

F.O.L.C.C.

(For Our Local Community Charities)

Motto:

"Crocheting Smiles and Joy"

Mission Statement:

"To Give Back to the Community, by Directly Helping Those in Need"

My name is Charlie Praphatananda (T-05163), and I am a prisoner serving a sentence of Life Without the Possibility of Parole (LWOP). Having been incarcerated for 20 years now, I've spent the past 13 years here on the Progressive Programming Facility (PPF) at California State Prison – Los Angeles County, (CSP-LAC). I'm currently a Golden Eagle student in the on-site Bachelor's program through Cal State - L.A. I'm also the founder of the prison crochet group F.O.L.C.C., (For Our Local Community Charities) - pronounced "folk."

I first started crocheting as a way to show my nieces, nephews, and family members, that I care and appreciate them for the many things they've done for me since my incarceration. Needless to say, crochet is not seen as the manliest of things to be doing in prison, so there was a lot of fun had at my expense. But it didn't bother me much, because after all, I'm pretty secure in my manhood. One of the funniest and most ironic things that happened was that the people who initially made fun of me, ended up being many of F.O.L.C.C.'s first students! When they saw the stuff I was crocheting, everyone wanted to have stuff crocheted and offered to pay for it. It was then that I realized that I could make some money to support myself, a rare thing for most prisoners. Eventually my creative side took over and I began creating my own crochet designs; this included a crocheted Viking Helmet, a Hooded Bear Scarf, Bear Beanie, and Hooded Long Coat. However, in the process, I came to see there was a bigger need I could fulfill through crochet. This was where my idea of F.O.L.C.C. began.

I created F.O.L.C.C. because I wanted a way to be able to give back to those in need, to make amends to a society that I hurt with my actions, and to allow my fellow prisoners to have that same opportunity, because in here, there aren't a lot of opportunities for us to be able to directly give back. F.O.L.C.C. is a community of crocheters who believe in self-sufficiency, meaning, we don't want to rely on donations or anyone except ourselves, to supply the materials we need to do our charity drives. This is one of the core pillars of F.O.L.C.C. Forgoing commissary for a month, or using a quarterly package to buy materials for a charity drive...there isn't a better feeling than to know, that you were able to help someone in need.

I began by researching places that could benefit from crocheted items. There were many places, but I narrowed it down to St. Jude Children's Hospital. I chose St. Jude because of its founder Dave Thomas and the many great things he has done, from helping foster kids find families of their own, to helping parents of children fighting diseases. Mr. Thomas was an inspiration of the good that could be done for those in need, and was what I hoped F.O.L.C.C. could do with its crocheted projects. F.O.L.C.C.'s motto became "Crocheting Smiles and Joy". Once I knew where F.O.L.C.C.'s first project was going to go, I needed to decide what would help them out most, so I got a few friends who showed interest to help. F.O.L.C.C. began with just three people: me, and my friends Micah Thomas and Robert Chan, who are also members of my Crochet Council. A simple beanie pattern for babies was written up, copied, and then a goal of 100 beanies was set. Because 100 beanies was a lot for only three people to do in a month, we asked for help from a few of our fellow incarcerated college friends: Demetrius, Jimmie, and Woody. So there were, now five of us. This was F.O.L.C.C.'s first charity drive and our first test run to see what areas we'd need to work on, or improve, in order to make future drives run more smoothly and successfully.

In December of 2012, F.O.L.C.C. completed its first charity drive with just five people and only one month left. We made the 100 beanies in shades of purple to bring awareness to new mothers,

regarding shaken baby syndrome, which can occur within the first few months of birth. The success of this project was a turning point for crocheters in prison, as the positive response from the administration and the curiosity from other prisoners sparked a wildfire. Within a few months, a proposal for a peer-to-peer F.O.L.C.C. group was written and then accepted by the administration. Classroom time and space was made available, basic instructions were put together, and a roster was created. Our first class had eighteen students, and two instructors. Now, crochet is easy to learn because it only consists of six basic stitches which can be used to make pretty much anything you want. By combining these six basic stitches, you can make up a whole lot of specialty stitches and bring uniqueness to any crochet project.

