

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Hinds County Probation & Parole's Thinking for a Change graduates credit program for new start

JACKSON – Kevin C. Jordan is making plans to continue growing his technology business.

Carlo E. McDonald recently graduated Tougaloo College with a degree in health and recreation and plans to leave soon to play professional basketball overseas in Spain.

The two probationers say they are on the right track after completing the latest “Thinking for a Change” program at the Hinds County Probation and Parole Office.

“I have learned valuable life lessons through this program and met a lot of people who have helped me along the way,” Jordan, 23, said. “This program has helped me to become a better person.”

Said McDonald, 25: “The coach said I couldn’t get a basketball scholarship until he saw that I was out of trouble. This program made a difference in my life. This program helped me to overcome obstacles and get my life started again.”

The two were among 14 of the latest 19 graduates receiving certificates in a ceremony last week. More than 140 offenders supervised by Hinds County probation officers have now completed the 12- to 16-week program designed to teach skills and methods to help them successfully re-integrate into society.

“This was a challenging class,” said MDOC Agent Angela Harper, one of the program’s facilitators, after the ceremony at the Sparkman Auditorium at the Mississippi Agriculture & Forestry Museum on Lakeland Drive. Some participants battled addictions and sought counseling. Another participant who is pregnant needed help finding a place to stay.

Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall said meaningful rehabilitation is more than getting offenders, including probationers and parolees, to report to their supervising officer. “It is going a step further to help,” she said. “We must be creative and offer diverse rehabilitation options to fit different needs. We must be focused on helping offenders succeed because the fewer people we have returning to prison, the more the cost of incarceration decreases.”

Hinds County Justice Court Judge Frank Sutton, guest speaker at the past week's program, told the graduates that they should accept what they had done and then move forward.

"Today, you have a clean slate," Sutton said. "Only you can mess that up. Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery and today is a gift. This is your day."

Two former NFL players from Mississippi also attended the ceremony to show support for the graduates' achievements.

Lawrence Pillers of Hazlehurst, who played football at Alcorn State University before his NFL career with the New York Jets, San Francisco 49ers, and Atlanta Falcons, was joined by Vernon Perry of Jackson, who played at Jackson State University and later for the Houston Oilers and New Orleans Saints.

"There is always hope. If you put yourself among the right people who can help you, build your life, get an education and a degree, there is hope if you trust and believe in the Lord," Pillers said. "None of us are perfect. Try to be positive to everyone and be the strength that someone else needs."

In addition to Jordan and McDonald, fellow graduates Octavia Harper, 33, and Arceolar L. Freeman, 22, also heard Sutton's and Pillers' words of encouragement.

"The program taught me how to think before I react and to respect other people's feelings," said Octavia Harper, who is on house arrest and is unrelated to Agent Harper. "I intend to be a productive citizen and be there for my family."

Freeman, a parolee, said he is planning to start school at Hinds Community College and study criminal justice. "This is a stepping stone for me, and it has opened new doors in my life," he said.