

## COMMENTARY

SIGN

# Armed with GEDs, inmates can triumph over their pasts

**O**n a recent morning, at the end of a long road that drops into an old pasture and emerges at a rectangle of high fences in far eastern Travis County, pride had to make way for pain in a locked and guarded room.

Two hours after I entered this emotional scene, I drove out, passing a kennel of baying bloodhounds, and questions lingered:

Why the pain? Is it properly distributed?

This was graduation day in the Windham School District. Never heard of Windham? That's because its schools are scattered within the walls and fences of units of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ).

This particular branch was at the Travis State Jail, located at 8101 FM 969, which houses 1,100 inmates. The school is one of 88 schools in the TDCJ.

Seated in folding chairs on one side of a large room were 36 men. Some wore blue gowns, others white prison uniforms. Most were between 18 and 35, though a couple of 43-year-olds were mixed in.

Their faces were expressionless, eyes deflected in the protective human mask that is useful if you are a felon trying to survive behind bars.

On the other side of the room were 30 to 35 people — men, women and children. They were the fathers and mothers, wives and girlfriends, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters.

When asked if they had anything to say to the prisoners, emotions welled up among these families.

"To my graduate, Julien, my husband, I love you."

"Rowdy, my son, I love you. You make me very proud."

"People make mistakes. Just don't make the same mistake twice, William. We'll set up the business when you complete ... your dues."

"We love you. We miss you. Keep up the good work."

"Delton, I hope this is a right step in a positive direction."

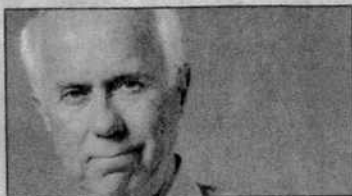
"Donald, God has a plan for you. Everyone makes a mistake. Let God lead you."

Among the inmates across from them, eyes reddened, heads swiveled, a nervous wave was proffered, sullen faces turned to smiles and finally, eyes met eyes.

There was good reason for pride. Thirteen of the prisoners had earned their General Educational Development (GED) certificates.

Another 11 had completed courses in business computer information systems, and three had earned certificates in landscape design and construction maintenance.

I felt pain, too, in seeing what these young men had done to their families, and wondered why it was necessary, because you could see these guys working at the local hardware store, hotel, hospital or business office.



**RICH OPPEL**

Perhaps that is where we will see them next, because their commitment to earning a certificate and learning work skills gives them a good chance of staying out of prison.

The average Windham student never attained a high school diploma, functions at a 6th grade level, has an IQ of 85, and is 34 years old.

Among the 1,100 here at the Travis State Jail, you sense that these 36 are made of the right stuff.

"Congratulations, for putting up with all of the negativity of the dorms," said Ashley Anderson, the building captain, noting that they had borne ridicule by other inmates for having the courage and steadfastness to seek an education and have a vision for the future while others sat on the edge of their bunks.

As I've written before, I have a GED, too. That's why I was here. I never served time, but I know that these guys aren't that much different than I was at age 18. They may have pulled a stick-up or beat up somebody. They got what they deserved, though their families didn't deserve this.

But everybody needs a hand up, and now these guys in blue and white were getting that help.

Help from the warden, Corey Ginsel, and the school principal, Sandy Haak, and teachers like those who showed up for the graduation on their day off — Joe Castillo, Richard Coppedge, Suzanna Grant and Terrence Smith.

And most of all, they were getting help from the families on the other side of the room, the people who shared the pain and still love them.

## Correction

Reader Tom Throop of Austin notes that I erred in my lineup of Democratic candidates in the 1968 presidential primary. The field that year included Hubert Humphrey, Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy. The others I mentioned — Henry "Scoop" Jackson, George McGovern and George Wallace — ran as Democrats in 1972. I covered both the 1968 and 1972 primaries in Florida, and in my column incorrectly compressed the fields of those two elections into 1968.

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