MEET OUR GRADUATES

Last June, family and friends, DOC staff and volunteers, students and FEPPS partners joined together in celebration of student accomplishments during the 2015-16 school year. Emotion swept us all as FEPPS first four Associate of Arts graduates, Lenore, Shawn, Alyssa, and Melissa, received their degrees. For our first paper newsletter, we wanted to share with you what inspires the FEPPS Class of 2016, how they inspire others, and most of all, how higher education has impacted their lives.

"I feel so much pride and confidence knowing that I not only completed my A.A., but that I was one of the contributors who built this program that allows women to achieve something that will change their lives. I have gained so much confidence and awareness of who I am as a result of the challenges I’ve encountered in these classes! Our professors, by expecting greatness of us as students, as people and not just as inmates, allow us to expand our expectations of ourselves. To have achieved my associates degree feels like the beginning of a long journey."

Alyssa enrolled in FEPPS first college courses and is a founding member of FEPPS Education Advisory Council. She works with dogs in the Prison Pet Partnership Program at WCCW, is interested in Biology and Gender Studies and continues to work towards her Bachelor’s Degree.

"I believe higher education renders possibilities for incarcerated individuals. Having achieved my associates degree I’m reminded every day that I am a person with a purpose. Sharing my success with other people gives them hope. My peers have seen the pictures in the school and congratulate me and want to know what to do to get an education. The women who have signed up for FEPPS, or who are in the trade school classes, tell me where they are in math, English, etc. and ask me for help. I like it when they come back with an A or B on their papers and a big smile on their face. I’m proud and so are they! I feel good about my accomplishment so far with higher education. It has given me focus on where and what I can achieve and gives me hope for a future."

It’s been 40 years since Lenore attended High School and 23 years since she attempted community college. Her success in the FEPPS program is an inspiration to her peers, especially those new to the program. She has an interest in writing and hopes to pursue a Bachelor’s Degree in Psychology or English.
One of our college students, who is also a poet, musician and scholar, said that getting an education in prison allows her to “dream over the wall” and imagine a different life for herself. At our graduation in June, that idea seemed more relevant than ever as we celebrated students who are building a future beyond the walls of the prison toward more education.

The values of a liberal arts education are urgent and necessary now more than ever. College in prison encourages students to imagine, think, and reason — in a way informed and cultivated by a rigorous education. Being in college encourages students to engage in critical reflection about the planning of their life, to recognize and show concern for other humans, and to be able to imagine the situation of another person. Most of all, participating in a liberal arts college program means being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. As we move forward and consider the 15 women who will graduate next year, we want to keep those values at the forefront of what we do. We are grateful to all of you. Our wider community enables all of us to keep dreaming over the walls.

“School is a lifeline for me. It makes me look beyond these walls and believe there will be life after prison. It makes me feel alive and it opens up so many opportunities. For the first time since coming here, I feel like an employer will see my degree and not my charge. My family is proud of me and my self worth has improved. Higher education makes my mind stronger and not wither away.”

Shawn lost the opportunity to finish her AA degree in 1994 when incarcerated individuals became ineligible for Pell grants. She hopes to one day earn her Bachelor’s Degree and has an interest in psychology, pet therapy and Christian counseling.
“Having access to higher education has made me believe that even though I am in prison, I can continue to better myself. It’s important for me to know that there are people out there who are willing to dedicate their time and knowledge to helping strangers get higher education. It reminds us that not everyone has a negative view of prisons and prisoners. My degree has motivated me to be the best person I can be and to be proud of myself no matter where I’m at. It opens doors for me and my future. I know that if I set my mind to anything - I can accomplish it. So, thank you to everyone who is involved with FEPPS for encouraging me to be a strong, responsible and confident woman.

Since childhood, Melissa has wanted to be a Zookeeper. She is interested in Wildlife Biology and Animal Behavior and dreams of becoming an animal handler and leading educational programs. She looks forward to taking classes that get her closer to her achieving a Bachelor’s Degree.

I have never been a fan of graduations; I only went to mine because a firm secretary informed me that it wasn’t about me. She was right: my mother was horrified that I planned to skip, thrilled the secretary had prevailed. In the years since, my antipathy to graduation ceremonies has not diminished: I skipped my nephews’ graduations – though I celebrated at the after parties! This changed on June 14, 2016 when I marched in the faculty processional to celebrate our first cohort of AA degree recipients. By the end of the ceremony, there wasn’t a dry eye in the room, mine included.

What made this graduation different? In a word: circumstances.

These days, a college degree is a vexed thing; many students tell me they attend college because they “have no choice” – somebody (their parents) or something (social forces) says they must get a college degree to succeed. By contrast, for an incarcerated student, the impulse to and reason for getting a college degree is utterly different. Nobody or nothing is telling them to do it; in fact, the barriers to learning are greater than the support for it. Many forces are telling incarcerated women to disregard schooling. To take classes, to persist, to pursue a degree despite these messages takes grit. These students are making a choice, encouraged by none but their inner motivation. And that is what made that graduation ceremony so powerful. The students who persist in challenging classes and impossible assignments, despite many discouragements, both external and self-imposed, are making difficult choices under constrained circumstances. That is the purest definition of humanity. The four AA graduates and the students who marched to collect their certificates all proved that “commencement,” as graduations are sometimes called, is just that: the first, giant step in defining their lives.

Priti Joshi, professor of English at the University of Puget Sound, has been teaching with FEPPS since 2012. This year, she has organized the monthly lecture series which brings a crucial aspect of the college experience to our students.
Hello everyone!

My name is Zoe and I am thrilled to join FEPPS as Program Administrator. My passion is building community so that everyone has access to tools for self-advocacy, strong family relationships, and financial stability. I believe in education as a platform for increasing equal opportunity and am committed to collaborating with our teachers, facilitating self-empowering classrooms.

After work you will find me running around Seattle parks with my dogs, checking out new breweries, pickling fennel, and playing rummy 500. I am an alumni coordinator for the youth-led outdoor education program at Garfield High School as well as a community ambassador for King County’s youth court divergence workshops, known as the 180 Program.

I’m looking forward to working with the powerful team that is FEPPS!