

First inmates earn GEDs at Madras state prison

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'This gives me motivation,' says 'excited' inmate

By Kelsey Watts, KTVZ.COM

It was a day of celebrating, at a place you may not expect: prison.

Behind the barbed wire and fences, hundreds of inmates at the Deer Ridge Correctional Institution near Madras are hitting the books, working toward their GED's.

It's a series of tests equivalent to a high school education and after a lot of hard work, the first graduating class earned theirs.

For many of the men, this is the first big accomplishment in their lives. They may have lost their freedom, but as one speaker said at Wednesday's ceremony, their education can never be taken away.

No caps and gowns, but music, applause and pride were part of not just another graduation, inside prison walls

"Oh, I'm really excited," said inmate Gregory Supp, 25.

Supp has wanted his GED for years, but after dropping out of school in the 9th grade, and floating in and out of jail, it's been a tough road to take.

"So when I came to do the GED testing, my scores were really low, and I had to study really hard," he said.

Supp has been in prison for the last year, after getting in a fight with his girlfriend. But he's working hard to turn his life around and hopes getting his GED will be the first step in his recovery.

After years of hard work and dedication, 12 men in the prison's first graduating class received their GED's.

It may not be a traditional ceremony, with caps and gowns, but this may mean even more. Prison officials say the GED program helps inmates apply for jobs, keep work, and stay out of the corrections system.

"It's a rewarding thing, to see people take responsibility for what they've done," said Parrish Van Wert, the prison's public information officer. "They've taken responsibility to better their lives. And I've personally spoke with each one of these men, and they're ready to embark on their next phase of life. And I don't believe we'll see them back."

Supp's mother lives in Hillsboro and couldn't make it to his graduation. But Supp says he knows he's made her proud.

"I sent her a copy of my GED certificate, and she's extremely proud of me right now," he said. "And some of my friends out there are, too."

In the future, Supp hopes to live his life-long dream of being a baker, and says he's always loved to cook. Now, he can't wait for his education to help turn his dreams into a reality.

"This is the first time I've ever accomplished a positive goal for me in my (life) - ever," Supp said. "So this means a lot to me. This gives me motivation to step forward and to continue with a positive life, instead of just negative outcomes."

"We want to send the message out to other kids in the community that staying in school is what you need to be doing," explained Van Wert. "Because if staying in school gets you your high school education, you won't be staying with us."

Seventy percent of the adults who enter the corrections system don't have their GED's.

But through this partnership between the Department of Corrections and COCC, where teachers come to the prison to teach the classes, more than a third of the 600 inmates at the minimum-security prison are now working towards their own graduation.