

Home / News / The Citizen Local News / The Citizen Local News

Auburn prisoners earn associate degrees, celebrate with ceremony

- Story
- Discussion
- Image (2)

Auburn prisoners earn associate degrees, celebrate with ceremony

Kelly Voll The Citizen AuburnPub.com | Posted: Tuesday, June 5, 2012 5:01 pm | (4) Comments

Font Size:

Default font size

Larger font size

- 1 retweet
-



[Buy this photo](#) Michelle Bixby, The Citizen

Graduates of the Cornell Prison Education Program, from left, Richard Johnson, Gary LaRocca and Jacob Russell smile for a group shot before their commencement ceremony Tuesday at Auburn Correctional Facility.

 Loading...





AUBURN | Outside the wall, it was just another day in Auburn.

But inside the 40-foot walls of Auburn Correctional Facility, history was made Tuesday as the first class of New York state inmate-students graduated from the Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP) with associate degrees.

The 15 men took Cornell University classes for years and received degrees conferred by Cayuga Community College.

On Tuesday, to the sound of a lone bagpipe, the graduates processed through an auditorium at ACF. They were recognized with thunderous applause as they crossed the stage, received diplomas and switched their cap tassels from right to left.

"I think the moment is filled with dignity for them and I think this is an accomplishment that those of us on the outside don't have an appreciation for," said Deborah Streeter, a professor at Cornell's undergraduate business school, the Dyson School. She taught entrepreneurship classes at ACF.

Graduate Eric Paris Whitfield said earning his college degree has been nearly as important as gaining his freedom.

"I'm not where I want to be and for that matter, I'm not where I could be," he said. "But I'm grateful for this opportunity to change the direction of my life."

Richard Johnson said his anthropology class taught him an important life lesson when the class studied the people of Papua New Guinea.

"It showed us how fortunate we are compared to people in other countries, even though we're incarcerated," he said. "To study other cultures makes you appreciate the things you do have, the little things in life like water and graduating with a diploma."

Graduate Saifuddin Abdus-Samad said he wants people on the outside to know that "they're not just handing out degrees in here. We work hard."

Graduate Danny Rincon said his goal has been to get through CPEP and get his degree, and there have been challenges.

"Staying out of trouble in order to complete the classes," he said. "It's a huge hurdle to avoid so much. ... I feel accomplished. I feel good. I feel that, despite my unfortunate circumstances, I've taken a negative and turned it into a positive."

Michael Rhynes said he's gotten another chance to learn, after growing up in a social scene where going to school was frowned upon. He said the diploma is just the piece of paper; it was the learning that made an impression on him.

"It's not about the document. It's about the journey," Rhynes said. "I met myself along the way and I must say, I've enjoyed that meeting."

CPEP originated in the 1990s when state law changed to end taxpayer-funded college programs in most state prisons. Cornell Professor Emeritus of English Pete Wetherbee and other faculty taught courses at ACF and in 1999, inmates could earn Cornell credits.

In 2009, through a grant from The Sunshine Lady Foundation, the program expanded to include an associate degree through a partnership among Cornell, Cayuga Community College, ACF and Cayuga Correctional Facility, in Moravia.

This past semester, students chose from 13 classes; corrections staff could take one course. In 2011-12, there were 120 inmate-students between ACF and CCF. CPEP may eventually lead to a bachelor's degree, said Jim Schechter, CPEP executive director.

"The guys that are graduating today will have opportunities to keep studying," Schechter said.

Doris Buffett, who started The Sunshine Lady Foundation, said the program helps prisoners re-enter society successfully.

Speakers included Buffett, class speaker Jacob Russell, CCC President Daniel Larson, Harold Graham, superintendent of ACF, and Brian Fischer, commissioner of the New York State Department of Corrections.

"I ask you ... to use your new skills wisely," Fischer told graduates. "Prove to others the value of education."

Fischer said giving prisoners an education will improve their chances of staying on the outside once they get out.

"Even though (the prisoners) are here for a long time, most of them will go home," Fischer said. "They go out and they don't come back and that's the key to public safety."

Staff writer Kelly Voll can be reached at 282-2239 or kelly.voll@lee.net. Follow her on Twitter at [CitizenVoll](#).

Posted in Local, Auburn, County on *Tuesday, June 5, 2012 5:01 pm* Updated: 2:41 am. | Tags: Email_local, Cornell University, Education, Cornell, New York, Cayuga Community College, Ivy League, Auburn Correctional Facility, Associate S Degree

Share This Story

Print Email ShareThis

Other Stories

- Public event scheduled at CCC to announce new capital project with Auburn school district
- TODAY'S FORECAST: Highs back in the 70s, with a chance of showers and afternoon thunderstorms
- Council to consider creating alternate-side parking waiver board
- Second day of Hutchings' trial focuses on missing funds
- Man gets 3.5 years for having contact with victim he admitted to raping in 2009
- Closed-door hearing details emerge in J-E principal's new complaint
- Sheriff's office: Burglars stole medicine from Brutus residence

Sponsored Links

[Click Here 4 Younger Skin](#)

Woman reveals weird wrinkle trick that has angered doctors...
ConsumerLifestyles.org

[Mortgage Rates Hit 2.50%](#)

If you owe under \$729k you may qualify for 3.01% APR Govt Refi Plans.
www.SeeRefinanceRates.com

[53yr Old Woman, Looks 25](#)

53yr Old Mom publishes 1 simple wrinkle trick that has angered doctors.
www.ConsumerLifestyleMag.com

Ads by Yahoo!