

Re-entry inmates honored in graduation ceremony

BY ANDREA HIRSCH

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— Curtis Key, a resident in the Plainfield Re-Entry Educational Facility, recently shared his feelings with those attending his graduation ceremony from the Christian Theological Seminary (CTS).

“A lot of guys in this program are associated with failure,” he said. “After being in this program, I am excited because I now know I can accomplish my goal in life.”

Key, along with nine other residents and eight outside students from CTS, participated in a six-week course to learn how religion and the teachings of the Bible have directly affected and influenced the penal system around the world from the beginning to present. The graduation ceremony is the result of the first ever collaboration between the CTS and the Indiana Department of Correction.

The course, facilitated by Professor Scott Seay, was based on religion and faith in the criminal justice system.

CTS students, as well as residents incarcerated at the facility in Plainfield, learned new interaction skills.

They were also able to benefit from the unique environment in a way that allowed them to learn from each other's very different perspectives.

“Our experience was wonderful,” Seay said. “I have taught the course five or six times but never with persons incarcerated. I can't imagine teaching without that experimental component now.”

Seay said the students from CTS didn't have experience working with people who are incarcerated.

“It was a bit unsettling and shocking for some, but when they got here and realized the men are similar to themselves with the same concerns, they felt more comfortable,” Seay said.

Mary Longstreth, director of Faith in Community Ministry, that helps re-entry, reintegration, and reconciliation of inmates, thought the program was a success.

“I think it's important for these students to interact with residents because they can see what common misconceptions people have about inmates,” she said.

Longstreth said she hopes the program will continue and hopes the students will go back to the classroom and talk about their experiences with one another.

And although some of the students from CTS admitted to be nervous and even scared, the inmates said they felt the same.

“I was very intimidated in the beginning psychologically because of the separation from society,” said Anthony Fisher, a resident at the facility. “Five years is a big gap of separation. I didn't think I had the courage to take this opportunity that would allow me to be transitioned back into society.”

Fisher said he believes this program was an opportunity that helped prepare him to go back into the community. The elements and tools within the class have encouraged him to go on and encourage others as well, he said.

Earl Johnson, a resident in the program, said the experience for him was phenomenal.

“I was able to come in dressed with my own identity and not just a convict with a number,” Johnson said.

“I wasn't nervous to be involved in the program because this is my niche, although the re-entry part to break the mentality of the convict was fearful because I lived and acted as a convict for so long.”

Johnson said he is confident in his re-entry to society and attributes his success to the re-entry program, with the help of the CTS.

Seay said he hopes to continue the program, with the collaboration of the corrections facility, as well as expand it. He said he hopes the general public understands persons incarcerated should not be forgotten and that there is an obligation to punish individuals but also help rehabilitate them as well.

andrea.hirsch@flyergroup.com

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