"There's love and affection you show to [the calves]... because you live in a pretty harsh world here," Gibson says.

Graterford Prison, without bars

It's the space the Graterford inmates crave, the solitary confinement of the prison's farm.

By Walter F. Naedele

They spread the manure that produces the straw that lines the stalls that house the cows that make the manure.

They raise the corn that feeds the cows that produce the milk that feeds the men who raise the corn.

They are farmers.

They are convicts.

Some of them are short-timers, soon to leave prison.

Some of them are on the farm for life. They are murderers, serving life sentences.

The lifers are the better farmers.

"Lifers, by and large, give us that added measure of stability that we need... to have consistency on a daily basis," Alan J. LeFevre said the other day, driving along a road past fields where lifers were farming.

LeFevre is the prison officer at the State Correctional Institution at Graterford in central Montgomery County, more than 30 miles north of Center City.

Today, Graterford is a maximum-security prison. It is also a farm.

Once, it was home to several farms — some owned by the Grater family that lived near a ford over the Perkiomen Creek — before the land was sold for prison land in 1926.

There are 1,714 acres at Graterford, but only 62 of them are buried under concrete and steel within the prison walls. About 800 acres are still farmland.

Out of 3,350 inmates at Graterford today, there are only 72 prisoner-farmers. And only 14 of them are lifers.

The prisoner-farmer, LeFevre said, "has demonstrated over the long haul that he can handle this kind of loosely structured environment... without a problem."

None of them, lifers or short-timers, could do much more than tell one end of a cow from the other.

In the locker room, Chuck Logan peels off his clothes after working on the farm.

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