

## Wall Street Journal: At Sing Sing, Redemption in Degrees (Mercy College Graduation)

Twenty-one inmates earn degrees from Mercy College

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As Dr. Timothy Hall, president of Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., addressed the Class of 2015 last week—at least those members who couldn't make it to the regular graduation because of circumstances beyond their control (they were locked up at Sing Sing Correctional Facility for crimes such as murder)—I was reminded of a scene in "The Wizard of Oz."

The one where the wizard informs the scarecrow that he was never lacking a brain, only the college diploma that makes it official. So he gave him one.

"This is a degree that says you have finished a body of material, crossed a finish line," Dr. Hall intoned at the ceremony, behind the prison's walls. "This is a beginning, not an ending. It is the start of becoming educated. The things taught in colleges and schools aren't an education, but a means towards an education."

Mercy College graduated 21 prisoners as part of a program run by Hudson Link, a nonprofit that provides college educations to prisoners and the support needed to put those degrees to good use upon release. Hudson Link Executive Director Sean Pica said the recidivism rate among those who have completed the program is 1%, compared with 42% for New York state's overall inmate population.

But perhaps the most impressive and important thing about the program isn't that its graduates, dressed in cap and gown, held a piece of paper in their hands as they marched off at the end of the ceremony to the strains of "Pomp and Circumstance." It was that they proved to themselves, and now to their assembled friends, family and assorted dignitaries, that they could beat the odds after being pegged as disappointments much of their lives, that they possessed the stamina not to let their eye wander from the prize.

"Keep your eye on the sparrow," Harry Belafonte, one of the guests and a regular at Hudson Link graduations, explained. He was referring to the words of a gospel hymn. "Where the sparrow flies you realize freedom and opportunity. A lot of the men are very gifted."

"It's an unbelievable moment in these people's lives," the actress Debra Winger, another guest, acknowledged. She said she developed an interest in prison programs

through visits to Judith Clark, currently serving 75 years to life at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for her role in the 1981 Brink's robbery. "They're getting something we all take for granted: an education."

The truth of her words was revealed on the faces of the soon-to-be college graduates as they entered the visiting area. Their pride was palpable as family members stood and cheered. Julian Bond, chairman emeritus of the NAACP, delivered the commencement address.

To get a sense of what the men achieved required only that guests negotiate the tedious process of gaining access to the prison, with its alternating layers of security and bureaucracy.

In his greeting, Christian French, Hudson Link's board president, alluded to the peculiar obstacles against gaining a college education behind bars—while explaining that the inmates' diplomas, and the requirements it took to acquire them, were exactly the same as those demanded of the Mercy College students who graduated at the school's 80th commencement exercises on May 20.

"Which you achieved under much harder and trying conditions," Mr. French noted. Getting to class across a crowded, sprawling prison "is a pain in the butt. We don't have any right to be here. We're guests of the facility."

No one understands that better than Hudson Link's Mr. Pica, a former Sing Sing inmate himself. Mr. Pica spent 16 years behind bars for murder, the last seven at Sing Sing, starting when he was 16 years old. "It's the largest cellblock in the country, hundreds of men," Mr. Pica explained. "You're supposed to study and write term papers. It takes six years to get a four-year degree."

Donald Washington, one of the graduates, serving 15 years to life for murder, gave me a sense of the milieu as he explained that his education was already paying dividends, even though he won't be eligible for parole for almost three years.

"It's definitely applicable now," he explained. "What you see here is not the culture of prison."

He was referring to the post-ceremony festivities where friends and family ate cake and ice cream as the sun set below the Hudson River, the view marred only by spools of barbed wire.

"The culture of prison is violence," he went on. "To navigate that you have to employ some degree of behavioral science. The violence is so common that we don't have a reaction to it sometimes. Seeing a man stabbed before your very eyes and having no reaction to it is not a normal thing."

Mr. Washington's father, Dennis, said he'd been trying unsuccessfully for years to get his son off the streets. "He apologizes to me all the time," the father confided. "He says, 'I'm so sorry I had to come in here to get my degree.'"