



KEEPING BEES

AT SMITH STATE PRISON

— Jennifer **Berry**

After 17 years of beekeeping experience, it still amazes me to think about how many different ways that honey bees help us humans! First and foremost, they are responsible for pollinating a great deal of the fruit, vegetables and nuts that we eat. They also produce honey (yep, that's right!), which offers a natural alternative to sweeten our lives. There are also the health benefits from pollen, royal jelly, and propolis that may help to alleviate: allergies, wrinkles, stomach ailments and even topical infections. And many swear by apitherapy, a growing medicinal alternative here in the U.S., for relief from arthritis discomfort.

These may be the most obvious ways that honey bees enrich our lives, but there are many others. For example, what about all of the jobs associated with honey bees, beekeeping and pollination. Let's begin with the beekeepers. They raise and manage bees for honey production, and pollination services across the nation. Then, there are those folks who create and sell the equipment associated with keeping bees (woodenware, foundation, tools, protective garments, medications, honey extraction equipment, gadgets, etc.). There are the scientists and academics that research honey bees. There are the authors who write and the employees of the companies that publish those books and articles.

There are the mead makers, candle makers folks who use beeswax, honey, and propolis in the health and beauty industries. And, then, there are those who specialize in making the soaps to cleanse our souls.

What about all the jobs just associated with honey sales: extraction, bottling, labeling, and packing. There are the food companies that use honey as an ingredient in their products. Now all these bees and products need to get around the state, country, and world. How many folks do you think are associated with packaging, handling, delivering and stocking the store shelves? Who else? The list goes on and on . . .

There are more ways (other than consumption and employment) that honey bees enrich our lives, too. Keeping bees helps me to stay healthy, active, and mentally challenged. And, in the Summer months, they keep me sweaty, hot and tired! Think about this: beekeeping may be physically challenging but, when I'm working bees, all my problems (i.e., stress, concerns, worries, angst, etc.) seem to fly away with each forager leaving the hive. Each box is a treasure chest of adventure just waiting to be explored. What will the next colony reveal?

Now, imagine being in a confined place where you would rather not be. A place most of us would fear. Yet, once a week, you are able to escape your trap and be free for an hour. What if this place was a prison, and you were serving one year, two years, 10, 20, life. And, the one-hour a week to take pause from your situation is the opportunity to spend time with honey bees. I imagine that each occasion would be a little taste of heaven. When I asked such an inmate what it was like to be with the bees, he said, "It's a taste of home."

Several months ago, Bear Kelley, President of the Georgia Beekeepers Association, contacted me to inquire how our Master Beekeeper Program certification process could be implemented at a prison. At first, I thought there is no way that it could happen, logistically speaking. I mean, how would we set up a practical exam with live bees, smokers, frames, and hive tools in a prison? And, then, when Bear mentioned it was Smith State Prison, one of two maximum security prisons in Georgia, I concluded to myself there would be no possible way. Among its thousands of inmates, Smith State Prison holds many of Georgia's most violent offenders. The prison administration is not going to let us just waltz in there to certify inmates as beekeepers. Well, much to the contrary, they did exactly that, and here's how it came to be.

It all started within the concrete walls of the prison several years earlier when an inmate, Roy Nichols, started talking with other inmates about the bees he used to keep on the outside. As he kept telling stories, he continued to pique the interest of his peers. Eventually, the discussions turned into the idea of starting a beekeeping program at the prison. And, one day, Roy took it upon himself to approach Warden Stanley Williams about this as he was making his routine rounds through the dormitory.

In minimum and medium security facilities, inmates are allowed to carry out work details outside of the prison. Smith State Prison, however, is rated as a closed (maximum) security prison. Its inmates are not allowed to venture outside the walls because of the types of crimes that they committed. Warden Williams realizes that there has to be something for these folks to do; there needed to be programs to prepare those who make parole or complete their sentences for an eventual life on the outside. The idea is that the better prepared they are with skills and trades, the less likely they will be to end up back in prison.

Unfortunately, Roy's first presentation of his idea, fell on deaf ears. Warden Williams didn't see an opportunity for beekeeping at Smith State Prison. But Roy was persistent. He approached the Warden once more; this time, he was

prepared with evidence in hand. Roy submitted an article about how the Florida Agricultural Department was involved in several state correctional facilities through an inmate re-entry program in beekeeping. It described that not only was the program helping the inmates learn a skill, but it was also generating income for the state! In an interview, Dennis Baxley, honorable member of the Florida House of Representatives, said that through programs like this, it may be possible to cut recidivism (relapse back to criminal behavior) by 33 percent, which could save the state a billion dollars. It was a huge endorsement, not only for the benefit of the state, but equally important for the individuals turning their lives around!

After Warden Williams read the article, he realized that this was exactly the type of program that they should introduce into the Georgia prison system. So, he went back to Roy and gave him a job. He charged Roy with the responsibility to develop a curriculum and a list of required materials. First, Roy put together a list of minimum requirements needed to keep bees. Next, he went to work on putting together a lesson plan, borrowing from several sources including his own experience as well as an old copy of "*Backyard Beekeeping*," by Kim Flottum.

