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Lessons learned behind bars

BY TIFFANY DE MASTERS
tdemasters@thespectrum.com

ST. GEORGE - Nolan Newman stood in front of incarcerated men and women in Purgatory Correctional Facility, on Tuesday, not as a fellow inmate, but as a fellow graduate.

The men and women who received their high school diplomas and GEDs were able to do so through the adult education program of the Washington County School District. Newman, age 37, was one of 19 inmates to receive a high school diploma while 29 inmates received their GEDs.

Mike Heins, one of the program instructors, spoke to the audience.

"I believe that all students can learn," he said. "It's been rewarding to watch individuals grow.

"There is a satisfaction of helping others that no one else wants to help. It's giving back."

It was two years ago when Newman decided to change his life while incarcerated in the Gunnison Prison. He started the adult education program and picked it up when he came to PCF 1½, 2 years ago.

"I kind of think this is the best thing that's ever happened to me," he said. "This is just one more step up from the bottom where I hit."

Newman dropped out of high school in the 10th grade and has spent 20 years of his life behind bars. Going through the program was difficult for him.

"You give me hands-on equipment and I'll excel to the top of the class," he said. "You give me a book, it's like a monkey staring at a math problem - not only did I have to pick up where I left off, I had to learn how to use a computer."

Newman's release date is Dec. 27, 2011. When he gets out he's going to reunite with his mother. He said she wanted to watch him graduate, but the jail has a no-contact policy during incarceration.

"It was awesome just hearing the excitement in her voice - all this right here is for my mom," he said. "It's my way of saying 'Sorry.'"

When Amber Coulson, 23, got up to accept her diploma the crowd cheered. When she entered the program she was only 1.75 credits away from receiving a diploma and was enrolled in classes for the fall at Dixie State College at the time she was arrested for distribution.

"I've been here (PCF) for two months," she said. "I don't know how long I'll be here. I might go to prison - that or rehab."

Coulson is happy she finished the credits needed to get her diploma. "It feels like an accomplishment," she said.

When Coulson gets into college she plans to go into fashion and interior design.

Jack Rolfe, with the School of Life Foundation, was the keynote speaker for commencement. He said he speaks at colleges all over the nation.

"The spirit of education I feel on those campuses is no greater than the spirit I feel here today," he said.

Rolfe told the graduates "today" (Tuesday) was not the end, it was only the beginning.

"When you have a passion inside of you, you can take it to any limit you want to," he said.

Rolfe left the men and women with five steps they could use for success.

"One, find your mission. What's your purpose in life? We all have one," he said.

"Two, live your dream.

"Three, never give up. Challenges can be problems or opportunities, it's up to you," Rolfe said. "Four, perform with passion. Give all your heart, your soul and your mind."

And five is lift someone up.

"Use your talents to lift someone up," Rolfe said.



Jack Rolfe, founder of the School of Life Foundation, delivers the commencement address, Tuesday, during commencement exercises at Purgatory Correctional Facility. (Jud Burkett / The Spectrum)



Purgatory Correctional Facility inmate Amber Coulson receives her diploma Tuesday during commencement exercises at the jail. (Jud Burkett / The Spectrum)



Purgatory Correctional Facility inmates Jake Dowhaniuk, Ma'aele Ma'aele, Thomas Davidson and Kelly Lyman move the tassels on their caps from right to left to indicate their new status as high school graduates during commencement exercises Tuesday. (Jud Burkett / The Spectrum)