

The Register-Mail

Hill Correctional graduates 6 in first entrepreneur class

By Robert Connelly

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GALESBURG — Six men became the first graduates Monday of a new entrepreneur program being offered to inmates of Hill Correctional Center.

Leroy Anderson, 29, of Chicago, had the most energy during his business pitch before he received his certificate.

“I just want to open this barbershop to let people know even though you’ve been locked up in the penitentiary for two or three or four years that a positive outcome can come out of a penitentiary instead of sitting back and accepting the negativity,” he said of his business plan.

“With the community, I just wanted to give back and let them know I still love them.”

Also graduating Monday afternoon in a ceremony within the vocational building inside Hill’s campus at 600 S. Linwood Road was Randy Flood, 50, formerly of Zeigler.

Flood is nearing the end of his sentence for a 1999 Franklin County murder case where he was convicted under the accountability theory, meaning he was present when a murder occurred.

He is about a year away from his release into three years of parole.

Flood said he has been a “model inmate” and hadn’t been in trouble for 17 years as he has held a plumbing job for 10 years and most recently was operating a packaging machine.

Online Illinois Department of Corrections records said Flood has been in state prison since February 2000.

“My biggest fear is that someone won’t give me an opportunity to get a job when I get out because of my past. I’ve only been to jail once, but it was bad enough. I’ve been gone for 20 years,” he said.

His pitch included a landscaping company he hopes to open when he returns to southern Illinois that also would be able to build retaining walls.

“Whatever you need done. I have plumbing experience. I’ve done several things in my life. I can apply my skills I do have. I’ve always worked since I’ve been here,” he said.

One concern for Flood that his five classmates might not have had was age.

“I try to keep it in perspective,” the 50-year-old said. “I’m just wanting to learn so much because society has changed so much since when I left. That’s my biggest fear, just getting a chance because people can be so judgmental, you know, and sometimes good people do bad things or get involved in things they shouldn’t.”

The first class met for two hours on Mondays for eight weeks and was taught by Jim Boyd, who is director of the Illinois Small Business Development Center at Western Illinois University.

While Boyd couldn’t remember where the idea for the class originated, he said he drives by the prison along U.S. 34 from WIU’s campus in Macomb on his way to do workshops with private, local companies.

“Why can’t we do this? Why wouldn’t this make sense and can we benefit offenders? And Warden Dorethy was kind enough to entertain this off-the-wall dream, if you will, and from there it’s just evolved,” he said.

Hill Correctional Center Warden Stephanie Dorethy said the WIU pilot program isn’t the first program to be tried at Hill.

“I’m excited for any type of programming that gets them out of their cells that’s positive and that helps them be better,” she said.

The program also looked at businesses to start such as landscaping, maintenance and barbershops, among others, as Boyd says, “Nobody in here is going to go out and open an Amazon or Google.”

“We had the discussion first session that you’re not going to earn a million dollars. You’re not going to go out here and earn a million,” Boyd said of setting expectations for the men in the class.

Operating a small business “becomes 70 hours (a week) as you do your own bookwork, and they all understood that. We put on a lot of workshops where

people don't understand how money works and how credit works so i was pleasantly surprised that we had that base level and understanding."

It will be a few weeks until the second class begins May 13 with 20 members. Boyd said he will tweak some aspects of the curriculum based off of the first class that graduated Monday.

But the core part of the class will remain the same.

"They will have challenges with just that (conviction) being on their record. They will have challenges with credit. They will have challenges if they're doing something inside there will be a challenge with their insurance and we discussed those and tried to identify what those biggest ones were depending on the business so they're aware," Boyd said. "Those three things and the trust level they'll have to overcome and make that trust."

And some of those aspects are the lessons Flood took to heart. The thing that surprised him the most were the hidden costs.

"I didn't have any idea. I know it takes money to make money, but I didn't know the expenses you'd be out, like if you get stuck paying a credit card and the compounding interest," he said.

There were smiles, handshakes and congratulatory words shared between Boyd, Hill staff and the men who graduated Monday.

"Ain't it going to be better to end up with something rather than end up with nothing, you know what I mean? I've been gone for 20 years and you guys, we're all getting out pretty soon," Flood told the crowd Monday.

"We got to take the opportunities in our hand to do something with this."

<https://www.galesburg.com/news/20190422/hill-correctional-graduates-6-in-first-entrepreneur-class>