just take me away from this. Well, it figured, my darned luck. Getting owned by my own tears.

It all began to come back to me, and I began to recall small moments of the event. Some quicker than others. Then a gentleman walked in who I figured was someone important, as he had a group of people with him. And there was someone I recognized! Yes, someone I knew. I found myself crying again. I could only move my eyes and I could only hear them when they came right up to me. That is when the initial shock hit me. I was told it's possible that I might not walk again and that I was lucky to be alive. "Are you kidding me? Lucky!!!!, Alive!!!! Not walk again, but lucky? I am not lucky if I can't walk."

All these thoughts raced through my head. What do you call urinating through a tube, defecating in a pan and having someone clean it, and all the while you cannot even move? "YOU CALL THAT LUCKY?" I was informed of my accident and the injuries I sustained and was told that walking again was possible, or at least not impossible. The next fourteen days were challenging to say the least, in full body traction and being turned to prevent atrophy. Just existing. One has a lot to ponder in life when you are lying around. And I pondered a lot. I felt lost, lost in my own soul and sense of purpose. I lost my identity. Depression set in. I began to use my pain to ask for more drugs to stop the pain. The more they offered me the more I would take. I lost who I was and wanted it all to end, to just sleep and not wake up. I had hoped the drugs would end it for me and that was my coping mechanism. That didn't work, I was still

there. Each day that I awoke, I fell into a deeper hole. I felt that I would not be me anymore, that no one would want to be with a "cripple." No girlfriends, no intimacy, no fun, no sports, NO LIFE!!!! I would just be a burden. "Please Lord," I asked, "Just take me peacefully." Between the depression and anger, I only found peace when the pain killers hit. Unknowingly, I was mentally heading to rock bottom.

After being removed from traction I felt a glimmer of hope, but it was short-lived. I was still required to remain motionless. To me, that was not a good sign. It felt as though it was the end, because I was no longer undergoing traction. I figured there was no hope for me, so they stopped the treatment. I felt isolated and believed I was permanently done. No one could give me a clear answer to why I could not walk, why I could not move. I became angry with everyone. It did not matter that they were trying to help me, clean me, give me hope. I was so angry that to me there was no hope. I was not a man anymore. I wanted it to end. I wanted to go away. I didn't want sympathy, I want death to ride in and carry me away to stop the pain, anger, and emptiness. I could do nothing without a nurse doing it for me. "God, please just let me go and be done," I thought. But I was painfully reminded by Him that this was not His plan, and He was not going to let me go easily.

More days had passed when my feet began to burn. The pain seemed to radiate from my feet upward in intense waves. I would have hit the painkiller button, but they had taken that away from me because I was hitting it too often as a means of escaping. I called for a nurse and begged for help to stop the pain. She asked me what I was feeling. I explained it very loudly to her and to my surprise she smiled and yelled at me,

"You can feel burning?!" I remember using very colorful language in the affirmative. She yelled again happily and left the room in a hurry.

If I could, I would have hit someone for that response. I was confused and angrier now than ever. I asked for help and she just laughed at me and left. I lay there dealing with the burst of heat moving up and down my legs, when the Important Man and a few others walked in and just stared at me, smiling. I began to yell obscenities. I am sure I crossed many lines of unethical behavior. Once I shut my trap, the big man asked me calmly, "Are you done, Easy?" I had not been called "Easy" for many years. How did he know? That brought me back to whom I had once been. I froze in time. I began to cry. I begged for help. Then came the news. The pain I was feeling meant that my nerves were recovering from the trauma. The nerves were finding their pathways and basically waking up. It was at that moment that I dared to hope. It was just a glimmer, but it was HOPE. Unfortunately hope came in the form of lots of pain, as my body began to wake up, and let me tell you, it was as angry as I was, and it surely let me know it.

I began the hard journey through therapy. It was like being an infant again. Not that I remember being an infant, but if this was anything like it, then yep, that was me. People feeding me by hand, changing diapers, cleaning me up, bathing me top to bottom. Trying to lift my head, turn my head, move my extremities. Then came sitting up. I became stronger each day. I experienced a roller coaster of emotions, but after hitting rock bottom I ultimately had nowhere to go but up. It was not all fun and games. I sometimes fell back into depression but with help, was able to shake it off and try again. A major turning point

was when I tried to walk on my own without the walker and assistance. "Darn It!!!, I am 'EASY,'" I said to myself, "I can do this!" I don't need help anymore!" Then came my first step without the walker, which translated to what we all know as a faceplant. Yep, that was me again, like falling timber after being felled by a logger, but without the thunderous noise. Not much of a sound from a weak, 150 pound skinny kid. I slowly crawled to the bathroom and pulled on the emergency call cord. Then nurses ran in looking for me and found me. They were yelling at me and trying to raise me up. Once I was standing, I loudly proclaimed, "STOP!!!! Please, I just want to do this my self." I asked again with tears in my eyes. They held me and I did my business. I did that on my own! That was my greatest turning point. My hope was no longer a glimmer. It was in reach. Once back in bed, I thanked God for that, and I questioned why He would help me after I had given up on Him, after I had lost faith in Him and in myself.

