

Original Version

This story was originally written as a breaking new story for the university website immediately after the event. This program had been written about multiple times on the web, including immediately before the event, and was relatively familiar to the on-campus audience.

Commencement behind bars celebrates nine LIFE graduates

BY JANEL SHOUN-SMITH | DEC 16, 2013

[Click here](#) to see a photo feature of the ceremony

LIFE IN the News:

- [Associated Press](#)
- [Tennessean](#)
- [USA Today](#)
- [Channel 4, WSMV](#)
- [Channel 5, WTVF](#)
- [Al Jazeera America](#)

Eight Lipscomb University graduates got the full commencement experience a day early on Friday, Dec. 13.

They spent the morning at the Provost's Breakfast, being served food by their former teachers in aprons. They put on their robes and mortarboards among congratulatory friends and classmates. They solemnly marched into the auditorium and shook the hand of the university president as they received their diplomas.

But these graduates did all that not on the Lipscomb campus, but in the Tennessee Prison for Women located in Nashville. Eight residents of the prison (and one in absentia) received their associate degrees

Edited Version

For the Lipscomb University alumni magazine, which came out a few weeks after the event, I felt I could use a more delayed lead appropriate for a feature, which allowed me to lead with the graduates' own words. I expanded the scope and changed the order information was presented to serve a larger audience that may know nothing about the LIFE program. The timing also allowed me to incorporate comments made to news agencies the day of the ceremony. The yellow highlight and text strike-throughs represent changes made on the page once designed.

HEADLINE: Unique program gives unlikely students LIFE

“Thank you for not seeing the blues that I wear.”

In the Tennessee Prison for Women, the “blues” means more than melancholy. It means the blue uniforms that every inmate of the prison must wear. It’s what defines these women. It’s what reminds them every day of the worst mistake they ever made.

On Dec. 13, 2013, Lipscomb University gave eight women at the prison a chance to shed their blues and wear graduation robes instead. Like any other graduates, Barbi, Erika, Antoinette, Michelle, Donna, Markeisha, Tabitha and Amelia donned their mortarboards and tassels, hugged their favorite faculty, posed for photos and laughed with joy as they became the first associate degree earners in Lipscomb’s history.

At the ceremony, held in a gymnasium just off the prison yard, **Tabitha Ann Slack**, of Portland, Tenn., read a poem upon receiving her diploma:

“Thank you for all that you have come to mean to me.
Thank you for not seeing the blues that I wear.
You have given me the greatest gift of all:
The ability to believe in myself, regardless of my circumstances.”

These eight women, and a ninth—**Felicia Ybanez**, of Cordova, Tenn.—a resident at another prison who received her degree in absentia, are all members of the original cohort for Lipscomb’s LIFE Program (Lipscomb Initiative For Education), which provides courses for college credit at the prison each semester. It is one of only a handful of programs in the U.S. to offer a college degree to prison inmates.

The university sends faculty out each Wednesday evening to the prison to teach liberal arts courses such as art history, judicial process, Biblical ethics, community engagement, math, English and physics. In addition, up to 15 of Lipscomb’s traditional students per class travel to the prison each week to take the courses along with the inmates in the prison. They get three hours of credit, but

Friday before an audience of close to 200 people. They celebrated afterwards with hugs from family, a Lipscomb cake and photos with the president.

"Words cannot express my thanks for the opportunity to pay this forward," said graduate, **Erica East**, of Ocala, Fla., as she received her degree, an accomplishment eight years in the making.

"My heart could just burst for the amount of love I feel for my Lipscomb family," said **Antoinette Kidder-Hill**, of Williamsontown, Mass.

Lipscomb's first associate degree earners are members of Lipscomb's LIFE Program (Lipscomb Initiative For Education), which provides courses for college credit at the prison each semester. The university sends faculty out each Wednesday evening to the prison to teach liberal arts courses such as art history, judicial process, Christian ethics, community engagement, math, English and physics.

In addition, up to 15 of Lipscomb's traditional students per class travel to the prison each week to take the courses along with the inmates in the prison. They get the same three hours of credit they would get on campus, but they also get a life-changing experience as they get to know the "inside students" on a very personal level.

"One of the things that tends to happen in our criminal justice system is that the inmates become dehumanized," said Richard Goode, professor of history at Lipscomb and founder of the LIFE Program. "We never see the inmates, so we develop certain perceptions about them, most of which are false.

"When we all get in a room together, it humanizes the situation," he said. "The campus students begin to realize we aren't all that different, and the women at the prison are eager for human contact and interesting conversation. With multiple perspectives, we are all challenged."

