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Barton celebrates inmate success at Ellsworth Correctional Facility

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Story by Brandon Steinert

Desmund Cantu has been incarcerated for four years, since he was 19 years old, and he, like 97 percent of all inmates in the US, will be released. Cantu has less than two years left in his sentence.

Statistics would say he will have a one in three chance of landing back in prison, a cycle known as recidivism in which inmates return to the only lifestyles, habits and behaviors they've ever known.

Cantu, however, resolves to defy statistics. Thanks to education opportunities through Barton Community College, he will have a whole new set of skills and expectations when 2018 arrives and he tastes freedom once more.

Barton, Ellsworth Correctional Facility and the Kansas Department of Corrections highlighted the success of almost 130 inmates who have taken the initiative to pursue their educations while incarcerated at the 12th Annual Learning Celebration on Tuesday evening at Ellsworth Correctional Facility.

Cantu received his high school diploma through the General Education Development (GED) test, a certificate in welding and a WORKready! Certificate, which is a nationally recognized certification indicating an individual's competence and readiness to enter the workforce.

He hopes to find a job in welding and eventually pursue more education in art.

"I like being creative," he said. "I like being able to take a thought in my mind and make it a reality for other people to see and make it into existence. The whole process has always fascinated me."

Cantu said he's grateful to have a chance at building a better life when he is released.

"What they're doing back here with Barton, what they're doing to help us better ourselves, is a wonderful thing," he said. "I deeply appreciate it. It's a great benefit not only for ourselves, but for our families so we can provide for them. We can utilize our time in productive manner and feel proud

to
take a negative situation make something positive from it.”

The dozens of other inmates with stories similar to Cantu’s were recognized during the learning celebration for reaching milestones in their educations through Barton’s Building Academic Skills In Correctional Settings (BASICS) program.

In addition to the certificates Cantu received, inmates also celebrated the completion of programs in computer skills, manufacturing skills and more.

All of these opportunities are afforded to inmates thanks to grant funding and the drive of several employees and administrators at Barton and Ellsworth Correctional Facility, such as Dean of Workforce Training and Community Education Elaine Simmons, who helped start the program.

Many of the inmates were able to take courses with the help of privately funded scholarships. Barton Foundation Director Coleen Cape distributed certificates to the 11 scholarship recipients. She said she was proud to be among young men who had realized they have made too many poor choices.

“You decided it was time to make good choices,” she said. “You may think there is shame in falling down, but the only true shame is in just lying there after you’ve fallen. You may not be proud of what you did, but you can be proud of what you’re doing.”

Barton president Dr. Carl Heilman also encouraged the inmates to keep going, to never stop their pursuit of education and self-improvement.

Guest speaker Stephen Barbee of the Metro Lutheran Ministry left the inmates with what he called the five Ps, the first four of which are process (of change), purpose, pattern (of behavior) and power (source of motivation).

The fifth P, he said, is “prize”.

“You’ll get that diploma or certification. You’ll get that in your hand and say to yourself, ‘I did it’,” he said. “You have finished it. Was it easy? I doubt it ... mission accomplished