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## NY inmates help build ice palace in Adirondacks

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Volunteer Jeff Branch, top, and inmates from the Moriah Shock Incarceration Correctional Facility, work on the Saranac Lake Winter Carnival ice palace on Monday, Jan. 28, 2013, in Saranac Lake, N.Y.

Mike Groll — AP Photo

By MICHAEL HILL — Associated Press

SARANAC LAKE, N.Y. — It's a far cry from breaking rocks in the hot sun on a chain gang. In New York's Adirondack Mountains, inmates break ice on a frozen lake to make a giant winter palace.

A work crew from an area "shock" prison camp once again this year helped local volunteers create this mountain village's lakeside ice palace - the shimmering centerpiece of the annual Saranac Lake Winter Carnival, starting Friday.

Under snowy skies this week, inmates marched onto the frozen lake in military formation in winter-weight prison greens and hard hats. Working alongside the volunteers, they were handed poles to break off blocks or head-high saws to cut through the ice. Others in the boot camp-style incarceration program were dispatched to the tall walls of the palace with buckets of slush to fit between blocks like mortar.

"Sir, yes sir! This is an experience of a lifetime, sir," said inmate Patrick O'Donnell. The 24-year-old from Long Island, like all inmates at Moriah Shock Incarceration Correctional Facility, answers questions like a new military recruit.

"Sir, where I live there's not much snow, so to see something like this is an experience, sir."

Moriah, about 45 miles from Saranac Lake through twisting mountain roads, houses a six-month shock program designed to build character and self-esteem.

Prisoners convicted of nonviolent offenses like burglary, forgery or drug sales can shave months or years off their sentences by successfully completing a shock program - but it's tough. Inmates wake up at 5:30 a.m. for intense days of exercise, academics and substance abuse treatment.

And they work. Moriah began sending crews to help build the ice palace in 2009, after the closing of a prison closer to Saranac Lake that had sent workers since 1984.

The inmates move about the snow and ice without shackles, but under the watch of corrections officers. Officer Mike Maloney said the labor on the lake helps inmates get ready to go back to "the real world" when they graduate from the program.

"It's actually great, sir. It makes the day go by fast - get away for a little while, get a little peace of mind, sir," said Norman Bloom, who is from Rochester. Bloom, 25, worked with a heavy metal pole to break ice blocks into the frozen water.

Ice palaces have been a winter feature of Saranac Lake since 1898, fitting for a quaint mountain village where winter temperatures can plunge to minus 30 during cold snaps. Festival organizers say the palace tradition stems from the days when ice from local lakes was harvested for refrigeration.

Volunteers were out on the village-side lake the weekend before the festival, cutting out big ice blocks. The footlocker-size ice cubes are plucked from the water by crane and fitted into the walk-in palace on the shore.

This year's palace is about 70 feet wide and 50 feet deep inside and requires as many as 2,000 blocks, said ice palace committee chairman Dean Baker. So every hand helps.

"We could do it without them, but it would be a lot more work," Baker said. "We're glad they're here."

Warm weather and rain complicated palace construction this week, and work was suspended for a couple of days. Baker said volunteers planned to get back to work Friday and fix up damaged parts of the palace, working through the weekend if needed.

The festival's theme this year is "under the sea," and the organizers planned nautical touches to the palace, such as an octopus ice sculpture and a throne shaped like a scallop shell. The palace is lit up at night with multi-colored lights.

Moriah inmates do other outdoor work, such as clearing trees at state campsites, but like this job in particular.

"Sir, we've done everything from work on Fort Ticonderoga, built campsites, but this job is probably the most exciting just because it's part of something bigger, sir," O'Donnell said.

Jared Ridner, of Albany, said "this inmate loves it, sir." Ridner, 22, is scheduled to graduate from the shock program Thursday, so he plans to visit the festival before it ends Feb. 10.

"This inmate, his parents are coming up," Ridner said, "and we're going to take a ride down here to show this inmate's parents what he did, sir."

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