by JESSE ELLISON *photography by* MOLLY HALEY

LIBERTY'S PRISON

IN MAINE'S MAXIMUM SECURITY LOCKUP, WARDEN RANDALL LIBERTY IS OFFERING INMATES GARDENS, THERAPY, AND A SENSE OF PURPOSE.

Randall Liberty's role as warden at the Maine State Prison almost seems fated. He was 7 years old when he first set foot in the prison, then an aging brick fortress on Main Street in Thomaston. He was there to see his father, who was doing time for burglary. Once a week for the next year, young Randy and his three brothers would accompany their mother on visits with their dad.

"I remember the clanging bars," Liberty, 53, says. "The industrialness of it. My older brother remembers it better: the $500 car and the bald tires and the driving all the way from Clinton to here, the difficulties of it all, trying to keep it together."

It's been 45 years, but Liberty keeps the memory close. A framed picture of one of those visits sits in his office. It was taken around Christmastime, and in it, Randy and his brother are sitting on the lap of an inmate dressed like Santa.

Caption

The Maine State Prison that Liberty oversees today is just 4 miles southwest of where that old penitentiary once stood, but it feels much farther. No signs point the way. It rises unexpectedly out of the farm fields of Warren, a sprawling maze of buildings hemmed in by tall, barbed-wire fencing. Inmates are housed in cells equipped with heavy steel doors – no clanging bars – and grouped together in wings called "pods," which in turn are connected to each other through a web of indoor and outdoor walkways and halls. Maine's maximum-security prison holds 930 perpetrators of the most serious crimes – all men – and employs 300 people, roughly two-thirds of whom are sworn officers.

In the two years since Liberty became warden, the prison grounds have changed visibly: tucked between the fences and walkways are rows and rows of tidy gardens that this summer were sprouting tomatoes, peppers, kohlrabi, kale, and cheerful red and orange flowers, a stark contrast to the brutal gray buildings behind them. Beyond the fence are prisoner-made beehives, which Liberty tends himself. The bees fly through the fence and fertilize the crops. This year, inmates grew 10,000 pounds of vegetables, keeping the bulk for the prison kitchen and giving away 1,000 pounds to soup kitchens and food banks across the state.

On another side of the yard sit squat towers of compost, 32 feet around, made from the food scraps of 3,000 daily meals, as well as paper, cardboard, and other organic wastes. Between composting and a new recycling program, the prison has reduced its overall waste by 90 percent, or 300,000 pounds, and cut $60,000 from its trash disposal budget. The money saved goes into the garden and other programs for the inmates. It's the kind of "low cost, no cost" project that helped get Liberty his job.

"He fits well because we don't have a programming budget, number one," says Ryan Thornell, Maine's associate commissioner for corrections. "It's an area of corrections that often gets overlooked. That's been part of his motivation – if we can reduce cost in support service areas, we can possibly funnel some of those funds into areas where we can have reduced recidivism. And at the end of the day, he always has an eye on the bottom line."

During his 16 years at the Kennebec County Sheriff's Office – seven as sheriff – Liberty, a master gardener, started a jailhouse garden that grew into a small working farm called Restorative Community Harvest. By 2015, the year he left to take the job as warden, the jail was donating some 50,000 pounds of produce a year to food pantries and soup kitchens throughout the state. Inmates benefited along with the communities they served.

"It's really important that the guys feel good about giving back, that we have some community feel," Liberty says. "It's really wonderful to see them gardening. On their hands and knees, they've got their fingers in the dirt. They love it.

"What I don't care for is a lot of idle time. What I'm trying to do is give them a purpose, a reason to get up out of bed."

The tenure of the average prison warden is about three years. This is Liberty's third year, and he has no intention of leaving. "I feel like I can effect some change, make a difference here," he says. "I plan to settle in."

