

Times Herald-Record - Inmates get associate's degrees from SUNY Sullivan

By Pauline Liu

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FALLSBURG — Most people who are released from prison don't ask to come back. But Ian Eckardt-Rigberg, 24, made a special request to return to the Sullivan County Correctional Facility on Wednesday so he could attend his college graduation.

It took him more than two years to earn an associate's degree in Humanities from SUNY Sullivan with his 18 classmates, who are also inmates at the maximum security prison in Fallsburg.

Eckardt-Rigberg's academic achievement was made possible through a program called Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, which has expanded into six prison facilities: Sullivan, Shawangunk, Sing Sing, Taconic, Greene and Fishkill. The program, which is entirely funded through donations and grants, is in its 18th year and has awarded more than 475 degrees.

Eckardt-Rigberg, who is from the Albany suburb of Delmar, served four years for manslaughter, following a deadly hit-and-run incident in Albany. He was released from prison on March 21. He said that getting an education has changed him.

"It gave me the opportunity to rehabilitate myself and turn myself into a positive person," Eckardt-Rigberg said.

The valedictorian for the prison's Class of 2017 was 58-year-old Robert Ehrenberg of Suffolk County, Long Island, a former construction worker convicted of murder. Sentenced to two consecutive terms for the same murder, Ehrenberg explained that he's already served 25 years in the system but he won't be eligible for parole for another 25 years. By then, he'll be 83.

"I got my education late in life," Ehrenberg said. "There was so much wasted intelligence and wasted potential. The program has taught me that life is for learning and education is key. I will do anything to aid and abet higher learning."

Ehrenberg has used his time behind bars to tutor other inmates in algebra. He's written a 95-page syllabus for a 16-week, credit-bearing course in pre-college algebra that is being used by the program, according to Mary Donnolly, Hudson Link's academic coordinator at the prison.

"Now, he can use his energy to help others and that makes him feel fulfilled," his friend, Debbie Forte of Long Island, said.

Hudson Link claims its graduates have a recidivism rate of 4 percent, which is much lower than the statewide average.

“We’re very close to having a four-year program, so you guys are not done,” Hudson Link Executive Director Sean Pica told the graduates.

As for Eckardt-Rigberg, since his release from prison, he’s found work as a nighttime grocery stock clerk, and he wants to continue his education.

“I’m planning to attend college in the fall for business administration or finance,” he said.