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College students visit the big house

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CCC class provides opportunity to work with prison inmates

Wednesday afternoons this year have seen several Clackamas Community College students put behind bars. Not for crimes committed, but in the name of education. They attend Criminal Justice 199 alongside inmate students at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility in Woodburn.

Abe Rios, a program director and assistant superintendent at the facility, and a few of the inmates gave CCC students and their instructor, Ida Flippo, a tour of MacLaren before one of those class sessions, which conclude this week with spring term finals. The first stop was where the inmates actually live.

“Kincaid is a different program from what you will see in other living units. It’s not the same; this is more of a higher end youth that do fairly well on campus,” Rios said. “They pretty much take care of business. (They are) involved in college courses, full-time work or doing some kind of academic work.”

The comfortable and relaxed atmosphere in the Kincaid Unit was not the steel and concrete fortress with armed guards one would expect at a youth detention facility. Widescreen televisions, couches and even computer access for homework were available for the prisoners’ use. Inmates in the unit have more privileges because of good behavior and have the opportunity to enroll in college classes.

Only first names of inmates were provided for this story. Noah is an inmate who resides at Kincaid and is also a student in CJA-199. Residents in the Kincaid Unit enjoy more privileges than the average inmate at MacLaren.

“This is a self-managing unit. The idea is that we are old enough now and we’ve shown that we can earn the responsibility to take care of ourselves and we don’t have to be micro managed every minute,” Noah said.

Stephan, a MacLaren resident, has completed 82 college credits at Lane Community College, not including CJA-199 at Clackamas. All of his college coursework has been completed while incarcerated. He plans to have an associate degree by the end of this term. His goal is to enroll at Oregon State University and obtain a degree in human resources.

“My whole purpose in going to school is to better my surroundings that I came from; because it’s (gang/drug life) just a cycle and I don’t want any part of keeping that cycle going. Someone’s got to stop it,” Stephan said.

Real college experience

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program works with institutions of higher learning and correctional systems to deepen the conversation about and transform approaches to understanding crime, justice, freedom, inequality and other issues of social concern. More information about the program can be found at insideoutoregon.com
The spring schedule of classes describes CJA-199, Inside Corrections, as bringing a group of students from CCC together with a group of residents of a correctional facility to gain a deeper understanding of the criminal justice system through the marriage of theoretical knowledge and practical experience achieved by weekly meetings at the facility. Students will explore ideas about crime and justice, the criminal justice system, corrections and incarceration.

The four-credit class was held at the correctional facility most Wednesdays this spring from 1 to 4:50 p.m. The learning experience is an opportunity for criminal justice and corrections students to see their field from the inside.

Across the correctional campus, the students gathered in the facility’s educational buildings in a classroom. Students discussed the tour of the grounds and how it made them feel.

“Is there anything you want to talk about that stuck out?” Flippo asked the class.

Danna, a CCC student, replied: “I like all the different work opportunities. I didn’t realize all the different opportunities that they (inmates) have.”

Although the inmates at MacLaren can take online classes, CJA-199 gives them a chance to experience education more traditionally.

“The inside students really appreciated this opportunity because it gave them more of a real college experience than just communicating online with their instructors or with their fellow students,” Flippo said.