The nine women receiving their degrees began their studies in January 2007, the first semester of the LIFE Program, and have taken a class each semester, as well as extracurricular activities along the way such as creating a literary journal and producing a play based on their personal life journeys.

The original LIFE cohort started with 15 women but dwindled to nine graduates as many of the women had been paroled or transferred to other prisons. Several paroled LIFE students have gone on to take additional courses on the Lipscomb campus and the recidivism rate for those released is close to zero, said Goode. The next cohort of students should earn their associate degrees in two years.

LIFE participants are selected by the Tennessee Department of Correction and must have a two-year record of good behavior and a high school diploma or GED. Two additional cohorts, totally 29 women, have been added over the years, and as women are released, other participants are added, allowing the LIFE Program to touch the lives of more than 50 women since its establishment.

In addition to enhancing the lives of those released, the women with long-term sentences have become models and mentors for the other women in the prison, Goode said. In her comments at graduation, **Donna McCoy**, who will likely not be leaving prison, said she will always "seek means to regift all that you have given me."

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"When we all get in a room together, it humanizes the situation," he said. "The campus students begin to realize we aren't all that different, and the women at the prison are eager for human contact and interesting conversation. With multiple perspectives, we are all challenged."

The nine women receiving their degrees began their studies in January 2007, the first semester of the LIFE Program, and have taken a class each semester, as well as extracurricular activities along the way such as creating an annual literary journal and producing a play based on their personal life journeys.

The program was originally intended to provide 18 hours of college credit that the women could use toward a degree upon release or for self-edifying purposes. The students' passion for learning won over Goode and other LIFE faculty who continued to offer them courses and obtained the approvals for Lipscomb to provide an associate degree in the prison.

Sixty-three hours and eight years later, nine of the original 15 LIFE students—several have been paroled or transferred to other prisons—received their degrees in much the same manner as those who graduated in Allen Arena the day after.

They spent the morning at the Provost's Breakfast, being served food by their former teachers in aprons. They put on their robes and mortarboards among congratulatory friends and classmates. They solemnly marched into the auditorium and shook the hand of the university president as they received their diplomas. They celebrated afterwards with family, a Lipscomb sheet cake and photos with the president.

"I want all of you all to know that what Lipscomb brought about was something the scripture always says. We are one body, with a lot of members. We are each members with one Spirit," said **Donna McCoy**, a 57-year-old inmate from Atlanta who will likely not be leaving prison. From the graduation stage she pledged to always "seek means to re-gift all that you have given me."

In his commencement address, Lipscomb President **L. Randolph Lowry** urged the graduates to make the most of their degrees. "I hope you have found a sense of freedom in learning. Even here, there is freedom that is yours," he said. "I hope you see not only your ability to achieve, but I hope you will see your ability to give."

Antionette Kidder-Hill, of Williamstown, Mass., has another 38 years to serve, but she says her degree and education will be a blessing to all those around her in prison. She told the national news agency, Al Jazeera America, "This is a community. It may not be a community that is seen out in the world on a daily basis, but it is still a community. So there are women here who will get out before I get out, and now I have the tools to help them."

“What Lipscomb has brought about is what is talked about in the scriptures,” said McCoy of Atlanta, Ga. “We are one body with a lot of members. We are each members with one Spirit.”

More than 150 traditional students have enrolled in LIFE courses taught at the prison, and many have reported changing their career or humanitarian goals after attending classes with the LIFE women, Goode said.

The tears flowed in the audience, which included the other LIFE participants and traditional Lipscomb students, faculty, staff and board members, as each graduate shared a few words of thanks upon receiving their degree.

“Thank you to the Lipscomb faculty for believing in me when I did not believe in myself,” said **Markeisha Seagraves** of Nashville.

The LIFE Program is one of only a handful of programs in the U.S. to offer a college degree to prison inmates. Program coordinators are currently working toward offering a bachelor’s degree option to the students at the Tennessee Prison for Women.

The LIFE Program also holds college classes for credit for formerly homeless men at the Room in the Inn campus and at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, although traditional Lipscomb students do not attend courses at Riverbend. The LIFE Program also partnered with the Tennessee Higher Education Initiative to offer an English composition course at Charles B. Bass Correctional Complex this past semester.

