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Offenders building a life behind the wall

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Burlington School District Superintendent Pat Coen gives a fiery graduation speech to ISP offenders who graduated Wednesday from the prison's Apprentice Graduation. Coen told the group they needed to own their decision, be proud of their accomplishment, and model the behavior to fellow offenders. Photo by Chuck Vandenberg/PCC.

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BY CHUCK VANDENBERG
PCC EDITOR

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FORT MADISON – A group of eight members of the Iowa State Penitentiary's apprenticeship program earned their journeyman certificates in a graduation ceremony Wednesday morning.

The program teaches offenders a craft including housekeeping, cooking, cabinet making, and computer operations and is based on the completion of a varied number of hours working in the program.

Each program: Cook, Cabinetry, Housekeeping, and Computer Operator, has different requirements for the amount of hours and curriculum, said Rebecca Bowker, executive director at ISP. For example, the housekeeping program has seven tests and 2,000 hours of on-the-job training, whereas the Cabinetry is 8,000 hours of training and 13 tests.

ISP started the program in December of 2015. Some offenders were granted credit for on-the-job hours as some had been working in the shops for over 10 years.

As part of the ceremony, graduates were invited to the front to speak about their experience with the program.

Gentrick Hicks, who's serving life, talked about wanting to build on the graduation if he were to leave incarceration on a commutation. Hicks graduated from the housekeeping apprenticeship.

"I'm standing here today in a cap and gown and I want to build on this and be able to graduate from WIU with my granddaughters at my side," Hicks told the audience of ISP staff, family, friends, and media.

"When I came to ISP, I told myself to pursue my education. I got my GED and that felt good," Hicks said. "But I said I could keep making steps to improve. I could use this. I could become a productive citizen."

Burt Smith, who graduated from the cabinet making program said he started his time at ISP with a bad mindset.

"I started doing time the wrong way. I didn't think these types of programs would be productive for me, but the more I talked to people, my mind changed," Smith said.

He said he was thankful for the teachers and staff that made the program possible and, not only is his accomplishment important to him, but it will



be recognized by others as well.

David Gonzalez-Becerra began serving a life sentence at ISP in 2004 and said he, too, didn't start his life or his sentence the right way saying he didn't do well in school and that carried over into committing crimes and ending up in prison.



"I was a wild child and I didn't have my head on right, he said. "But I turned my head around and got my GED. And during that time, the warden here was a guy named Nick Ludwick and he talked about my accomplishments. That made me want to take on this...and I did it. I wish I would have gotten better grades...but I did it.

Gonzalez-Becerra said he also wanted to get into the cooking apprenticeship because he knows how the system works and programs get cut all the time and he wanted to get in and get his certificate before the programs changed.

In Iowa, a life sentence means the offender will not be eligible for parole, so a life sentence means your sentence ends when your life ends.

Gonzalez-Becerra said he realizes that he will be incarcerated for life, but how he lives that life is completely up to him.

Burlington School District Superintendent Pat Coen gave a fiery speech to the graduates apologizing for the education system failing those offenders.

"When I heard you talk about failing in school it pulled at my heart strings," he said. ""But you're the reason you're here, and you have to take ownership of that."

The former U.S. Army Colonel told the graduates that now they need to take this accomplishment behind the wall and use their influence with other offenders to show the importance of these types of programs.

"Earned respect is where this value is at – and you've earned that," Coen said. "It's now up to you. We can't spread this message for you, you have to do it."

The 8th Judicial District covers Lee County and Coen said they have a motto, which is Providing an Opportunity for Change. Coen said ISP is providing that opportunity to offenders, but it's up to them to take advantage of them and it's their responsibility now to share their stories.

"It's time to stop the madness," Coen said. "Your decision here is huge and it's time to get off the crazy train."





ISP offender David Gonzalez-Becerra accepts his certificate from ISP Warden Patti Wachtendorf. Photo by Chuck Vandenberg/PCC.



Gentrick Hicks, a graduate of the housekeeping apprentice program, speaks to the audience at Wednesday's ceremony. Photo by Chuck Vandenberg/PCC.

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