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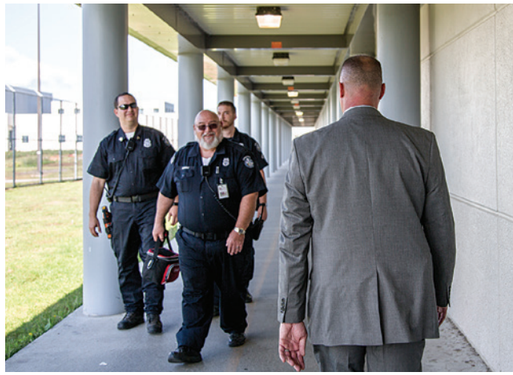
Programs like gardening, counseling, and education services are the key to preventing recidivism, Liberty argues. "We know that when people roll out of here with a bachelor's degree, they're not coming back," he says. "We know that when we punish, they come back. Do you like that cycle? It's very easy to be logical about all this stuff. Wherever you are politically, programming makes sense. Helping people makes sense."



Randy Liberty describes his father, the late Ronald Liberty Sr., as an "opportunistic" criminal with a drinking problem, who was in and out of jail most of his life – burglaries, mostly, nothing violent. In his first job as a part-time patrolman for the Fairfield Police Department and Somerset County Jail, Liberty once guarded over his dad. It wasn't a big deal, he insists; they kept it "on the light."

"I had a hot water source in my little station," he remembers. "He'd say, 'Randy! Give me some hot water for my instant coffee.' I'd say, 'Dad, I can't do that, man!' He'd say, 'You bastard.' I'd say, 'It is what it is, man. I didn't put you in here.' It wasn't an emotional thing to me. It was how he was – always on the verge of getting jammed. I know it sounds foreign, but it's all I've ever known."

His mother, young when she had the boys, dropped out of school early. The family struggled, relying on food stamps and living in a cramped trailer. Liberty shakes his head at the memory. "We endured a lot of poverty that was needless. It was just needless," he reflects. "All my brothers, we've never missed a day of work. We work hard and we all strive to pay our bills, and everyone's done well." He pauses and shrugs. "Who knows, maybe it made us hungry. Maybe it made us want to overcompensate and really do well."

Liberty's outlook on what's possible changed when his older brother, Ron, enlisted in the army. Suddenly, Ron was making $600 a month, driving a brand-new Ford EXP. "It was the first time I smelled the new-car smell," Liberty remembers. "And he had incredible food, and housing."

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So, when he turned 18 in 1982, Liberty enlisted too. He became a military police officer and almost immediately deployed to Korea, where he spent 14 months. Army life suited him. He felt good in it. He loved the brotherhood and how the steps to success were clearly spelled out. He credits the army for breaking the cycle of poverty, not only for him, but for his two brothers who also served.

Liberty's military career spanned 24 years, including 21 in the Army National Guard and Army Reserves. He trained with mountain infantry in Italy, was a drill sergeant, and taught military history at West Point. In 2004, at age 39, he took a leave from the Kennebec County Sheriff's Office to go to Iraq. He spent 10 months as command sergeant major of a transition team embedded with Iraqi infantry in Fallujah, where he saw some of the war's bloodiest fighting. He was constantly on alert, barely sleeping, never taking off his uniform. In 2005, he came home with a Bronze Star and invisible wounds.

Liberty resumed his job as deputy sheriff in Kennebec County and was elected sheriff the following year. Not long

after assuming his new post, he was driving his pickup truck while off duty, and another motorist flipped him off. Liberty lost it. "I turned on the blues – I'm in shorts and Tevas – I exited the vehicle, opened the door, and grabbed him. It was just stupid."

The driver made no formal complaint, so Liberty didn't face professional fallout from the incident. But his then-wife, who was riding in the truck along with their son, called Ron, Liberty's brother, who reached out to the Togus VA Hospital. Liberty began treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder.

Thereafter, he threw himself into helping other veterans. He became an outspoken advocate for treatment, giving talks around the state. At the Kennebec County Jail, he recognized the symptoms of PTSD in many of the inmates who

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were military veterans, so he created a veterans block, grouping together men who had served and providing them with counseling and programming to treat the underlying issues that had caused them to land in jail.

Over time, Liberty developed what he calls a "purpose-driven approach," identifying the issues that may have contributed to someone's getting in trouble with the law to begin with – things like mental illness, substance abuse, even learning disabilities – and then working to help resolve them.

"Twenty years ago, I thought the solution to addiction was kicking doors down," Liberty says. "I was the guy in the helicopter looking for dope, back when people cared about weed. It became obvious to me, when I spent more time in corrections, that the solution is recovery."