About two months into class, the F.O.L.C.C. Crochet Council got together and some major things happened. The first was the expansion of the Crochet Council from three members to five; we added fellow crocheters Philip Thang and Robert Robinson. This expansion helped F.O.L.C.C. be more efficient in our endeavors. Second, we were approached by an outside volunteer who'd heard about us and wanted to volunteer her time to help, so we welcomed Ms. Robyn Woodhouse of The Tehachapi Fire Mountain Quilting Guild. Ms. Woodhouse was a tremendous help in making contacts at the various organizations we wanted to donate to, and she also helped with getting patterns for the class as well as projects for charity. We are eternally grateful to Ms. Woodhouse and The Tehachapi Fire Mountain Quilting Guild for all their support and the love they have shown the F.O.L.C.C. peer-to-peer group, as well as the crochet community here at CSP-Los Angeles County, 'A' Yard.

The Crochet Council and I were feeling good about our accomplishments, and we decided to do two charity drives in 2014. These two drives were a teaching moment for the whole F.O.L.C.C. group, and a lesson we would not forget. Having already completed one successful charity drive, and now with eighteen new students ready to tackle *their* first charity drive, I felt confident that this was going to be easy. The American Cancer Society, specifically their "Annual Breast Cancer Walk-A-Thon," was our first choice for this charity drive. We decided to do 100 sets of hats and shell lace scarfs with a little crocheted pink ribbon on each item. We crocheted these in shades of pink. By the time we got our material for this drive, we only had two months to complete it so that the crocheted sets could be handed out to participants of the Walk-A-Thon; this event is held every October. It was an intense two months, as I had to keep the students and my council members on a tight schedule, because the first month passed with little being done besides the usual class banter. We made it, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief, at least until they realized we had a second drive to do and there was no time to rest or relax. The reality of time became clear to us and our mad dash to stay ahead of the deadline began. F.O.L.C.C.'s second charity drive was also 100 sets, but of beanies and simple scarfs for a homeless youth center at a local church. We did this because in the wintertime it gets extremely cold here in Lancaster, so cold that a homeless veteran actually froze to death. This charity drive deadline was for December, literally two months after the completion of the breast cancer drive. As if two big charity drives weren't enough, the F.O.L.C.C. Council members and a few advanced students decided to also donate to the Karma Rescue "PAWS for Life" dog rescue program here at CSP-LAC. Karma Rescue holds an online auction. We crocheted one-of-a-kind items to help raise money for the "PAWS for Life" program and our crocheted items helped raise \$500.00 dollars in the auction that took place in October 2014. The F.O.L.C.C. Council and students have proudly participated in three of these auctions over the years. These rescue dogs may be coming here to get training and a little bit of love, but in return they've helped remind us of our humanity.

Time was moving, the first month flew by and while two months sounds like a lot of time, it's not. Panic set in when the first month disappeared. The students started scrambling to meet the quota as the deadline seemed to be fast approaching. This was a trying time for us, as I harassed our band of misfit crocheters, keeping them on task and keeping us on schedule. At the time most students weren't impressed by my enthusiasm or my motivational encouragement. Many students and instructors jokingly voiced that my motivational encouragement, was really just "sweat shop tactics," but upon completion of our second charity drive, the satisfaction of achieving our goal and

giving back, left us with a lasting, positive feeling. I like to believe that I helped my fellow crocheters understand the importance of time management. The experience of having been stressed-out for the previous four months was a lesson we all learned, and it was decided that F.O.L.C.C. would do only one big drive or two smaller drives a year.

I may make F.O.L.C.C. sound like it runs like a well-oiled machine, but truth be told, it is anything but that. There are always obstacles to overcome and being in prison makes it even harder to get things done. I say all this because I feel it's necessary for people to understand the great efforts and dedication put forth by F.O.L.C.C. to give back to those in need. F.O.L.C.C. has been fortunate to have the support of some staff like Mr. Ronald Underwood, an academic instructor on Facility 'A', and Associate Warden C. Wood, both of whom have helped F.O.L.C.C. succeed in its endeavors to crochet smiles and joy.

For 2016, F.O.L.C.C. crocheted 100 hats for Antelope Valley Women's Clinic; they were so impressed with the hats, they asked if we could do sets of baby hats and booties for the new mothers at their clinic. This became F.O.L.C.C.'s 2017 project, which began in August and ended in October. F.O.L.C.C. completed this project by crocheting 110 sets for the Antelope Valley Women's Clinic. I've done a lot of work to improve my life while making amends and even though I've accomplished other things that I'm proud of in the past 20 years (i.e. earning a GED, an A.A. degree, working on my B.A.), I've found that F.O.L.C.C. is one of my proudest achievements.