

34 earn GEDs at Staten Island correctional facility

by Staten Island Advance

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Educated inmates are less likely to return to jail in their lifetime.

So the faculty of the Arthur Kill Correctional Facility was pleased to honor 34 inmates with their GEDs in a late-afternoon ceremony on the Charleston prison grounds yesterday.

As the enthusiastic graduates paraded into the common room -- garbed in red gowns and caps accented with black tassels -- their happiness was evident.

"In a prison environment, it is not easy to succeed academically," said Dennis Breslin, Arthur Kill's superintendent. "The success of one inmate is the success of all of the faculty."

Breslin also mentioned that these inmates "chose to work at something" rather than "watch television or play basketball."

Steven McDonald, an NYPD officer paralyzed in a 1986 shooting in Central Park, was present to offer words of encouragement to the graduating inmates.

"You are very special. There is no other person out there like you," he said. "Remember that you are unique and there is no other that can copy exactly what you can do."

Guest speaker Stevie Lacy-Pendleton, deputy editorial page editor and senior columnist for the Advance, greeted the graduates by saying, "This is what my mother would call 'a God-smile day.'"

She noted the difference between "doing time" in serving a prison sentence and "doing time" in the sense of being constructive and working toward a goal while paying one's debt to society.

"We all have to start somewhere. It's not where we start but where we end," she said.

The correctional facility is a medium-security prison that houses an average of 950 inmates on any given day.

"My job sometimes is to be a cheerleader," said Betsy Wilson, who teaches various subjects.

Class representative Terrence Smoot had some good advice for the grads.

"Life is homework," he said. "Be prepared."

--Contributed by Tim Vassilakos and Margaret DeJesus