

Local prison celebrates 25th anniversary

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ALTONA -- Looking at Altona Correctional Facility, many people would never know that inmates sleep, eat and learn where local students once gathered for classes.

For 25 years, hundreds of inmates have served their time at the medium-security prison, which once served as Altona High School.

But after the school closed in the early 1980s, officials began eyeing the large building as the site of a new state prison.



After a series of costly renovations, the former Altona High School was transformed into the site of a new medium-security prison in the early 1980s.

Though remnants of the school are still visible to many correction officers who roamed the classrooms and hallways as kids, the facility has undergone a dramatic transformation.

It is now lined with gates bristling with barbed wire and features security towers and locked doors.

"You can still see the architecture and nuance of the school, though," said Deputy Superintendant of Programs Mike Lira, who's worked at the local facility for about two years.

After working at about a dozen other facilities across the state, Lira said, Altona "is probably one of the greatest jails I've worked at. There's a lot of history here."

TIES THAT BIND

He said the welcoming and close-knit community not only makes Altona a great place to live but gives local correction officers "a strong sense of camaraderie" as they work with many of their childhood friends, relatives and neighbors.

In return, Lira said, the facility has close ties with the community as many officers give back to their hometown by volunteering as area firefighters, sports coaches and referees.

They were there for the community during the 1998 Ice Storm, when prison officials opened the Quality of Work Life building for emergency housing to help the more than 20 area residents who were displaced from their homes.

And their service to the community hasn't stopped there.

Officers often collect money among themselves to help support neighbors, friends and families during times of need.

The staff also participates in the national Make a Difference Day, donates food to area pantries, sends supplies to domestic-violence shelters and hosts breakfasts for area senior citizens.

CELEBRATION

In honor of their service and the facility's 25th anniversary, many of the dedicated officers and staff members recently gathered for a staff-funded barbecue celebration.

"It was really nice," Lira said of the event, which drew together current and past officers and staff for an afternoon of reminiscing.

"There was a lot of nostalgia here that day."

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