**‘HOPE PROJECT’ – HMP STOCKEN**

COVID19 has impacted each and every one of us this year, leading to ill health, loss of life loss of freedom and social isolation. Prison staff and the Prisoners in their care have been also been dramatically impacted by the global pandemic.

Prisons are a high risk environment for COVID, with large numbers of people living and working together in a closed environment. To protect prisoners and staff, the past year has seen prisoners spending a lot more time in their cells to reduce social contact and stop the spread of the virus. This action, whilst necessary was tough on prisoners and their families, it was the ultimate and most extreme version of lock down. But the recent report by the Government Scientific Advisory Group SAGE commends the Prison Service for their performance during COVID-19 in protecting and preserving life.

Prisons have acknowledged concerns about the extended time spent in cell and the impact this could have on the mental health and wellbeing of prisoners. Prisons have also had to think far more creatively about how they could continue to rehabilitate prisoners who are spending more time in cells when they could not undertake traditional work and education programmes.

To help prison Governor’s continue with this work in lockdown, the CEO of HMPPS Dr Jo Farrar awarded prison Governors £10 per prisoner to spend on any item that would improve in cell conditions and improve mental health.

HMP Stocken in Rutland took this opportunity to not only look to improve prisoners mental health and wellbeing, but also give the men the opportunity to ‘pay it forward’ and raise funds for Young Minds. Young Minds are a leading mental health charity supporting young people in the community and have been focusing on the impact that the pandemic has had on young people’s mental health.

They also saw this as a great opportunity to support a local businesses impacted by the pandemic. Stocken approached a nearby independent art supplier, ‘Riverside Crafts’ and worked with them to place a huge order for over 1000 art canvases, paint sets and brushes…. With this ‘The Hope Project’ was born, the biggest art project to take place in any prison!

Donna at Riverside Crafts in Market Deeping said;

“It was an absolute pleasure for Riverside Crafts to work with HMP Stocken. We sourced all the supplies from our various stockists and were able to provide a top quality art set within budget. This was a much needed boost for our business during this very tough year and we are so pleased to see so much good has come from this project, well done to the HMP Stocken team for using the funds so wisely to support so many people.”

Taking delivery of the 1030 art packs, HMP Stocken pulled together to encourage every prisoner and staff member to embrace the healing power of art and create a piece of artwork on the theme of ‘hope’.

To encourage everyone to get involved no matter their level of experience or mastery of painting, Carl the resident artist and Tutor recorded an art class where he taught the prison Governor to paint! The video tutorial was played on the prison TV channel for the prisoners to follow, learn and paint in cell.

Governor Neil Thomas OBE “I am immensely proud of how prison staff and prisoners have conducted themselves throughout the global pandemic. The courage and fortitude they have shown was inspiring, I have seen first-hand the strength of the human spirit against adversity. But with that has come necessary restrictions in time out of cell that far surpass the restrictions on our daily lives in lockdown. Whilst we have done everything we can to support the men, this has undoubtedly has an impact on prisoners mental health, this small project has helped to address that. Art has the power to set you free and take you to another place, it inspires change and reflection. It is my sincere wish that the Hope Project will help many people both in and out of custody.

The benefits of this project have proved to be threefold – not only has it been a brilliant opportunity for prisoners to learn a new hobby and enhance their own wellbeing, but once they had completed their artwork they had the choice to either keep it and brighten up their cells, or donate it to charity with all money raised going to Young Minds.

The prison saw lots of donations of artwork coming through, so they reached out the Soft Touch Arts in Leicester, an award winning Leicester charity using arts, media and music activities as a tool to engage with and change the lives of disadvantaged young people.

Soft Touch Arts have used some of the artwork to create an online virtual gallery exhibition and are inviting members of the public to log on, have a look and purchase a piece – with all money raised going to a fantastic cause.

<https://www.artsteps.com/view/60914797b4c143140918b300?currentUser>

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