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New Reentry Academy creating pathways for inmates' success

JACKSON - The Mississippi Department of Corrections has a new program that provides a pathway to reentry to reduce the number of people returning to prison.

On Friday, 34 inmates graduated the Reentry Academy at the Mississippi State Penitentiary (MSP) bringing the total to 344, and another group is scheduled in April.

Using evidence-based principles, the Reentry Academy is a three-month structured program designed to strengthen inmates' life skills to help assimilation back to society. The academy began with about 1,000 inmates last fall. Eligible inmates must have a clean prison record, a GED or HED, be within 36 months of release, and be committed to finishing the program among other requirements. The program is designed to stem the recidivism rate within the first three years of release.

Now, after completing the Reentry Academy at MSP, Lafabian Brownlee, 28, said he has direction in his life. When he came to prison almost a year ago for committing conspiracy in DeSoto County, Brown said he didn't know what he was going to do when he was released.

"The reentry academy taught me to stay focused, don't give up, keep your head on and when things go bad, don't give in," Brownlee said. "It was a foundation for friends, loving and caring."

Warden Patricia Doty, who directs the all-male MSP program, said, "Its real intent is to prepare students to successfully remain in our communities as effective husbands and fathers and productive, contributing citizens."

Deputy Commissioner Kelley Christopher, who oversees programs, education, and reentry, said when an inmate struggles other inmates help provide support through the program.

“The first measurement of the success of an inmate’s return to society is that he or she does not come back to prison,” Christopher said. “The goal of the Reentry Academy is to create a consistent, uniform pathway for inmates to gain the personal skills, perspectives, and the confidence to navigate the inherent obstacles in the way of a felon as he or she creates a new life in a free society.”

Christopher said people may receive a “blueprint” for their life and the directions they can go, “but they are not always given the tools and resources to make it happen. Then they crash when they commit a crime and they are demonized for being sent to prison.”

With resources in hand and direction in mind, Brownlee plans to reverse that trend. The academy, including anger management, money management, and Moral classes, had Brownlee “really thinking” each night he returned to his cell, he said.

Brownlee plans to attend Delta Technical College to go into truck driving and earn a living to take care of his family. He will be released on May 8, 2024, and vows not to return to prison. “I will tell anybody this is no place you want to be,” Brownlee said.

Fellow graduate Corey Mixon, 37, said the academy helped him deal with anger, communication, and to be more tolerant of other people’s views. The academy helped prepare Mixon for work before his expected release on April 22. His mother will be dependent on him for assistance, he said.

“My biggest thing was not being able to communicate, not listening to the other person’s point of view, not wanting to listen to what the other person said, always wanting to debate,” Mixon said. “I think this program is going to help a lot of inmates in the future.”

At the Mississippi Correctional Institute for Women (MCIW)’s graduation, Vicki Gilliam, assistant district attorney for Rankin and Madison counties, served as the guest speaker relating different perspectives, including as an attorney in the criminal justice system, a woman and a mother. Gilliam said emphasis is often placed on prosecuting and punishing people for criminal behavior, but rehabilitation is sometimes ignored.

“This program is a miracle and continues to be a miracle. Mississippi, the most conservative state, created this program and allowed you to be in it because rehabilitation works,” Gilliam said, facing the graduates. “Inmates, you, had to make a choice to participate in this program or not. That is why this program will work for you.”

Sheena Burke, who spent 18 months for a conspiracy conviction, was released to parole five days after graduation. The program helped her through one of her roughest times. “The Reentry Academy taught me a lot, especially how to think for a change and think before I act,” Burke said. “My son was murdered and this program helped me with my grief and recovery. It taught me how to keep looking forward and never give up.”

Burke said she most enjoyed the Smart Start part of the Academy, using workplace documents, math, and graphic literacy. Her goals include hotel management and operating her own business.

Michelle Bullox, 49, is incarcerated for a second time on drug convictions. “The first time, I was young and didn’t accept responsibility. I didn’t put the blame on myself,” Bullox said. “This program helped me understand what I didn’t know before and I have a better perspective. It has helped me determine that I do not want to come back.”



Deputy Commissioner Jeworski Mallett, center, congratulates Jonquil McQuarter, right, at the first Reentry Academy graduation at the Marshall County Correctional Facility on Dec. 19, 2023, as Deputy Commissioner Kelley Christopher, left, awaits her turn to also greet the student.



Inmates participate in commencement exercises for the first Reentry Academy graduation at the Mississippi Correctional Institute for Women in Rankin County on March 22, 2024.



Deputy Commissioner Kelley Christopher, who oversees programs, education, and reentry, congratulates graduates at the Mississippi Correctional Institute for Women commencement.



Inmates enter commencement exercises for the first Reentry Academy Graduation at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman on April 5, 2024.



Inmate and graduate Lafabian Brownlee describes his experience with the Reentry Academy at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman following commencement exercises.



Reentry Academy logo

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