As sheriff, he also started a program called CARA, the Criminogenic Addiction & Recovery Academy, which involved grouping substance abusers together and providing intensive services to help them break free of their addictions. The program was a great success – both because it reduced recidivism and because he managed to run it without any funding.

"It's like he's the Energizer bunny, he's always got a project going," says retired police officer Ron Raymond, who hired Liberty for his first job in Fairfield and has stayed in touch. "He understands that these people are not just criminals, that they've got issues. He just worked his heart out to help them deal with those issues."

Randy Liberty walks the Maine State Prison's long corridors and paved outdoor walkways like a man on a mission – head down, one arm clasping a clipboard, prison ID hanging from a tan camouflaged lanyard that says GO ARMY. He talks quickly, and he greets practically every person we pass – guards, inmates, janitors – with a handshake. "Hey, bub, how ya doing?" he asks.

Some call out to him. "Hey, Warden, you get the email from my girl?" An older man working in the garden tells him he thinks that the cucumbers have a fungus and asks if he knows of any treatments. At one point, he stops to introduce me to a young man named Leo, who has earned his associate's degree while in prison – and was the valedictorian of his class. "Things are going well for him," Liberty says. He pats Leo on the shoulder. "Nice to see you, buddy. Take care."

As we walk away, he lowers his voice. "I arrested him in a home invasion – a machete case – several years ago up in Pittston. It was ugly."

Rick Liberty, the warden's younger brother and a nurse practitioner at the prison, says patients tell him that Randy engages with them in ways that past wardens haven't. "He encourages people to get back to the basics to move forward," Rick

says. "You see that in the recycling and gardening – different types of programs that have merit in a social sense but also help people stay busy and be productive and feel like they have worth."

Liberty says inmates have told him that he's the first warden to roam freely around the prison. "I feel comfortable in this setting because I've been doing it so long. And quite frankly, after you roam the streets of Fallujah for a year, going up and down the mile doesn't seem like a big deal.

"I feel like my journey living in poverty as a child, with my dad being here and all that stuff – it makes me legitimate with the inmate population too. They didn't have it any worse than I did. We can have those conversations about living in the trailerhood. Not all these officers can identify with that."

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On visiting days, Liberty often introduces himself to the families waiting to come inside. He invites them to come to him with questions or concerns and says he'll understand when they're running a little late. "They're surprised by that, but who am I working for?" he says. "They're the citizens! They're victimized also, so how can I assist? It's not an easy process to navigate. And if you're traveling three hours to get down here and you're 10 minutes late? C'mon."

Recently, Liberty has established specialized pods, like those he created at the county jail. The first was the veterans pod, which groups military-veteran inmates with guards and caseworkers who have served. Eventually, he wants to create an education pod equipped with computers and a recovery pod for substance abusers.

But creating new pods means moving people around, and that isn't easy – the change can be stressful and many inmates resist it. Some have put soap on the floor so guards slip as they come into a cell. More than once, an inmate has protested being moved by splashing a cup of urine and feces on a guard's face. During one of my visits, Liberty was telling me how the medium-security pod where we were walking typically had very little activity, when suddenly an officer in fatigues and a tactical vest stormed past us, a rifle-like tazer in his hands. An inmate down the hall had just sliced his own arm with a razor blade because he didn't want to leave his pod. "See what I mean?" Liberty said. "Blood and guts. Thirty-five years of this. This is how it goes."

By August, the veterans pod was about half-full and looked remarkably cheerful. Plants were growing in every window, and a few men sat outdoors in a walled-in courtyard, strumming guitars. One afternoon, Liberty strode in, in his purposeful way, greeted everyone with a "bub," and called a small group into a circle with a caseworker, recreational therapist, and guard. Liberty gave a quick update: Puppies, which the inmates are going to train as service animals for wounded veterans, would be arriving in early September, he announced. Paint was coming too, so the pod walls could get a fresh coat.

He wants this to be a "true therapeutic environment," he told them. He wants discipline kept at a minimum. "Look, this is a pilot, and this is ours to make as successful as we want," he said.

Leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees, Liberty looked each inmate in the eye. "It's not easy jamming 64 guys together, right? All that testosterone. But what it comes to here is a bunch of mature men, and learning how to grow and advance and help each other and form that brotherhood and have that fellowship. That's what this is all about."

Jesse Ellison is a *Down East* contributing editor.