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Flowood Community Work Center Inmates Benefit from Dance Program

FLOWOOD — An alternative way to promote a healthy mind and body has female inmates at the Flowood Community Work Center in Rankin County dancing.

Dance to Be Free, a Denver-based nonprofit that teaches incarcerated women how to become dance teachers, has trained 20 women to teach other offenders and perhaps share with others once released.

“Dance to Be Free is a way for incarcerated women to have a healing outlet while they’re serving time,” said founder Lucy Wallace. “It’s an empowering way to give women behind bars a way to give back and have leadership skills.”

To date, Wallace has incarcerated women dancing also in Arkansas, Nebraska, Hawaii, Colorado, and Washington. The Flowood center is the 10th facility in the country.

“They can let go... let off steam, have fun and just dance their troubles away for a little while,” said Katherine Shoulders, the non-profit’s regional director of Programming, before joining in with the class on Wednesday at Flowood. Two sessions were held over three days this week at the center.

What Shoulders said is so true, according to inmate Amanda Baugh, who participated in one of the sessions this week.

“I dwell on things if I’m not motivated,” said Baugh, 35, who is serving a burglary sentence. “These stripes don’t define me,” she said, gesturing at the green and white striped pants she wore. “In this environment, you have to stay positive. With this dancing, I can be myself.”

Baugh and the other women began a 12-week class in January to learn the routines after receiving instructional DVDs from Wallace.

Talks are in the works for the program to be offered at Central Mississippi Correctional Facility later this year.

The Mississippi Department of Corrections supports programs that reduce inmate behavioral problems and promote healthy lifestyle choices, Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall said. “If inmates are not working, attending classes or in training, we want them participating in some constructive activity,” Commissioner Hall said.

At Flowood, Chaplain Gwen McClinton watched the women move. “This is just the best thing. Look at those smiles on their faces. These ladies do the name justice,” McClinton said, referring to the nonprofit’s name, as she bobbed her head to the beat of the music. “They really are free and in another world.”