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### Five Thursdays in Prison

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# Five Thursdays in Prison

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Life seemed to fade into gray-scale as, one by one, six exercise science students and one kinesiology professor stepped into the yard of New Castle Correctional Facility.

Inmates played basketball and wandered among the courts. Dormitories lined the perimeter. Everything was colorless and dull.

The team's destination—the recreational center—sat on the other side of the yard, past the courts and all the inmates in between.

Crossing the yard was one of the most intimidating parts of Project FIND, a research project led by Dr. Matthew Renfrow, Associate Professor of Kinesiology. Every Thursday for five weeks, the team carried their equipment and materials—including a scale and dynamometer—through metal detectors, full body pat-downs, and seven sets of doors into the medium security prison which holds about three thousand inmates.

The team's mission was to collect information about inmates' physical activity and fitness levels, a mostly untouched area of kinesiology research.

Four of the team members were women. All of New Castle's inmates are men. Only one of the team members—Emily Cho '16—had been inside a prison before, in visitation areas. Jesslyn Ridge '16 had worked with former inmates through her father's temporary employment and budget training ministry in Ohio. No one else had ever interacted with inmates.

“Everybody has a stereotype of inmates when they don’t actually know them,” said Zach Hershberger ’16. “We think of them as just bad people, and we don’t really care about them.”

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## ***What did they do?* This question kept ping-ponging the back of Gabby’s mind, followed by a reminder: they’re human beings; treat them as such.**

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Going into New Castle that first day, crossing the yard with inmates all around, the women met stares, gawking, catcalling. The men felt simultaneously vulnerable and protective. Then, they entered the rec center and met their study subjects, 40 of the 470 inmates who’d expressed interest in participating. The men seemed respectful, friendly. Still . . .

“I would sit down at a table and interview men,” Gabby said, “and it seemed really normal, but at the same time, there’s this huge elephant in the room.”

They were put in prison for a reason. *What did they do?* This question kept ping-ponging the back of Gabby’s mind, followed by a reminder: they’re human beings; treat them as such.

That day, they worked on a Health History Questionnaire, a one-sided sheet of paper that asked questions typically found on a doctor’s patient form: personal history, family history, medications, diseases, symptoms like shortened breath, skipped heart beats, chest pain.

The elephant didn’t leave the room, but as Gabby asked each inmate about his family’s health history “*Yeah, my mom lost a battle with cancer*—she realized what she already knew: “They’re just people like me.”

## **TO GAIN THE BENEFITS OF EXERCISE, YOU HAVE TO ENDURE DISCOMFORT.**

The same was true for Project FIND. The second week of data collection, Renfrow’s father-in-law had a heart attack, so the students went to New Castle by themselves, unsure how the inmates would respond to them without their professor. Their agenda this time: gather height, weight, and waist circumference measurements. In metrics.

The inmates barely noticed Renfrow’s absence. As soon as the measuring began, they were caught up in the numbers.

*How tall am I?*

“I can tell you in centimeters,” Erika Ivey ’16 said.

*But what's that in feet?*

“One guy who was closer to our age . . . really wanted to know how tall he was,” Jesslyn said, chuckling. But the students couldn't bring calculators or phones into the prison, “so I'm trying to do long division.”

Eventually, she gave up and offered to return the following week with his height in feet.

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## **Many of the men would be leaving the prison system soon, and most of them were terrified.**

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Since Renfrow wasn't there, Dustin Wanner '16 acted as director, pointing people to the proper stations, chatting with them as they waited. In conversation with one inmate, Dustin found out the man was taking Bible classes online, trying to learn as much as he could, and was scheduled to be released in the next few months.

“How do you feel about getting out?”

*I'm terrified. I have nowhere to go.*

Other conversations revealed similar themes: many of the men would be leaving the prison system soon, and most of them were terrified. Prison and outside dysfunction were all many of them had known.

It was pouring rain when the team left that day, a sort of baptism for a place that had seemed colorless and terrifying. Now students looked at New Castle Correctional and saw potential.

The team finished just as the weather was turning worse, a storm sweeping in that prison administration thought might knock the power out. The students covered their equipment with garbage bags from the rec center, tore holes in other bags for makeshift ponchos, and rushed across the open yard, cheered on by men from their dorms.

## **ENTER ANY GYM AND YOU'LL FIND TWO MINDSETS HARD AT WORK:**

*Benefits require discomfort, and you are capable of more than you know.*

These mindsets are necessary for effective exercise, but if you don't know *how* to exercise, they'll lead to injury.

