

# Orting man runs scholarship fund for prison inmates

**BY JOSHUA HOLLAND**  
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ORTING – Willet Van Velzen recently moved here last summer after 37 years of living in Bothell. He is currently retired and donates much of his time to running the Prison Scholar Fund, a program that allows incarcerated men and women to get an education through distance learning programs.

The Prison Scholar Fund is the brainchild of Willet's son Dirk, an incarcerated student at Florence Corrections Center in Arizona. He is currently studying with Penn State University through their world campus program.

Van Velzen confesses that running a scholarship fund is a lot of work but says that he is primarily doing the work because his son can't.

His incarcerated son plays a key role however by keeping records, financial reports, and writing grant proposals to help fund this scholarship. Willet says he got involved with this scholarship fund because of his son and his son's need for someone to help with paper work that has to be done outside of the prison system and says he basically does everything his son can't do in prison for the Prison Scholar Fund.

Van Velzen stressed the importance of the program.

"It's important to realize that providing inmates with education is economically important because it saves society money by allowing released incarcerated people to become a useful part of society when they leave the prison system," he said.

The education they receive while incarcerated lowers the chances of the incarcerated person becoming a repeat offender when they leave the prison system.

The purpose of this scholarship is to allow for incarcerated prisoners to better themselves through education and build strong character in the process. This unique scholarship is one of a kind: 735 incarcerated men and women applied for it this last year alone.

With so many applicants vying for this unique scholarship, Van Velzen finds himself constantly busy sending out applications and other information regarding this scholarship to interested incarcerated men and women around the country. The application process involves a series of essays, an evaluation of character, a look at their leadership skills, their ability, service to others, financial need, and academic goals.

As a non-profit organization, the prison scholarship program uses 100 percent of the funds to help incarcerated students pay

for books and classes. With the rising costs of tuition, Van Velzen said that he'd like to donate more money towards covering the full cost of tuition but needs more funds to cover such endeavor. Currently, the scholarship is funded through donations, but just last year they tried sales of calendars with the inclusion of prisoner art work.

The number of scholarships available each year varies by the amount of funds received. In 2006, eight scholarships were awarded, while this year the number almost doubled with the number reaching 15.

This drastic increase in available scholarships is primarily due to the contribution of a college Professor in Michigan teaching at Hope College, who donated a large portion of this year's money.

Willet's hard work is primarily the main contributor to this program, but he says that it's a worthwhile cause that he donates his time to. He sometimes receives letters from some incarcerated people who have had their lives changed by the gift of education that he helps fund.

Recently, Van Velzen received a letter from a recipient of a past scholarship who informed him he was planning on going back home to his home country of Mexico to start a school after he was released, building on the idea that with education anything can be possible.