

Hope of life in the building trades for soon-to-be-released inmates

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

It was a most unusual graduation. In the medium security wing of the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville, Oregon, 16 female inmates were honored March 14 as the first group to finish an experimental building trades pre-apprenticeship training program.

To cheers and hoots from their classmates, one by one the women were called forward in front of an audience of prison officials, volunteer trainers, and visiting officials from local building trades unions. After receiving a certificate and hearing an appraisal from vocational instructor Jen Netherwood, each student got a chance to say a few unscripted words.

"So many times, I've been told I can't do anything," said Danelle Klein. "This class gave me an opportunity to do something with my life, and to support my kids when I get out." Klein is scheduled for an October release.

To be candidates for the program, inmates had to be nearing their release date, and have a high school diploma or GED. They also had to be considered higher risk for recidivism, but have had six months of clear conduct.

Divided into two groups of eight students each, the inmates met four days a week, four hours a day, for four months.

The program was the brainchild of Mark Warne, Oregon AFL-CIO workforce liaison. Warne had put together a similar program in Colorado, and argued to Oregon union apprenticeship coordinators and Oregon Corrections Enterprises officials that the benefits of such a program make the investment worthwhile. Unions get a chance to add younger women to the ranks of an aging and overwhelmingly male profession. And the Department of Corrections gets a chance to make a dent in recidivism: Paroled inmates are less likely to re-offend if they have a path to a rewarding career.

Inside, the star is Netherwood, a former professional soccer coach who's now a member of Carpenters Local 156. After seven years working as a journeyman carpenter at residential contractor Neil Kelly, Netherwood was teaching classes at Oregon Tradeswomen Inc., a program that prepares women for building trades careers. Then she had a phone conversation with Warne.

"He asked two questions," Netherwood recalls: "Can you pass a background check, and have you ever thought about working in a correctional facility?"

Netherwood never imagined such a job, but now that she's there, says
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Women inmates at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility fill the partially completed hut they constructed under the direction of vocational instructor Jen Netherwood (front and center). Standing on a ladder at the back is Monica Heusel. Standing, from left, are Charity Henshaw, Gloria Friedrich, Bell Andersen, Molly Lewis, Danelle Klein, and Valayshea Shaffer. Kneeling is Kelly Kissell. Sitting are Tami Johnson, Netherwood, and Shelly McGinnis. (Photo by Dave Conway, general manager, Oregon Corrections Enterprises)



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