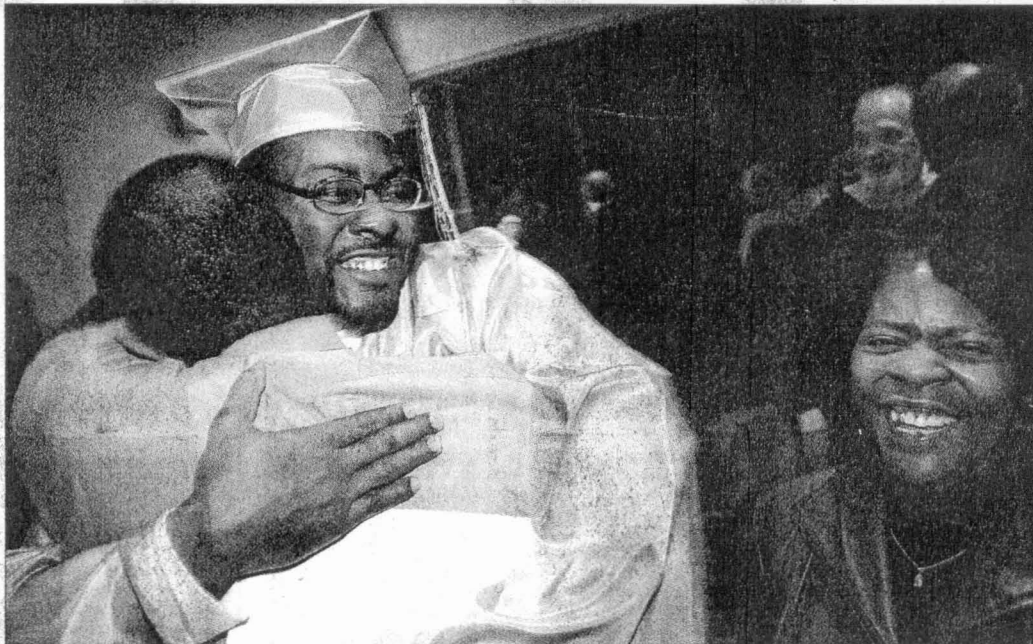


REACHING FOR A NEW START



KEITH MYERS/The Kansas City Star

Reginald Pennington, an inmate at Lansing Correctional Facility, received a congratulatory hug Friday after he graduated with an associate degree from Donnelly College. Pennington's mother, Regina Lockheart of Kansas City (right), shared his joy.

Prison inmates receive degrees at Lansing

By DAWN BORMANN
The Kansas City Star

No one said the college students at Lansing Correctional Facility were typical, fresh-faced youngsters.

Underneath the silver caps and gowns, grown men wore the same blue shirts and blue jeans they don everyday.

Inside the prison's medium-security unit

Friday, eight inmates received associate degrees in arts from Donnelly College. It was the first time that a group of prisoners had graduated from a Kansas penal institution in more than a decade.

Graduates marched down the aisle as their parents pointed and smiled.

"I was astonished," said Earle Bess Jr. of Salina, Kan., father of inmate Michael Bess. "I thought I'd never see this day."

The father's eyes grew wider when he glanced at the commencement program.

"We opened the program and said, 'Michael is the graduation speaker!'" Earle Bess said.

Onstage, Donnelly College President Ken Gibson hugged each graduate after the traditional handshake. The warden, also wearing

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GRADS: Lansing inmates receive college degrees

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formal graduation garb, congratulated each man.

Family members whooped and hollered as each graduate's name was read aloud.

Besides Bess, the other graduates were Robert P. Clark, Viet Quoc Doan, Dana Lundy, Roger Moss, Brett Nave, Reginald Pennington and Anthony D. Stallings.

Professors smiled broadly when officials announced that the class's average grade point was nearly 3.75.

Onlookers grew quiet when Michael Bess took to the stage and started his speech.

"Today is one of the greatest days of my life," said Bess, 41. "My self-esteem has soared, and I truly believe I can accomplish any goal.

Furthermore, education has drawn me closer to my family and friends. My children look up to me."

His lifestyle, he pledged, would change after he is released in March. He doesn't rule out furthering his education, but in the meantime he is focused on finding a job and making his parents proud.

"I wanted to really impress my

■ First prison class to graduate in Kansas in more than a decade

■ Classes build self-esteem and motivation in inmates

parents, because I haven't in the past," he said.

Reginald Pennington, another inmate who spoke at the ceremony, said he knew he wanted to continue his education after receiving his GED in 1998 while serving time.

"I did not want this time in prison to count for nothing," Pennington said. "No matter what goal you set in life, education has to be at the top."

The latest program began three years ago. Since then, at least 120 inmates have signed up for courses.

Local businesses were the first to inquire about reviving the program. The businesses employ several inmates and saw it as an investment.