Graduates:

- Barbi Michelle Brown, *Clarksville*
- Erika Anne East, *Ocala, Fla.*
- Antoinette Yvonne Kidder-Hill, *Williamstown, Mass.*
- Michelle Ann Lockwood, *Knoxville*
- Donna Yvette McCoy, *Atlanta, Ga.*
- Markeisha Tenayl Seagraves, *Nashville*
- Tabitha Ann Slack, *Portland*
- Amelia Kay Stem, *Lawrenceburg*
- Felicia Monique Ybanez (in absentia), *Cordova*

Lipscomb holds ceremony for LIFE graduates in prison

BY JANEL SHOUN-SMITH | DEC 9, 2013

In addition to having a degree in their pocket (the women received small laminated copies of their diplomas to keep in their cells), the LIFE classes have been life-changing on many other levels as well. **Markeisha Seagraves**, of Nashville, helps her middle school-age daughter with her homework in the visiting room. **Michelle Lockwood**, of Knoxville, receives weekly visits from Lipscomb alumna **Amanda McDowell** (‘11), who met her in a LIFE course and considers her one of her best friends.

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The prosecutor who taught the first LIFE course in 2007 actually left his job and moved into a different area of law after coming face-to-face with a woman he had helped to keep in prison. He is now involved in several restorative and social justice efforts as well as teaching LIFE courses.

Overall, several paroled LIFE students have gone on to take additional courses on the Lipscomb campus and the recidivism rate for those released is close to zero, said Goode. Thirty-seven LIFE participants learned physics, math and community engagement this past fall. By replacing each participant who is paroled or transferred, the LIFE Program has touched the lives of more than 50 women in the past eight years, Goode aid.

The next cohort of students should earn their associate degrees in two years, and university officials are working to obtain approvals for the eight associate graduates to continue studying to earn a Lipscomb bachelor’s degree.

“I just want to say thank you to Lipscomb for... opening up the doors where the doors have been slammed in our face,” said Lockwood at the commencement. “For giving us this opportunity and just embracing us. And for giving us a second chance at life.”

If you would like **To get** more information on the LIFE Program contact **Richard** Goode at richard.goode@lipscomb.edu. To make a donation to the LIFE Program, log on to www.lipscomb.edu/gift. At the online gift form, select “other” and type “LIFE Program” in the pop-up box.

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This year, the 2013 Lipscomb University graduates who have perhaps faced the toughest challenges during their college career won't even be at the December commencement ceremony. They will be in prison, where they have carried out all of their college-level studies over the past eight years.

Eight inmates at the Tennessee Prison For Women (TPFW), and one inmate at another Tennessee prison who will receive her degree in absentia, will become Lipscomb's first associate degree earners on Friday, Dec. 13, at 1 p.m., in the prison's gymnasium, 3881 Stewarts Lane, Nashville.



The women are members of Lipscomb's LIFE Program (Lipscomb Initiative For Education), which provides courses for college credit at the prison each semester. The university sends faculty out each Wednesday evening to teach liberal arts courses such as art history, judicial process, Christian ethics, community engagement, math, English and physics.



In addition, up to 15 of Lipscomb's traditional students per class travel to the prison each week to take the courses along with the inmates in the prison. They get the same three hours of credit they would get on campus, but they also get a life-changing experience as they get to know the "inside students" on a very personal level.

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The nine women receiving their degrees began their studies in January 2007 and have taken a class each semester, as well as extracurricular activities along the way such as creating a literary journal and producing a play based on their personal life journeys.

LIFE students at TPFW develop better self-confidence, expanded life experience and good study habits. In fact, several paroled TPFW students have gone on to take additional courses on the Lipscomb campus after they are paroled. Lipscomb's traditional students are afforded an eye-opening experience to get to know and befriend the inmates, an encounter that many students say has affected their life choices well after completing the class.

"I used to not care! I neither cared about the words that came out of my mouth, nor who I hurt with those words," LIFE participant Erika Patrick recently wrote. "I didn't care about my future, my education or the obstacles ahead, at least until I met a community of people who held me accountable for my attitude, actions and behaviors. They showed me that I was not only hurting myself, but also the community around me. I used to not care until I enrolled in Lipscomb University."

While it will be held in the prison gymnasium, Lipscomb officials plan to make the LIFE commencement on Friday, Dec. 13, with just as much pomp and circumstance as the traditional commencement on Saturday, Dec. 14, in Allen Arena. Faculty and graduates will dress in traditional regalia; the graduates will process into the gym; university President L. Randolph Lowry will present the commencement address and a special luncheon and post-ceremony reception will be held in the graduates' honor.

Guests of the graduates, Lipscomb faculty and administrators, other members of the LIFE Program at the prison and some of the past traditional Lipscomb students who have studied with the women will be in attendance at the ceremony.

The LIFE Program has grown since 2007 from 15 participants to 40 at the Tennessee Prison for Women. It is one of only a handful of programs in the U.S. to offer a college degree to prison inmates. Program coordinators are currently working toward offering a bachelor's degree option to the students at the Tennessee Prison for Women.

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