

LIPSCOMB *now*:

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Lipscomb:Next *Page 18*

Beyond Borders *Page 24*

Giving Students LIFE *Page 28*

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.

”



Barbi Brown receives her associate degree from President L. Randolph Lowry.

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 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 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.”

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.

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.



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.

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 prosecutor who taught the first LIFE course in 2007 actually left his job and moved into a

“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.”



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.



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