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Alexandria Robinson gets hands-on experience operating a forklift in the trades education program at Hiland Mountain Correctional Center.

Turning lives around

Hiland Mountain's trades education program builds employable skills, promising futures

By DAWNELL SMITH

A handful of women linger on the periphery as Yvonne Bennett demonstrates how to thread pipe. In minutes she turns off the machine, holds up the sample and plunks it down with the others.

She and her classmates have threaded a lot of pipe in the past few months. They've read schematics and done calculations; reviewed residential and commercial plumbing systems; discussed the applications of plastic, copper and steel; and learned plumbing terminology and concepts.

The 250-hour course has given them a sense of the vocation, and a taste of the workload, the code, the math, the possibility.

For these women, learning technical skills can change their lives. They all wear the same uniform — yellow

jumpsuits with the word "prisoner" on the back — but each will face distinct challenges and choices when they leave.

For some, the trades education program at Hiland Mountain Correctional Center in Eagle River will mean the difference between making a living and living in lockdown.

Building on hope

Bennett came to Hiland after serving some of her sentence at the Lemon Creek Correctional Center in Juneau. She described Lemon Creek as lockdown, 24/7, and said that coming to Hiland opened a whole new world of options.

Here, she can focus on something constructive and build

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PHOTOS: DAWNELL SMITH

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employable skills in plumbing, weatherization, carpentry, forklift operation, electrical work and more — and she can get NCCER certification and college credit, to boot.

“I’ve been busy since I got here,” she said. “I’ve always worked in an office or a store, and (a trade job) would be so much better. When I get out, I’ll have more open doors.”

She plans to find a well-paying job and get custody of her daughter back when she returns to Juneau. If all goes as planned, Bennett will leave Hiland in November with several trade courses under her belt.

Hiland’s Education Coordinator, Karen Jenkins, said 75 students took classes in the trades education program last semester, about 18 percent of the prison’s population. Inmates can also take classes in computers and culinary arts, as well as Workforce Development classes like time management and conflict resolution. The trades offer the most promise to women who have encountered few options for higher-paying jobs.

The program has had its ups and downs over the years, with just 21 and 49 enrollments in 2009 and 2010, the first two years of a partnership with Ilisagvik College, an accredited two-year community college in Barrow. Ilisagvik offers degrees and certificates, and the Hiland class list includes courses ranging from rigging and scaffolding to math for plumbers and an introduction to the National Electrical Code.

The program hit an enrollment low of zero in 2011 as Jenkins focused on funding, but it climbed to 465 in 2013, midway through a three-year Carl Perkins Nontraditional grant and a Career and Technical Educational grant. Nine students are also currently doing building maintenance repairer apprenticeships, and four more are in culinary arts, up from one student a year ago.

“These classes are expensive, and we’re privileged to have them,” said Jenkins, who is tasked with running the program from writing the grants to securing Journeyman Instructors and college credit through a Tech Prep Agreement with Ilisagvik College. Other correctional centers in and out



PHOTO: DAWNELL SMITH

Yvonne Bennett has been learning to cut pipe in the building trades program at Hiland Mountain Correctional Center. She plans to use the skills she has learned in the program to find a good-paying job and regain custody of her daughter after her release.

of Alaska have taken note, for now Jenkins takes calls from people looking for advice on developing similar programs in other facilities. The investment pays off when it reduces recidivism and gives inmates skills and confidence, according to researchers from the Bureau of Justice Assistance.

When Jenkins walks around the Hiland campus these days, inmates ask her about the next participant list for the trade courses, or they tell her about their latest project or plan. Their success stories circulate as Jenkins recruits new students from the Hiland population. Students in turn must fulfill their obligations to participate.

“We hold students to a high standard,” Jenkins said. “They have to be accountable for attendance, homework and random UAs (drug tests).”

The idea is to mimic the workforce and expect from inmates what an employer expects from staff: solid work habits and accountability.

The impact on the inmates is palpable, noted Gloria Johnson, an assistant superintendent at Hiland. “We have very few write-ups for women in the program,” she said. “We have a waiting list to get in, and the students in the program are our best-behaving inmates.”

Evidence suggests that inmates who feel hopeful for opportunities outside prison behave better when in prison, Jenkins said, and inmates who

engage in correctional education are more likely to get out and stay out.

“You don’t feel like you’ve got the word ‘felon’ over your head,” she said. “You know you can get a job.”

Strength through know-how

Michelle Boardman hopes to get out of prison in a few years, 2017 at the latest, and she intends to take advantage of the trades courses and building maintenance apprenticeship to secure her future and leave her mark.

“I’m a completely different person than I was when I arrived,” she said, gesturing to Jenkins. “This woman is amazing, and the opportunities she has brought here are above and beyond. Because of them I’ve become a stronger woman, a stronger person. I don’t need to take away from anyone else to be myself, to take care of myself.”

Boardman wants to give back to the program by rebuilding an inmate-run heavy equipment program that fell to the wayside when the prison moved its male inmates to a different facility years ago. She took the initiative and wrote a proposal, and a program is in the works. She already runs the plow and will learn the grader soon.

“I want to make this happen to open the door for the people behind me,” she said.

Fellow student Serena Garcia wants to get training in heavy equipment operation as well and has already studied

maintenance, carpentry, plumbing, OSHA compliance, forklift operation, hazardous waste handling and disposal and more. The trades program has "gotten me where I need to be and should be," she said. "I feel confident I can get a job."

It helps that students get hands-on, practical experience by working on projects for groups like Habitat for Humanity and through their real world work at the correctional center itself. Over the years, students have contributed to Hiland by building storage sheds and classrooms, installing energy-efficient windows, replacing tiles and ballasts, painting walls and fixing equipment and much, much more. An upcoming renewable energy class will teach students to tie in the energy produced by solar panels with the building where they take their classes, for example.

What goes around comes around, you might say. Jenkins has watched students grow confident as projects unfold, and she eagerly promotes the trades as satisfying careers to every new inmate. Though she got her degrees in education and worked as a teacher for the Anchorage School District before coming to Hiland, she talks wistfully about wishing she had pursued a trade. She sees daily the value of building things and making things work.

Certainly many inmates never imagined taking up electrical work or carpentry in their lives, let alone while in prison, but they clearly acknowledge the potential for trades training in making goals and dreams come true.

"I never thought anything like this would be offered in a prison," Tisha Negus said, "I'm amazed that in 300 hours I'm going to be a journeyman in building maintenance."

She already has plans to strip, remodel and flip houses when she gets out and says she has plenty of work waiting for her.

"There's nothing I've learned here that I won't use," she said. "And I still have my dream house to build." 

Dawnell Smith is a freelance writer who lives in Anchorage.

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