

Graduation Day for Auburn Prison Inmates

By Keri Blakinger | Posted: Wednesday, December 17, 2014 12:24 pm

On Wednesday, Dec. 10, a group of 13 students looking much like any other group of graduates walked across the stage to accept their diplomas as the Class of 2014. Unlike most college graduates, though, this group was entirely comprised of prisoners, inmates at Auburn Correctional Facility, the state's oldest prison.

The December ceremony was the second graduation ceremony ever held for the Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP). Rob Scott, the program's executive director, said that Cornell professors first began teaching prison classes back in 2001. Initially, though, it was not an official college program. There was no funding, and the courses were not offered for credit.

Then in 2008, Doris Buffett—the founder of the Sunshine Lady Foundation and sister of Berkshire Hathaway CEO Warren Buffett—got involved and provided funding to create a program that would actually help inmates earn degrees. Now, the students earn Cornell credits. However, because Cornell does not offer a two-year degree program, the credits are transferred to Cayuga Community College so graduates are awarded liberal arts associate's degrees. In the future, Scott hopes to see bachelor degrees become a part of the program as well.

Commencement speaker Ronald Day, who is both the current director of workforce development at the Osborne Association and also a former inmate himself, commented on the difficulty of making positive changes in prison. He said, "Few people are rehabilitated in prisons. Fewer still are rehabilitated by prisons. But a few rehabilitate themselves in spite of prison."

Graduate Nathan Powell is one who has done much in spite of prison. Although he was living in New York City at the time of his arrest, Powell also has a local connection: he graduated from Ithaca High School in 1981. Now, in this month's graduation, he was honored as the valedictorian. In his speech, Powell expressed his gratitude for the CPEP program: "The rest of the world had us tagged and bagged, and you came in here, and you cared, and we will never forget that."



Cornell Prison Education Program Graduating Class of 2014

Cornell Prison Education Program graduating class of 2014 pose for a group photo.

After Powell's speech, salutatorian Lucas Whaley took the stage. "Prison's a funny place," he said. "Sure, it's oppressive and depressing, but it's also filled with amazing things you wouldn't expect—like brilliance."

Another graduate, Maurice McDowell, said, "This means a lot. I have had something positive to do with my time here instead of doing idle time." McDowell said he hopes to become a social worker after his release.

The other 40 or so inmates currently enrolled in college classes were allowed to attend the ceremony as well. They offered raucous and enthusiastic support at times, but they also offered sober reflection. Dale Allen said he found it inspiring to watch his classmates graduate. He added, "This is the greatest advantage that prison can offer."

The inmates aren't the only ones who benefit from the program. As Scott said, "It feeds me to do this work."

It is perhaps in part because of that tendency to define inmates as "others" that prison education programs have sometimes drawn criticism, a fact to which Buffet alluded during her brief speech. However, Pete Wetherbee, a Cornell professor emeritus who helped launch CPEP, firmly averred the value of prison education. He said, "It's enriching for the culture of the prison. Some of the best students of the program are lifers. Also, it decreases recidivism, which is a tremendous economic boon to taxpayers." •