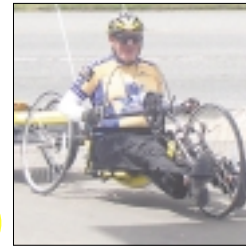


Life & Living

in Southeast Texas

**INSIDE
FEATURE...**

 Hand cyclist
 completes 750-
 mile journey

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Bridges To Life reaching long-range goals

 By Brenda Cannon Stancil
 Life Editor

The gruesome, brutal murder of a beloved sister became the genesis of one of the most successful restorative justice programs ever launched in Texas' prison systems. John Sage founded Bridges To Life in 1998, and did so because his sister, Marilyn, 19 months younger, was brutally attacked in her home in Houston on June 30, 1993, by two teens who wanted her automobile to go joy riding.

John and Marilyn were inseparable from the time they were toddlers; they played together, grew up together, went to college at Louisiana State University together and John married Marilyn's close friend. John and Marilyn were fourth and fifth in a close family of eight children.

John received the phone call that would forever change his life. "Marilyn's dead. She's been killed in her apartment," said his wife, Frances. Marilyn's murderers were arrested within 48 hours. In the 1994 trial, the jury took less than an hour to convict the first murderer and even less time to assess the death penalty for his crime. Marilyn had been stabbed with at least three different knives, bludgeoned with a statue from a nearby sofa table and finally suffocated with a plastic bag while she begged for her life.

Sage says that even with the guilty verdict rendered and the death penalty set, he still did not feel that anything had been resolved. Marilyn was still gone. Her life had been snuffed out like a match's glow. The conviction did not do anything to bring his beloved sister back and his wonderful memories of her



John Sage, founder of Bridges To Life program, did so after the brutal murder of his beloved sister, Marilyn.

were forever tarnished by the images of the brutal murder scene. Sage went to a therapist for help and started taking medication, but even that wasn't enough. He began to pray daily, joined a Bible study group and learned that God loved him and was aware of what he was going through. During these rough days of living after Marilyn's murder, Sage said he vowed to do more than accept God's healing love. He wanted and needed to do more.

Sage began to ask himself where he could do the most good toward reducing crime and preventing similar tragedies from happening to others. He concluded that it would be in the prisons. He knew the statistics that 67 percent of all inmates who are discharged from the nation's prisons are arrested again within three years of their release. "Released inmates violate the terms of their parole," according to "Restoring Peace," a book that uses

'Restorative justice attempts to repair the harm done by crime and restore the well being of the victim, offender and community. It certainly does not preclude punishment or retribution of offenders. But it does add a rehabilitative and healing component to the judicial system.'

— John Sage, Bridges To Life founder

lessons from prison to mend broken relationships, written by Kirk Blackard with a forward by John Sage. "Inmates soon return to their old criminal ways or otherwise commit acts that all too frequently send them back to prison. They tend to commit crimes at a much higher rate than other segments of the population, so the most concentrated pool of potential future criminals is in fact a pool of past criminals," said Sage. "Because of the high rate of recidivism, I felt I could most effectively prevent future crime by influencing the behavior of currently incarcerated people scheduled to be released soon." After much inner reflection and introspection, he concluded that people who have suffered as victims of crime are best positioned to help offenders, and that by helping offenders, they could, at least incrementally, help themselves deal with the continuing pain and hurt of their victimization. Sage said he knows his somewhat quirky, but inescapable logic, helped to give birth to Bridges To Life.

Sage explained, "Restorative justice attempts to repair the harm done by crime and restore the well being of the

victim, offender and community. It certainly does not preclude punishment or retribution of offenders. But it does add a rehabilitative and healing component to the judicial system. Offenders need to experience a 'change of heart' and be shown alternatives to their lives of crime. Victims of violent crime will never 'get over it,' but they need a healing process to restore some of the tragic emotional loss they have experienced."

During Sage's own healing process, he read a quote from Ernest Hemingway's "Farewell to Arms." Hemingway wrote, "The world breaks everyone, and afterwards, some are strong at the broken places." Sage said that a significant part of his own journey after Marilyn's murder was toward becoming strong where he had been so broken. "For a number of years, that seemed impossible," he said. "I continued the path toward restoring my inner peace and eventually, it led me to establish Bridges To Life. It takes work, patience and persistence."

Bridges To Life is now a faith-based nonprofit corporation officially founded in November 1998 with a primary mission to reduce crime

by reducing the recidivism rate of released inmates. Bridges To Life brings together victims and inmates — face to face — to help the inmates understand how crime affects others and to empower crime victims by telling their "stories" of victimization. By participating in face-to-face sessions inside the prison, both victims and offenders participate in a restorative justice process.

The 14-week program emphasizes empathy, crime, responsibility, accountability, confession, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and restitution. The meetings focus on self-disclosure, tough questions and listening. "Listening is key to the success of the program, especially for the inmates," said Sage. "For many, the chance to hear, firsthand, the effects of their wrath on individuals is foreign." Bridges To Life, through its process, creates an awareness of the devastating "ripple effect" of the crimes of each inmate and impacts their heart and their spirit. An offender will not stop his life of crime until he experiences this "change of heart," according to Sage.

