

Clark College president helps former inmate with second chance

Ken Vance
staff reporter

If it weren't for Clark College President Bob Knight, Sterling Wierzalis would have been dropped off somewhere in the Tacoma area on New Year's Day with just the clothes on his back, a stack of paperwork and \$40 in cash.

Wierzalis, now 22, was scheduled to be released from Larch Corrections Center in

with a sordid past and no apparent future.

"I look at him like my dad now," said Wierzalis of Knight. "I feel like he's the greatest person I could ever meet. He helped me out so much. Without him, I'd probably be back in Tacoma, back in jail, never would have come out of it. He's a guardian angel I guess."

More than six months later, Wierzalis has a good start at



FORMER LARCH INMATE Sterling Wierzalis (left) credits Clark College president Bob Knight with changing his direction in life. Wierzalis calls Knight "a guardian angel."

Yacolt on Jan. 1, 2009. He had no belongings to speak of. There were no family members around to welcome him back from incarceration. Just the paperwork detailing a young man

becoming one of the first success stories of a Pilot Prisoner Re-Entry Program between the Vancouver Housing Authority,

See Knight on page A2

Knight

Continued from page A1

Community Services Northwest, YW Housing and Clark College.

Those four organizations have joined together in an attempt to help people like Wierzalis change their lives.

Knight met Wierzalis while playing basketball at Larch Corrections Center last year, something he and members of the college's basketball program did three times last year and on more occasions this year.

Knight said Wierzalis approached him and said he was interested in going to school when his incarceration ended. Knight gave the inmate his card and, over several months, the two exchanged several letters and the Clark president learned more about the young man who made the bold step to approach him.

"His father murdered his mother when he was one month old and he was adopted by a great aunt," said Knight, beginning Wierzalis' life story which continued to the day when he was convicted of a crime at the age of 18. "He was with a guy who pulled a gun. The gun didn't hurt anybody. He didn't shoot anybody. But, he got three years."

Wierzalis spent the last of those three years at Larch, looking forward to the day of his release.

"He had no family," Knight said. "His father is in prison for life. His mother's dead. His great aunt that raised him passed away. He has a sister in

Iraq."

Before his release, Wierzalis had already worked with officials at Clark College and the pilot program to begin the application process and paperwork. Knight needed to find a way to get Wierzalis released in Clark County, rather than being taken to Tacoma where he was arrested.

After overcoming several obstacles, Knight finally got officials at Larch to agree to release Wierzalis to him upon Knight's pledge that he would stay with the former inmate in a local hotel.

"They needed him to stay in a stable place," Knight said. "I had a friend who had a hotel where he could stay for 4-5 nights. But, they didn't consider that stable enough, I had to stay at the hotel with him."

The next day, on Jan. 2, Wierzalis, who had completed his high school GED while in prison, was officially enrolled at Clark College and he has since completed two successful quarters.

"He's doing really well," Knight said. "He's a good kid. He just had some tough breaks in life. If he would have had a good public defender, he probably wouldn't even have had to serve any time."

Knight said Wierzalis is getting more and more independent with each day.

"He's living in subsidized housing," Knight said. "These folks don't have much of a chance unless they get an education, so we are trying to get them an education."

Knight is quick to deflect any credit for Wierzalis' early

successes, pointing to other people who have helped the young man.

"A lot of folks in the community chipped in to help him," Knight said.

Wierzalis, who takes full responsibility for the crime he committed, admits the more and more independent he becomes, the more and more difficult life is. He said he has passed his classes with a C average, but vows to improve upon that. He is also working for the college's athletic department.

"I know I can't just sit back and expect a helping hand from everybody," Wierzalis said. "I have to do it myself. Right now, I'm still learning how to do all the little things like paying my own bills. It's a challenge, but I'm doing all right."

The pilot program is not a free ride. Participants must maintain their grades and they are put on gradual rent increases that require the resident to become responsible for their own rent within 18 months.

"I'm very confident in his ability to continue to succeed," Knight said. "He needs monitoring, but he's a smart kid. He's got to continue to push himself and challenge himself. He admitted to my wife (Paula) that it was a lot easier in prison because he had no responsibility and there was no decision-making. But he's adjusting and he's a lot more confident now and he's making a lot of friends."

Wierzalis is trying to focus only on the present. He wants to complete his two-year degree at Clark and then move on to a four-year university. He knows there are a lot of people counting on him to make good on the opportunity he has been given.

"That's a big thing for me," Wierzalis said. "I don't want to disappoint Bob. He has helped me the most, but there's a lot of people out here who have helped me. I would not only let myself down if I didn't make it out here, I would also disappoint a lot of people and that's the last thing I want to do."