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Education on the inside:

Inmates at EOCI enroll in classes to prepare for life after prison

By KATHY ANEY
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Brilynn Reed, who teaches inside Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution, guides a class discussion. Looking on are Ricardo Juarez-Ramirez, Curtiss Miller and Sam Wilson. *Staff photo by Kathy Aney*



Inmate Johnni Nunez grins at his teacher's comment during class at EOCI. Also pictured are fellow inmates Curtiss Miller, Sam Wilson and Nathan Taylor. *Staff photo by Kathy Aney*

Sam Wilson, blonde and boyish, would look at home on any college campus. Instead, the 21-year-old spends his days on another kind of campus - the one inside the walls of the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution.

Wilson ended up behind bars after a drunken high-speed chase that left a woman dead.

Now Wilson, who entered prison shortly after his high school graduation, said the prison's education system is a way out of the murk.

"Education is the only way I can grow up," he said recently, "so I don't get out of here with an 18-year-old mentality."

Wilson, set to emerge from prison in 2017, was one of about 20 inmates who answered questions during a recent symposium at EOCI, a sort of show-and-tell for Blue Mountain Community College employees who work at the school's main campus. BMCC has provided instruction at EOCI since 1984.

The curious group of educators was a softball audience for the inmate scholars and their teachers, but the prison group spoke as if Bill Sizemore himself had come to visit with a plan to slash prison education and save taxpayers millions.

"Corrections is what we're here for," said inmate Nathan Taylor. "Incarceration on its own is not going to accomplish that."

Curtiss Miller said he believes education opens up a world of healthy possibilities.

"All I knew how to do was go out and commit crimes," he said. "This helps put words in motion and speak with an educated mindset - it's different than going around and ruining people's lives."

Taylor and Miller sat back in wooden desks in one of the unit's 11 classrooms. The cheery room contrasted with the typical prison ambiance of unadorned tile, cinderblock and the jarring echoes of sliding metal doors. Scattered on the walls are posters pitching inspiration such as "Never let the fear of striking out get in your way," "Success starts with believing in yourself."

Another poster reaches out and head-slaps any inmate who might think their teacher, Brilynn Reed, is a pushover.

Garfield, spinning an apple like a basketball, looks through half-lidded eyes.

"You can't scare me," the poster reads. "I teach."

Reed, one of six full-time GED and pre-GED instructors, moves her classes through a different subject every term. Sometimes the men sweat over math story problems. Other terms, they read and write. This summer, it was westward expansion. Next term, the students will tackle life science.

Reed started her career teaching elementary students before taking a part-time job in the prison. She loved the variety and the challenge.

"I fell into it and never left," she said.

Brigitte Amsberry, assistant superintendent of transition, said teaching in a prison setting is a balancing act. Instructors must model positive behavior and infuse some compassion into the inmates' lives, but also remain security conscious.

"It takes a while to find a balance, forming relationships, yet keeping boundaries strong," she said. "You've got to find out what motivates them without being the cop. You've got to connect."

The students arrive at class, fresh from a world that cuts them no slack.

"These guys can take kindness for weakness," Amsberry said. "They'll latch onto that."

About 2,000 inmates have received their GEDs at the prison. In the photos, some grads smile broadly, while stay serious with a backbeat of pride.

Graduates can return as tutors.

Another prison program, New Directions, also focuses on education. Run by volunteers and funded by donations, the program offers college-level classes to inmates. New Directions started in 2000 as an answer to the 1994 Crime Bill that discontinued Pell Grants to inmates. Oregon voters also passed Ballot Measure 17, which limited education funding to classes at the GED level or lower.

Plenty of ink has flowed in Oregon and beyond debating whether education is a way to slow down the revolving door. About 30 percent of Oregon inmates who leave are back within three years - the rate has hovered there for about a decade.

Amsberry believes education pushes the rate down.

"Evidence-based research shows education has a huge impact on recidivism," she said.

When a prisoner arrives, Amsberry said, he goes through an assessment to determine recidivism risk. Education level, along with age, type of crime and other factors, all go to determine the odds an inmate will return. Education level is one factor that inmates can adjust inside prison.

Research seems to back up Amsberry. The Three State Recidivism Study, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, followed 3,600 inmates from Maryland, Minnesota and Ohio. The study show attending school behind bars reduced the likelihood of reincarceration by 29 percent.

"Education reduces recidivism, which reduces victimization - it's not about 'let's give these guys something to do,'" Amsberry said. "We're providing education because it will ultimately keep the public safer."