Once the Warden received and priced the material list, he quickly realized that this wasn't going to be expensive; yet, it offered a high return for the inmates. Not only do vocational programs help keep prisoners active and engaged inside the walls, they also can help them to obtain parole through the

demonstration of their reformed behavior and resolve. They're also actively preparing themselves for when they're released by developing important skills to acquire and maintain a job. As you can imagine, it's challenging to find employment after you've served a sentence. So, learning trades in industries that tend to be more forgiving toward one with a record is exactly what these folks need. Warden Williams not only saw the potential of a beekeeping program for his prison, but he also saw the importance of serving as a role model to other Georgia correctional facilities. As a case in point, the Department of Corrections runs a 10,000 acre vegetable farm responsible for feeding inmates in the system state wide. Well, guess what they have to rent each year in order to pollinate all of the fruit and vegetable blooms? Yep, bees! Hopefully, one day bee programs in the prisons, local to that area, will be able to accommodate the farm's pollination needs.

Another person instrumental in getting the beekeeping program up and running was Wayne Johnson, then Deputy Warden of Care and Treatment. His job was to oversee the daily operation of medical, mental health, education, and counseling services for the Smith State Prison population. Both he and Warden Williams liked the idea of having a "hands-on" program at the prison. And, as a result, they gave Roy Nichols the job of class instructor.

After Warden Williams secured the funds and ordered the equipment and bees needed for the class, Deputy Warden Johnson oversaw their receipt and installation, as well as

Last minute instructions about the practical exam.





Jennifer Berry assisting a student.

supervised the classroom activities. The class began with only one hive, but that's all the students needed to figuratively "fly" over those walls and into a whole new world of adventure and opportunity.

Since then, Angie Henry has been appointed as the new Deputy Warden of Care and Treatment at Smith State. Even though she's only been there for a year, she came to the post with over 30 years of experience in the Department of Corrections. She's also no stranger to agriculture; she and her husband run their own private vegetable farm. Once she got wind of the beekeeping program, she immediately thought to contact Stephan Price, a long time friend of the family and Extension Agent for Bulloch County, for assistance. She not only wanted to continue the program, but also wanted to improve it. The first students who completed the classes only received a prison certificate of participation, but nothing official. So, she decided to pursue a true certification process to give their program legitimacy. Like the Wardens before her, she realized the importance of credentials in the inmates' vocational records. As she told me, "One day these inmates may be your neighbor, and it is important to give them the training necessary to make it on the outside so they will be good neighbors and stay on the outside."

Another person actively involved in this whole process is Mr. Lenwood Roberts. Since his arrival at the prison, he has taken on several teaching programs, which comes easy to him being a retired Superintendent of Public Schools in Georgia. Mr.

Roberts teaches agricultural classes, and now, oversees the beekeeping class.

With a request for a certification process in hand from Deputy Warden Henry, Mr. Price called the Ogeechee Beekeepers Association for some help. Rhett Kelley, then Vice President of the Association, took an immediate interest in the prison program. Rhett is an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), a beekeeper, a farmer, a husband, and a father of five. He also runs a company that makes and sells handcrafted bull whips. As an EMT, Rhett's already had some experience dealing with the internal workings of a prison. So, he decided to meet with the prison administration and inmates involved. After his first visit to Smith State, Rhett was convinced that this program needed a certification component. So, he contacted Bear Kelley to find out more about possible applicability of the University of Georgia's Master Beekeeper Program to the Smith State Prison situation.

Bear Kelley is a beekeeping mover and shaker here in the state of Georgia. Over the past few years, he has done wonders for the Georgia Beekeepers Association. He was the perfect person for Rhett to involve because he shared an eagerness to work with the prison. After meeting with the group and seeing for himself what they were doing, he was even more excited to help. He agreed with the certification direction for the program, and he contacted me.

The Georgia Master Beekeeper Programs offers four levels of achievement recognition: the Certified, Journeyman, Master

and Master Craftsman Beekeeper designations. The Certified Beekeeper exam consists of two sections, on each of which, a score of 70% or better is required to pass. The first is a challenging written exam covering an introductory level of knowledge of honey bees and beekeeping. The second is a practical exam, which is subdivided into two parts. The first part of the practical section requires a demonstration of beekeeping skills in the apiary; it includes lighting a smoker and properly working a beehive. The candidate is expected to approach, open, manipulate, and close a hive using sound apiary etiquette, as well as identify key constituents and structures within. The second part of the practical section can be held indoors or outside; it is an identification exercise to demonstrate a knowledge of beekeeping tools and equipment, as well as an ability to diagnose important colony disorders.

After talking with Bear and Rhett, I decided to visit the prison to figure out how we can make this work. It's about a three-hour drive south from the bee lab. We coordinated my visit so that I could meet with the Ogeechee Beekeepers Association on the preceding evening. They have a great club, and it always amazes me how there are so many folks from all walks of life interested in beekeeping and involved in their communities.