Trained volunteers go to
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Beaumont students learn how to play the game

By Jennifer Steeley
Staff Writer

A renowned master in the father of mind games whisked through Beaumont's Eagle Academy March 28, drawing a crowd from as far away as Tyler, Texas. Orrin Hudson, former Georgia state trooper, chess champion and coach, traveled to Texas from Georgia to deliver inspirational motivation to some local and not-so-local sixth- through 12th-graders, teaching them a new way to view the game of life and to how be a winner at the game.

"You've got to get in the game," started Hudson, as he began his dialogue with a room full of teenagers. Hudson told the young crowd that the first step to winning is playing. "Think it out, don't shoot it out. Push pawns, not drugs."

Hudson said he was first inspired to start his inspirational youth outreach

organization as a result of a Queens, New York, teenager-initiated robbery that resulted in seven dead for a measly \$2,400. Hudson said at that time he realized "the trend in how our kids are losing it," left his business and started Be Someone, a crime prevention charter program. At first, Hudson gathered a small crowd at a nearby park. He said he would offer the youth food, games and prizes to get them interested in working the program. In time, he gained their trust and their respect and garnered a special connection to the young adults.

Now Hudson travels the United States, motivating young spirits to choose to search for KASH (Knowledge, Attitude, Skills and Habit) instead of the sometimes life-shattering, problem-inducing cash. According to Hudson, KASH will elicit cash. "If you are successful, cash will come. KASH will make you successful. Success," said Hudson, "is not making

money. Money comes as the result of success. Money is nothing but a by-product."

Hudson's unique method of interaction focuses on the game of chess, relating the pieces on the board to resources available in life. "The King is KASH," explained Hudson. "He is the most important, main thing. And now the most lesson is to keep the main thing, the main thing." By keeping focus on what's important — KASH — you can win at the game. To help the students keep up and perfect their game, each was given a board to practice at home.

"We are all given the same resources," said Hudson. "It is how you use your resources that will determine your success." He said, "The biggest problem with people today is that they just don't think. The biggest failure is ignorance and the biggest ignorance is thinking you can get

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Photo by Jennifer Steeley

Chess master Orrin Hudson challenges two students at a time at Eagle Academy in Beaumont.

Lady celebrates more than a century of life

By Jennifer Steeley
Staff Writer

Huldah Elder entered this world as the third of nine children more than one hundred years ago on March 29, 1899. She was born in her grandparents' house, across the street from the University of Illinois, the institution where her mother had graduated from several years before.

It wasn't long before the family moved to a home with warmer winters. When Huldah was 6, the Elders moved camp to Palacios, Texas where her father founded the bank where Huldah later spent her summers working. Huldah, although working in the summer, studied hard and eventually graduated from Baylor in 1921. She was on the fast track when her education was interrupted by the flu epidemic of 1917, when Baylor closed its campus. According to Huldah, she can recall sitting in her parents' second story window on the bay front watching an almost continuous procession of horse drawn hearses making their way to the cemetery.

But Huldah survived the mass destruction wrought by the illness, and in 1925, Huldah moved to Port Arthur to teach school in one of the then-elite school systems in the state. There, she found the man of her dreams and she married C. E. Rees, a stillman at the Gulf Refinery. They had one son, Cliff.

During World War II, Huldah began to teach at Orangefield, where the family had moved to farm during the depression. The school was so small that Huldah taught English, math, Spanish and most high school subjects. She says she loved her students and



Courtesy Photo

Huldah Rees

was always so pleased when they became successful in life. And aside from teaching, reading, writing and arithmetic, Huldah found the time and energy to teach Sunday School for 40 years, instilling her Christian beliefs in countless young peoples' lives.

Huldah, once an extensive traveler, now resides in the Port Arthur Community Retirement Home at 3141 Procter where she enjoys reading her paper and playing dominoes.

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various prisons to share their personal story with the inmates. The goal is to show the effect that crime has had on their lives. The curriculum includes victim-impact panels and small-group discussions. A typical small group may include five inmates, two victims and a lay facilitator. No preaching or lecturing is allowed in the small groups. The primary function of the trained facilitators is to ask key questions and to promote real listening to the answers given.

With the assistance of the Victim Services Division of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Bridges To Life receives a monthly report concerning the status of all inmates who have completed the program. The recidivism study is a work in progress since released inmates are tracked carefully for three years. Current statistics indicate a very positive impact on the inmates. There have been 3,202 inmates to complete the BTL program since 2000. Of these, 2,758 inmates have been released and, thus far, 377 inmates or 13.7 percent have returned to the system. Of the 377 offenders who have returned to prison, 247, or 9

percent, received new convictions and 130, or 4.7 percent, returned due to technical violations. Only 33, or 1 percent, of released offenders have returned for violent crimes. As previously stated, this is not a complete study. National recidivism rates are 40 to 50 percent. Individual states often use different criteria for calculating recidivism rates.

Sage emphasized that the greatest need in the program to see that it enjoys continued success is for more victim facilitator volunteers. If you are at all interested in such a mission, please contact sage at JSage1@aol.com; phone him at (832) 274-4595 or log onto the Bridges To Life Web site for more information. Complete training is provided for anyone wishing to be involved in the program. Bridges To Life is to be a featured subject with an extensive photo essay in a coming edition of "Texas Monthly" magazine.

There are 22 scheduled graduation events at prisons throughout the state of Texas in coming months.

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