Thanks to state mandates, every inmate in New Castle has equal access to the rec center and its exercise equipment. “But kind of like recess in elementary school,” Renfrow said, “some people are going to do this, some people are going to sit around.” Because adults have more social anxiety than kids, if an inmate thinks he will look silly doing an exercise—or doesn't know the first thing about

exercising—he'll probably stay in his cell and not use his rec center time.

“Our program director said a lot of guys, they'll just sit in their dorms for years,” Renfrow said. “They'll get out and eat . . . but then they'll just sit around and do nothing.”

Week three, Renfrow was back. Several of the men asked him about his father-in-law. The man who was set on knowing his height asked Jesslyn if she'd figured it out.

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## **Some men didn't know how to do a proper pushup. Many of them had no clue how to use the equipment in the rec center.**

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The team was testing hand grip strength, measuring waist circumference again since Zach had done it wrong the week before, and having each man do as many pushups as possible.

One man was convinced he wouldn't be able to do a single pushup. He did 43. Others asked to try again when they found out a neighbor had done more than them, but . . . that's not how data collection works.

Gabby tested grip strength with the dynamometer, a tool you squeeze in your fist that measures the force of your hand but doesn't move or change shape.

*Did I do it wrong? Am I weak? Can I crush it?*

“No, you did so good!”

“Our test took a little bit longer, so the guys were gathering and, by the end, we had this whole huddle,” she remembered. They were cheering each other on, joking around.

Competitive camaraderie kept growing the next week, when they tested endurance with a 1.5 mile run. Men in the high-risk category were encouraged to do a 1-mile walk, but many ran anyway.

When they finished, they turned around and rooted for the others. The fastest runner, a 22-year-old who worked in the rec center for 20 cents an hour and was always the first there and last to leave, chatted with Renfrow about the possibility of attending college when he got out.

The team was excited to see camaraderie developing and the men's growing motivation, but they noticed a lack of exercise knowledge. Some men didn't know how to do a proper pushup. Many of them had no clue how to use the equipment in the rec center.

The last week, the team gave the men packets including their data and information about exercise and nutrition. After presenting the information, they asked the men what they would like to see in terms of a future exercise program.

## “I need to lose weight, and I need to get cut up.”

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The room lit with excitement. *We feel like we just scratched the surface! There are all these machines and equipment in here—just teach us how to use them. I think it'd be cool if, in a while, you tested us again to see if we improved.*

*So if you come back, who's going to be able to be in your program?*

“We will give you guys first dibs,” Renfrow assured them.

The team split up so the men could meet with them one-on-one. “The lines for the girls were so long,” Dustin said, “and [Zach and I] had like two guys come and talk to us.”

At least one of those guys received about 20 minutes of exercise and nutrition tutorial from Zach.

“He kind of poured it all out to me, like how this was his third prison . . . and he gained a lot of weight, and this wasn't how he used to be, but he wants to change,” Zach said. “So I walked him through step by step, what are some things he could do as far as changing his diet—which is hard at the prison—and . . . making the most of every opportunity he is allowed to be at the rec center.”

This may or may not have been the same man who came up to Gabby during one-on-one and told her:

“I need to lose weight, and I need to get cut up.”

Another overweight man told her, “I have learned so much. When you come back in the fall, you're not going to recognize me.”

“To see that there's a lot of excitement there energizes me to come back,” Gabby said. And the hope is that she will, with a new team of exercise science students just as passionate and excited, ready to face the discomfort of prison, the yard, inmates' stares, for what lies on the other side.

Not long after that last day, Renfrow received a letter from the 22-year-old who ran the fastest mile:

Dear Professor Renfrow,

I wanted to personally write and thank you for coming to New Castle Correctional for your exercise program. I know that coming into this type of environment isn't easy. It means a lot when people are willing to come here and interact with us. Most people's perception of inmates is that we are bad people. I hope that during your few weeks here, we were able to show you that we are not all bad. We made a mistake, and we learned from it.

I really enjoyed the times that you were here. It definitely showed me what I need to work on

and where I need to improve. I wish we had more time to where [sic] you could show us some exercises, stretches, etc. Hopefully you will be able to come back in the fall to have another program.

Once again, I want to thank you for giving us a chance. If you could give my thanks to:

- Ms. Cho
- Ms. Ivey
- Ms. Ridge
- Ms. Trudeau
- Mr. Hershberger
- Mr. Wanner

That would be greatly appreciated. They are a good group of ladies and gentlemen and I felt that I benefited greatly from them being here to help when needed, and encouraging us. I hope you all have a good end of the school year. It was a pleasure meeting you all and hope to hear from/see you again.

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*Project FIND was funded by a [Women's Giving Circle](#) grant. Renfrow is currently pursuing funding for a student-led exercise program at [New Castle Correctional Facility](#).*



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