

Earning college degrees in prison

transcript

Sean Pico – Executive Director of Hudson Link

Welcome to the Hudson Link Mercy College Department of Correction's graduation 2019. I think a lot of our prisons in this country were built on an effort of punishment. Typically you punish somebody, there's got to be something about rehabilitation – second chances, and that's what we're doing in these prisons. Hudson of higher education is a degree-granting college programme in five different prisons. Each one of our students leaves the prison with a college degree, we've been doing this for 21 years and we now have this opportunity to grow in a way that's impactful for folks all over the country.

Tim Hall, University President - There's nothing holding you back, there is no door that this education doesn't unlock and let you move into new place of learning.

Bill - Tomorrow we're doing our graduations through the Hudson Link programme,

Jermaine – It's one of the biggest events of the year – in Sing Sing

Sean – Hudson of Higher Education is now 21 years old, I was in the first graduating class. When I went to prison, at sixteen years old, I wasn't expecting there would be any future at all – let alone a good or bad one, but the fact is, the stuff that I did in prison is the most powerful stuff on my resumé today, everything that I have today was because the older guys in the prison made me go to school.

Bill - Sean is proof positive that people can change their life. I am a bachelor in behavior science . When I first got here it was to study myself, I chose the street life, I couldn't understand why I did a lot of the things I did. I was a dangerous person, and I believe if I can change, anybody can change.

Sean - It was a huge amount of guilt – that we have from being in prison, to be able to take that bad situation and now turn that into something good – that's incredible. We do it for free, we're raising this money privately. 68 percent of the men and women that go to prison return to prison when they leave, and that's a staggering number, we have a less than a 2 percent recidivism rate. Thinking strategically about what our future looks like, how do we do more of this ? How do we touch more prisoners ? You know, we've got to think a little bigger now. Different people that are getting involved are looking at this through a different lense. We were introduced to the Stand Together community. Sean Pico, whom you saw in that video, who leads Hudson Link, Sean is now working with this network to replicate that programme in prisons across the country.

Sean – For years, it was me making decisions alone, the Stand Together family has brought on a management style that's made us really think about the decisions we're making as a small nonprofit. Since we've been working with ST the breadth of what we've been able to offer has literally doubled since we met them.

Tim Hall, University President – You are receiving a college degree today, it is precisely the same college degree I award to thousands of other students who've done the same kind of work as you. What's being recognized here today - I want to make sure your family members and guests understand this - is that you've earned, you've earned a college degree.

Mark Holden, Senior VP of ST – You enrolled in the Hudson Link because you had a vision for something that could be better – right – you wanted something more – and now you're educated, you've got a college degree, you can start to write your own story

Zachary – I think I learnt a lot about myself through the process of going to school. And now I can hold a degree that shows that I accomplished something that is worthwhile and may help me do something with my life that I didn't think I was going to be able to accomplish while I was in here.

Laron – Having this college programme in these facilities like a beacon of light. It's real easy to lose hope in prison and this restores hope – gave me back hope. I want to go back to my community and help some of the young people that unfortunately face the same things that I faced as a young person, it is that they know that they have choices, that they have other options.

Michael – We know that every victory in prison is hard-fought. If we can succeed at this level, inside a maximum security prison, then we can succeed anywhere on any circumstance.

Sean – This is impacting communities, public safety, the families, it's not just about one person getting one degree, it's so much bigger than that. The person being released from prison has to realize that they've served their time, they deserve a second chance but also the community has to be open and welcome all that as well.

They're coming back as a helper now, that will have a rippling effect* beyond prison. I truly believe, as a community, we will solve this problem away, that's going to impact the entire country.