As I began to venture out of my room, I found great support in others who were going through similar experiences. I also found support in recovered patients who supported my growth, showing that there is life after injury. All this created in me a new purpose and passion. I was going to recover, prove everyone wrong and help others. It was not all that easy, as I still had a long path ahead of me. It was truly difficult and even though at times I wanted to give up, I fought through it. If not for letting go of the depression, anger, and frustration, I know I would not be here today. It was friends and family who drove me. I had to let go and open up to everyone who was trying to help. I had shut them all out, in fear that I would be abandoned because I would be an invalid. I had figured I would make it easy for them to walk away

from me. It would be best for everyone, but it was the opposite. Once I opened up and asked for help, that is truly when my healing began.

So, there I discovered my Purpose and Passion. Each day I met with a new drive to go one step further. Sometimes it was a game of an inch. Then two, three, and four evolved into feet and meters. The pain continued, but the progress began to dull the pain. I began to enjoy the pain and that made it go away. Pain is progress. Pain is life. I felt pain because I was alive and healing. I challenged others like me to races. Races in wheelchairs, on crutches, on walkers. Anything I could do. They accepted the challenge and we raced, sometimes not even making the finish line, but we still were victorious. We tried, we did not quit, we laughed and we cried but we conquered! I often think of the cartoon Christmas movie "Chris Kringle." *Put one foot in the front of the other, and soon you will be walking out that door.* Maybe that is why Christmas is one of my favorite times of the year, not to mention it has such a great meaning to me, but that is for another time. Then came the day I walked out the door. I did not shut that door permanently, as I returned at times to continue my recovery and stay connected with others I had shared my time with.

I could try and detail every moment. Believe me, that would take way longer than I would like to recall. Even as I write my story, I have experienced many emotions flowing back. I find myself shaking while trying to type and have to clear tears from my eyes. I feel shame from having given up and wanting it to end. But it was not the end of my story. Not one of us in this world is immune from bottoming out. Given the right circumstances and events, any of us can be affected. If there is

anything I can tell you about having to go through any type of traumatic event, whether it be physical, emotional, psychological or all of it at once, there is more strength and bravery in asking for help than from trying to do things by yourself. It is hard to ask for help, but you can do it. For anyone who has gone through trauma, or may go through a traumatic event, know that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Through my recovery, I found that light in Family, Friends and Faith. My wonderful bride and children give me motivation and a loving home. Friends appeared in my life in many ways, many of them from Lemon Creek Correctional Center. Having shared years with the LCCC Family prior to retirement, I had the honor of talking with many officers about professional, performance, and personal experiences. You came to me and we talked for hours. You allowed me to share my experiences with you, which I hope in turn gave you all support. Those of you who thanked me, may not sincerely realize how much you gave me and helped me in my struggles. You see, one can never truly forget the events that affect us all differently. If only it were that easy. But you all gave me the hope and faith to always keep moving forward. There are always people out there who care. They are closer than you know. All you have to do is find them. You are not alone.





## Those Who Are Left Behind

By

**Daryl Webster**

**Warning: Disturbing Content**

**W**hen Alaska DOC's annual suicide prevention training rolls around, everyone assumes that the course is strictly aimed at avoiding inmate suicides, because we recognize the vulnerability of people who have lost their freedom. But how many of us in the classroom really believe that such a thing could ever reach out and touch us? I'm here to tell you that our stake in this matter is much more personal, because as loath as we are to admit it, even our own families are at risk.

Think about this for a moment. No matter how the inmates we supervise have conducted their lives, nearly every one of them has someone, somewhere who loves them, who remembers when they were innocent children, who believes, against all odds, that their loved one will one day walk out of prison, healthy and free of addiction, their sentence served, and ready to be reunited with their family. But when one of those inmates dies in custody, in an institution far from home, the people who

loved him spend the rest of their lives wrestling with desperate sorrow and guilt over what they did or could have done or should have done differently. Survivors live with an unfair but absolute assumption that their own failures helped to condemn their loved ones. I know what I'm talking about.

On September 27th, my wife, daughter, and oldest son attended a weekend Scout Camp at Eagle Beach, just a few miles outside of Juneau. I woke that morning and went downstairs to rouse Declan, my 14 year old son. The plan was to hit McDonalds for breakfast and then pay a visit to camp. His door was closed, as always. I knocked and called for him but received no response. When I opened the door, I found him. He was dead, having hung himself sometime during the night. That image of my boy, as I found him, supersedes every other memory of him.

Most people have no clue how they would react to such a discovery. My reaction was perversely calm, and in a way I can't

explain, that shames me deeply. Let me give you a little context. Before coming to Alaska, I spent 28 years as a police officer in a large metropolitan police department and for about 15 of those years, I worked the streets. In all that time, barely a fortnight passed that I didn't have to deal in some capacity with dead, dying, or seriously injured people. I saw adults and children dead from gunshot wounds, from being stabbed or beaten, killed in collisions or house fires, from overdosing, drowning, and hanging, and desolate elderly people who died alone at home. More than I care to remember.