"We benefit as a business because they develop skills," said Dave McGeenens, president of Impact Design, a prison-based industry.

The program was designed to be

expense-free to taxpayers. Tuition is divided into thirds, with the inmates, private businesses and the college picking up equal parts. Private donors help pay the college's share.

The prison provides classroom space. Inmates of any category — minimum, medium or maximum security — are eligible, as long as they have a record of good behavior.

Corrections officers are not present during classes. Professors simply haven't needed them, Gibson said. "They're such eager learners. They're like sponges," said Bernard Franklin, a former professor. "They don't want to waste their time."

Classes will continue, corrections officials said, provided there is an interest among the inmates. Deputy Warden Rudy Stupar said he had seen a marked change in the attitude, self-esteem and motivation of inmates who signed up for college courses.

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Education Behind Bars

Catholic College Contributes to Reducing Recidivism

BY ANTHONY FLOTT

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Like other college students, James Shehan and Tuan Huynh have dreams of making a difference. Shehan hopes to mentor troubled youth and keep them off the streets. Huynh wants to become a biblical counselor.

Unlike other college students, Shehan and Huynh are convicted murderers.

Both are serving life sentences at Lansing Correctional Facility in Kansas. But thanks to Donnelly College, a small Catholic liberal arts college in Kansas City, Kan., Shehan, Huynh and other inmates are getting a shot at redemption through education.

"There are some of us trying to make changes in our lives," says Shehan, serving his 24th year. "We know we've done wrong. We're trying to rectify the situation.

"For all my life I'd just been a quitter, only did things halfway. This was my chance to knuckle down and complete something for once in my life."

Donnelly began the associate degree program in Lansing in 2001. And now it has help. In February, Donnelly announced that the U.S. Department of Justice provided it a \$223,000 grant to help with its education of 50-plus inmates each year. The grant, spearheaded by Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., is tied to a congressional effort to cut recidivism rates in half within five years.

"Donnelly's Lansing program can serve as a model for other prisons," Brownback said in a release. "People in prison need to do time for their crime, but they are not without redemption."

Mission of Service

Postsecondary correctional education once was commonplace. That changed radically in 1994, notes a January report by the Correctional Association of New York, when President Bill Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. Among other things, it prohibited awarding Pell Grants to federal or state inmates. Nearly all of the nation's 350 postsecondary correctional education programs closed — despite the various benefits of its programs. Donnelly points to federal analyses indicating that higher education in prisons yields at least \$2 in public savings for every dollar spent. Recidivism also is reduced.

Yet, Donnelly estimates, today it is one of less than a dozen U.S. colleges with a prison presence.

Ken Gibson, Donnelly president emeritus, founder and coordinator of the Lansing program, said funding was the greatest obstacle to initiating the program. Costs are kept minimal in part due to the partnership with and in-kind contributions provided by the Lansing facility. Initially, other expenses were covered in thirds, split among inmates who work (or their families), participating employers and Donnelly. But employers later discontinued reimbursements, leaving Donnelly to cover two-thirds of the expenses.

"One miracle was getting the prison accredited as a college campus," said Gibson. "The second miracle was keeping the doors open. When employers backed out, we thought we were finished. But we were able to talk to some more people and get some more help."

The grant will support program operations for the next three years. Gibson said that will allow the college to raise funds for a sustaining endowment.

Donnelly offers Lansing inmates one of three associate degrees with an emphasis on business courses. There's a range of other classes, too.

Shehan, a 2005 Donnelly alumnus, has taken music appreciation, Greek and Roman mythology and American history. Huynh, a 31-year-old inmate serving a life sentence for murder committed when he was 18, has taken 12 classes, including income tax and physical science this past semester. He is eligible for parole in May 2011.

About 20 faculty members have taught at the prison. Most classes are held in medium security and can be broadcast to prisoners in the maximum and minimum facilities.

"The inmates know that education is a way for them to get out of prison. It's always a help with the parole board," said Gibson. "If they get the degree, it gives them the opportunity once they get out to get a decent job to stay out of prison."

Shehan is working toward a bachelor's degree in child or adolescent psychology, taking distance classes through Louisiana State University — a challenge, given the prison's lack of a modern library and Internet connectivity. If he gets out, he hopes to turn others from their errant ways.

Does the program work? Donnelly points out that of the more than 325 inmates who have taken classes, 14 have earned associate degrees. Of the 155 former students who have been released from prison, just three have been reconvicted of another crime and returned to prison. According to a 2002 Bureau of Justice Statistics report that Donnelly cites, 25% of inmates nationally are resentenced to prison for a new crime within three years of release.

One criminal justice researcher, though, says reducing recidivism takes more than just education.

T. Hank Robinson is a professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Juvenile Justice Institute, which conducted the "Recidivism Reduction Treatment Center Study" that identified five different factors affecting recidivism: education/employment, substance abuse, mental health, housing and support of social networks.