The next morning, the three of us met in front of Smith State Prison. Did I mention it's a maximum state correctional facility??? Most of us will never set foot inside an area barricaded with razor wire, high concrete walls and bullet-proof glass. At least, we hope not! Obviously, it's not a very welcoming place, and it shouldn't be. Inmates held at maximum security prisons are serving long sentences because of the crimes that they've committed: armed robbery, kidnapping, arson or even murder. It's one thing to watch and laugh at an episode of "Orange is the New Black" on TV, but going there (even just to visit) is another thing. So, I was a little apprehensive, to say the least.

I really didn't know what to expect, but once we were buzzed in, searched, guided through a metal detector, buzzed through several more locked steel doors and gates (topped with even more razor wire),

led through yet another steel door (these folks are serious), we entered a room where 15 students were seated and waiting for us. There was nothing more fancy here than just tables, chairs and concrete walls. We were introduced to each other; the students seemed very attentive and eager to learn.

Bear started off the conversation by telling them that we were there to see if we could extend the Georgia Master Beekeeper Program certification process to them here at the prison. After Bear finished his introduction, I spoke for a few minutes about how the program worked, what we expected from them, and what they could expect from us. After a lengthy Q&A, we were escorted to the bee yard. Again, we followed a maze-like path through numerous locked, steel doors and gates, pausing at each junction to pose for the cameras and wait to be buzzed through. After traversing a long green courtyard with tall gray walls, we finally entered the fenced-off apiary. There were four humble beehives that showed a good bit of wear and tear. Rocks were used as makeshift entrance reducers and plastic bottles as entrance feeders. As the students arrived, they told me how one particular colony had swarmed and another was currently queenless. They proudly indicated their strongest hive, and, by their awareness and enthusiasm, it was obvious they knew a great deal about beekeeping and really cared about the bees and this program. While standing inside the fenced apiary and listening to the students, I was convinced of the importance of this program and committed myself

Philip Quinn delivering the practical exam.



to doing everything that I could to bring our certification process to the prison. We wrapped up the day back in the classroom where I made a list of the things that they needed to grow their program. I recapped what they could expect from me and said that I'd be in touch soon.

Once back at the office, I called upon my good friend, Shane Gebauer, at Brushy Mountain Bee Farm. I told him about the list of needs and my intentions to solicit a donation of one or more items from each of my beekeeping supply contacts until the list was fulfilled. Shane asked that I send him the list and said that he would do what he could. I thanked him profusely before hanging up. A few days later, I received an email from Shane saying that Brushy Mountain will donate EVERYTHING on the list. Wow! I was ecstatic and without words; when I realized that the total value of the contribution was over \$2,000, I was truly taken aback by Shane's generosity and kindness. Once again, thank you,

Brushy Mountain Bee Farm!

Now, all that was left to do was to schedule the exam. While this was not as straight forward as it sounds, Deputy Warden Henry and I worked it out. When I asked the technician crew here at the lab if they would be interested in helping out with the certifications, nobody even hesitated. They all wanted to pitch in. So, several months later, Nicholas Weaver, Philip Quinn, Ben Rouse, Nathaniel Beach, Jack Garrison and I headed south to administer the exams.

We met up with Rhett Kelley in front of the prison, who along with Mr. Roberts, had decided to take the exam with the inmates. When we arrived, I could feel the tension in the classroom; everyone was very quiet and still. Our staff divided up; some stayed to proctor the written exam, and others went to the apiary to set up both parts of the practical exam. I gave a final review of the most important material for about an hour as well as answered any last minute questions. Then, as the exams were



being handed out, one of the students blurted out loud how nervous he was, and everyone else nodded their heads in solidarity.

As the first exam was turned in, Philip Quinn and I quickly graded it to find that only two questions had been missed; that's a score of 96% (A+). We were still nervous for the rest of them, but what a great start! After 45 minutes, all the students had completed the written portion of the exam and our concern faded quickly as we graded them, they had all passed. Now, it was on to the practical exam.

I noticed that the inmates were much more at ease after having gotten the written exam section behind them. Each of our staff took one candidate after another through the practical. They progressed through

both parts in short order. Once the last candidate had completed the outside portion, we were escorted back inside. Philip and I moved into a private room to tally the grades. It didn't take long since all had passed with flying colors. The lowest grade was 85%. They really blew the top off the exam. It was a 100% pass rate, which was the highest of any test administration to date. Once we had completed recording the scores and organizing the certificates, we joined the group.

While clearly anxious, the candidates calmly awaited the news of whether they passed or not. They were lined up in the main hall outside of the classroom. There were a couple of tables set up with table cloths. One had a beautiful cake decorated with honey bees, and the other had

sandwiches, fruit plates and juice. Warden Douglas Williams (the new Warden at Smith State) and Deputy Warden Henry joined me to award the certificates. I announced that not only did they all pass, but they had rocked the exam with excellent scores across the board! They were rapturous. One at a time, we gave out their certificates and took pictures. Then we ate cake and celebrated the first class of Certified Beekeepers at a correctional facility in Georgia.

Like I said earlier, it's amazing how these little, industrious insects can enter our lives, re-shape our world, and help out in so many different ways. Here's just one more example of how these creatures can lift our spirits and carry us to places we never thought we would go.

See ya! **BC**