When you do that for a living, you either quickly find another line of work or become inured to it, not for lack of sympathy, but because in moments when everyone else is overwhelmed by emotion, the person in uniform must always be the calm one in the room, the bringer of order to the realm of chaos. No matter the horror of the scene before you, in time, it no longer shocks you or makes you sick like in the movies. You just do your job like the professional you are, offer what comfort you can, and take the next call. Then you go home at the end of the shift, put the memory in a box and add it to all the other boxes in your head that you hope to never open.

When I found my son that morning, a huge adrenaline jolt rocketed through my body. I've never felt anything approaching it, and I fell back on what I knew, taking care of business. Taking care of my son. But I was too late.

So began the longest two hours of my life, calling 911, struggling to maintain my

composure while repeating the story over and over to the dispatcher, to fire personnel, and to police officers. The whole time, I was desperate to get to my wife before she learned of it from someone else, but I waited until they carried Declan's body out of the house in a bag. I didn't want my little boy to be among strangers, alone and afraid. Then came the impossible task...finding my wife at camp, and with the help of a woman from our church, urging her away from a crowd of boisterous scouts, and breaking the news that our boy had died that night. Of course she knew, before I could get the words out of my mouth, that something was terribly wrong. And that was how I brought the waking nightmare into her life.

There were many awful duties to perform in the next few days, with the invaluable help of friends, family, and co-workers. The turnout at the funeral was huge and heart-warming. For weeks afterward, church members brought meals to our home. But I'll cut to the chase. Especially as a parent, life carries you on from the event, but you never escape it. No matter how you rationalize the loss intellectually or lean into your faith in God, your emotions remain frozen in the moment, and you spend your waking hours longing to hear his voice, to see his quirky smile. You remember when he was a baby, a small boy clinging to your leg, riding his bike in the sunshine, playing catch in the yard and little league at the ballpark.

You already get it. There's a lot of sorrow involved when a loved one, especially a child, dies. More than you can possibly imagine. You might be surprised how many

people you know who have suffered through similar ordeals, but who just don't talk about it. What might also surprise you is the tonnage of guilt carried by those who are left behind and all the unanswerable questions. "Why wasn't I a better parent?" "Why didn't I lavish him with more patience and love?"

And the big one ... "Why didn't I realize the depth of his despair and how close he was to ending his life, while there was still time to stop him?"

Woulda. Coulda. Shoulda.

Declan was moderately autistic. He was a handful, even as toddler, but as he got older, his condition slowed the progress of his emotional maturity. He was impulsive and not given to demonstrating affection. Meaningful conversation was difficult with him, but there were also flashes of droll humor and playfulness and intellectual curiosity that kept me hopeful for his future.

He was very uncomfortable with physical contact unless he initiated it, but at the most unexpected times, usually in the stress of a crowd, my teenaged boy would take my hand, with no self-consciousness at all, and hold on for dear life. I wish I could have spared him the discomfort, but God help me, I felt so close to him in those moments when he needed comfort and turned to me.

I wasn't God's gift to parenting. But I loved Declan dearly and worked so hard and thanklessly to help him live a full and normal life. From my very wise wife, I eventually learned not to be overcome by my son's vagaries, but to let them wash around me like the tide, reassuring him

instead that I loved him. But I can't be sure that he ever understood that and now it is too late to ask.

I do know that I spent way too much time worrying about family finances, constantly focused on obligations outside our home. And I'm painfully aware that all that I did and experienced in my long career caused me to be very emotionally controlled. I succeeded in being a father to look up to but not necessarily a dad to look level in the eye.

I was a traditional father, obsessed with providing for my family and "protecting" them, as I understood it. As an older parent, I felt an urgency about that because I knew that my time with my children would end too soon. How unintentionally prophetic. In that calculation, I missed an important point that I don't want you to overlook. Those of you with families and those of you who will eventually have families of your own will find yourselves performing the end-of-evening ritual of walking through the house, locking all the doors and turning off the lights, all the while telling yourself, "No one is going to break into our house and harm *my* family. They'll have to get through me first," not realizing that Peril may already be living inside your home, having whispered conversations with your children while you sleep. My boy heard that disembodied voice and followed it beyond the veil, late one night in September, while I slept in careless ignorance not 50 feet away.

I will confess to you that one of the hardest parts of living through such a tragedy is surviving the return to normality, when so many innocuous things wait to ambush you. A toy, an article of clothing, photographs,

holidays, and even what should be fond memories all remind you of what you have lost and abruptly return you to the moment, in all its shock and grief. And it never entirely goes away.

So, care for one another and the inmates in your charge. Without even intending something profound, you may be the talisman who reminds a broken person that goodness, hope, and purpose still exist for them. And the next time you attend suicide prevention training, hearing for the umpteenth time who is vulnerable to suicide and what signs to look for, LISTEN. Don't be lulled by having heard the message before. It is repetitive because it must be, so the lessons will become ingrained in you. Be aware. Don't rationalize. Take action. Prevent some inmate's family from suffering the agony of the damned. And for God's sake, take those lessons home and apply them to your family.



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