"The more stable a person is the less likely it is that they're going to commit crimes or get in trouble," said Robinson.

Huynh agrees. "A guy can earn a master's, a bachelor's, a low-level associate's, but if he doesn't apply what he learned," he said, "education is irrelevant. If he prides himself with what he has learned, then it's effective."

Then why is Donnelly's program so successful?

"It really may not be their increased ability to read or write or to do plumbing," said Robinson. "It may be all the life skills and all the life organizational techniques and tools that people pick up when they go through the program."

Gibson indicates that Donnelly's program does go beyond academics. As a faith-based college, he notes, Donnelly talks "to them about the importance of faith. It's the same kind of position they take in a 12-step program. You have to have a higher being that helps you out, and you can't do it by yourself."

Anthony Flott writes from

Papillion, Nebraska.

THE LEAVEN

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Former Donnelly College president Ken Gibson talks about the new program to give inmates at the Lansing Correctional Facility a chance to earn an education from Donnelly College in Kansas City, Kan., something he pushed for during his tenure at Donnelly.

A SHOT AT REDEMPTION

Donnelly program gives inmates a chance to earn an associate's degree while in prison

Story by KARA HANSEN | Photos by SUSAN MCSPADDEN

KANSAS CITY, Kan. — “Show me the money” is what former Donnelly College president Ken Gibson used to tell the warden at

Lansing Correctional Facility when asked about offering classes to the inmates there.

“I said, ‘It’s a wonderful thing and it would really fit our mission,’” recalls Gibson. “But show me the money. We can’t take money out of the pockets of our current students in Wyandotte County!”

It took a few years and the dedication of a number of people, but Gibson is now seeing the money — in the form of a federal grant in the amount of \$223,000.

At a press conference held at the

college in Kansas City, Kan., on Feb. 27, Donnelly announced it has received a grant from the Department of Justice to support its associate degree satellite program at Lansing Correctional Facility. Classes have been offered at Lansing since 2001.

“Donnelly’s program at Lansing is simply an extension of our original mission to serve those who might otherwise go unserved,” said Gibson’s successor as president of Donnelly, Dr. Steven LaNasa. “We know that education exerts a powerful effect on the lives of those who pursue it. The Lansing program recognizes that education can help transform the lives of these students, and that those who make the commitment deserve the chance to pursue a college education.”

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'This is the first time someone has believed in them'

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The benefits of an education to those trying to put their prison time behind them and succeed on the outside cannot be overestimated. More than 325 inmates have taken classes through Donnelly since the program was launched, 155 of whom have been released.

Of those, only 25 percent returned to prison, compared to the national average of 52 percent.

But more importantly, most of those returning do so for short terms of only 30-90 days for parole violations.

Only two percent — or a grand total of three graduates of the program — have actually returned to prison having been convicted of a new crime.

"This is a good program that helps so many people and really saves the country money in terms of reducing prison time," said Gibson. "The program has a real commitment to reducing recidivism because we know people are much less likely to return to prison once they've gotten an education."

Inmates pay a third of their tuition to demonstrate commitment and personal investment in their education, but additional funding is needed to offset the remaining tuition and program costs.

Senator Sam Brownback was instrumental in helping Donnelly secure the funding for the grant from the Justice Department. The senator said it took over three years to garner the bipartisan support needed to obtain the aid. He took a vested interest in the program, he said, after his own voluntary incarceration in two different prisons in an attempt to better understand what prisoners were experiencing.

"People in prison did bad things and they need to do time for their crime, but they are not without redemption," said Brownback. "We have a problem when we start looking at people as problems. We need to treat them with dignity and help them become better people."

Donnelly's program is one of only a few like it in existence, and one of only two in the state of Kansas.

"Part of the church's mission is to make real and tangible the love of Jesus Christ in the world today, and this program fits that mission so well," said Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann.



Dave McKune, warden of Lansing Correctional Facility, stressed the positives of the Donnelly program at the Feb. 27 press conference.

After the press conference, Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann exchanged greetings with Senator Sam Brownback, as well as warden McKune, past Donnelly president Ken Gibson (center) and current Donnelly president Steven LaNasa (partially hidden).

"We're delighted the church is a part of this and we're very proud of the program and everything Donnelly has accomplished."

The grant money will be distributed equally each year over the next three years. The assistance came at a critical juncture in the life of the program, which has recently seen a rise in class enrollment at the prison due to the introduction of live video conferencing,



which permits classes to be held simultaneously in more than one location throughout the facility.

"This program helps our inmates address some of their shortcomings in education as well as in their self-concept,"

said Dave McKune, warden of Lansing Correctional Facility. "For many, this is the first time someone has believed in them — that they can accomplish positive things. They start to see their self-worth for the first time."