

Howard Payne coeds mentor girls at juvenile correctional facility

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By George Henson

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BROWNWOOD—Each week, 39 Howard Payne University students travel a few miles down the road to another world. They visit the Ron Jackson State Juvenile Correctional Complex to show girls there how to experience the different life that Jesus offers.

Students Chassidy Carroll and Chaley Perkins share their lives with girls who need positive role models. Carroll, who helped begin the program three years ago, now mentors four girls during her twice-a-week trips to the facility.

“We’re very open that this is faith-based mentoring, but we talk about anything they want to,” Carroll said. Some of the mentors from the university lead Bible studies or devotionals for the incarcerated girls. While Carroll mentors four girls and Perkins two girls, most mentors invest themselves in a single girl.

“A lot of these girls are really struggling,” Carroll said of the 13- to 18-year-olds at the facility.

“But the girls who have realized a need have requested a mentor, so they’re interested in changing their lives and want to know how God can help in that.”

Staff members at the high-security juvenile facility also sometimes request a mentor for younger girls entering the system, Perkins added.

“The staff see a change in the girls that have mentors, so sometimes they will set up a meeting with a mentor to see if a relationship develops,” she said.

While the length of stay for girls in the correctional facility varies with their offense, most are incarcerated one to two years, the students said. That length of stay allows for some deep, trust-filled relationships to be built.

It also necessitates that mentors commit to at least a school year of continuous contact.

“We train the mentors before they meet with girls, and the biggest thing we stress is that it is a commitment,” Carroll said. “The girls really need them to show up on a regular basis.”

“These girls have been let down so much, if we’re not there, it’s just someone else letting them down,” Perkins added.

Showing the love of Christ is very important, Carroll said.

“God’s love is the underlying theme of every question they ask,” she said.

“These girls come from very broken backgrounds and that someone loves them is very hard for them to understand.”

The program is part of the Baptist Student Ministry at Howard Payne. The students who are a part of the program gain as much from the interaction as those who are mentored do, BSM Director Katy Blackshear said.

“HPU students who mentor at the State School are able to take a glimpse outside of their world into a reality that is not their own, be strengthened in their own faith by hearing how God’s redemptive love is at work, as well as be challenged to know the word of God and be ready to share the gospel freely,” she said.

She identified only one negative aspect to the mentoring program—a waiting list of girls who have requested a mentor and not enough volunteers to fill the need.