

# SWOSU Students Get Rare Tour of Oklahoma Penitentiary

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SWOSU student Brooke Christensen sits in the “Old Sparky” electric chair at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester with prison counselor Dale Cantrell helping out with the conducting cap.

SWOSU students and faculty attending the prison tour were (front from left): Dr. Dorie Astle, Joanna Santilla, Cynthia Morgan, Dallace Pugh and Brooke Christensen. Back from left—Colton Hays, Brett Nungesser, Sandy Dowdle, Laura Smalling and Lennard Adebiji.

Nine students enrolled in Dr. Dorie Astle’s U.S. Corrections course at Southwestern Oklahoma State University in Weatherford recently had the rare opportunity to go inside the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester.

The tour was taken with the authorization of Warden Anita Trammell, the first female warden of the prison, and was conducted by Warden’s assistant Terry Crenshaw and prison counselor Dale Cantrell, who has also been referred to as the prison’s “walking historian”.

“We were allowed access to areas of the prison ordinarily off-limits to visitors,” said Astle, who is associate professor of criminal justice/sociology at SWOSU. “It gave my students a unique opportunity to see first-hand the operations and facilities—including death row and several other cell blocks—and to observe the security measures in place at this maximum security facility.”

All executions in the state of Oklahoma take place at this prison which to date are one by hanging, 82 by electric chair and 105 by lethal injection. Students had the opportunity to see and, if desired, to sit in “Old Sparky,” the electric chair. The group also sat in the witness room and observed, through glass, and under the narration of Crenshaw and Cantrell the current execution chamber which utilizes lethal injection.

There are currently 55 inmates on death row in Oklahoma including one woman who is held at the Mabel Bassett Correctional Center in McCloud. As of late summer, the population count at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary was 572. The Oklahoma corrections system-wide total, which also includes those on parole or probation and contract facilities, was 50,152.

“It was a learning experience you simply cannot get in a classroom setting,” Astle said.