

Taconic inmates honored for class they shared with Vassar

BEDFORD — Inmates at the Taconic Correctional Facility cheered Thursday as fellow prisoners walked up to a podium to be honored for their college-level course work.

About 50 prisoners looked on as their peers at the medium security women's prison accepted certificates for completing classes through College Connections, a non-profit program that provides inmates the opportunity to take credit and non-credit courses in sociology, math and creative writing at the prison.

Amy Meacham, a 41-year-old inmate, told the crowd she considered herself lucky to take part in a fall semester sociology class where inmates learned side-by-side with students from Vassar College in Poughkeepsie. She thanked the Vassar professors who taught the course, Molly Shanley and Eileen Leonard, who were seated in the audience.

"You challenged us, and you gave us something that we could only dream about — credit from Vassar College," Meacham said.

Founded by Gina Shea and Johanna Foster, College Connections strives to use education to improve inmates' chances for a better life once they're released.

Shea recalled recently how impressed she was with the prisoner's motivation when she started teaching a grammar class at Taconic in 1997. The program eventually grew to include classes offered by Vassar, Nyack College and Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry.

Foster estimated that about 500 to 600 Taconic prisoners have completed courses through the privately funded College Connections.

Women who have been in the program have been incarcerated for murder, drug offenses and white-collar crimes, Shea said, but she doesn't dwell on the circumstances that brought them there.

"They've already been judged and juried," Shea said. "I don't need to do that."

Joining the prisoners for last fall's sociology class were 10 Vassar College students who passed through a metal detector and walked past barbed wire to a classroom where desks were arranged in a circle. The class was "Gender, Social Problems and Social Change."

Liz Pugh, a Vassar junior who was in the class, recalled recently how intelligent the Taconic inmates were and how committed they were to the class.

"At Vassar, we're all coming from pretty privileged backgrounds," Pugh said. "The women who have ended up at the Taconic have been dealt a very different hand. ... Their perspective is so valuable because it provides real context for the issues we're talking about."

Meacham remembered wondering whether the students from the liberal arts college, once part of the elite Seven Sisters, would think she wasn't as intelligent or articulate as them.

"But the first time that we met the (Vassar) students, you could tell that all those walls were just in my head," said Meacham, who is serving a sentence for assault.

Meacham, a former nurse who has two associate's degrees, said she only has a couple classes left before she receives a third associate's degree in sociology.

She said when she gets out of prison, she wants to

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Inmates Katie Murphy, 25, and Amy Meacham, 41, attend the recognition ceremony for the College Connections program Wednesday at the Taconic Correctional Facility in Bedford Hills. The program gives prisoners the opportunity to take college-level classes in women's studies. (Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

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