

Parolees learn, now hope to succeed

By Brian Hazie / Staff Writer

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VISTA- In some ways, it was like any other high school graduation: pomp and circumstance, beaming faces and congratulations all around.

However, a closer look revealed that this was no ordinary graduation

The 15 men who received high school diplomas yesterday are state prison parolees who are part of a program focused on rehabilitation rather than incarceration.

The means to success: education.

The state-funded program, called People in Transition Academy (PITA), is run by the Amity Foundation, a halfway house for parolees. Eagle Peak Charter School provides the teachers, who travel each day to the foundation's Vista Continuation Ranch to teach English, math, science and reading. The students, all men, range in age from 21 to over 40 and have spent as much as 10 years in prison.

The program, which started in September, is the first of its kind in the state to focus on education as a means of rehabilitation, said Mike Salzano, director of PITA.

The graduates have overcome addiction, prison and parole, among other things and have been places most people couldn't dream of. But Salzano and all that is behind said all that is behind them and education and self-esteem will make them productive members of society. "Recovery is attached to education," Salzano said. "If they feel good about what they are doing, they are going to recover."

Good feelings were in abundance at yesterday's graduation ceremony - the first in the school's short history - at the North Coast Church on North Melrose Drive.

Emotions ran high as the graduates received the diplomas, something many of them once thought was impossible.

"Hey, Dad, I got my diploma," David Zapp announced to the crowd. Zapp's proclamation was a triumphant moment for his family.

"He's been to the bottom - up and down," says his father, Gary Zapp, fighting back tears. "It's good. I never thought I'd see this day."

Others were similarly moved.

"I struggle every day with my choices and mistakes," graduate David Reynoso told the crowd. "Sixteen years ago, I broke my mother's heart by not graduating from high school. This one's for you, Mom."

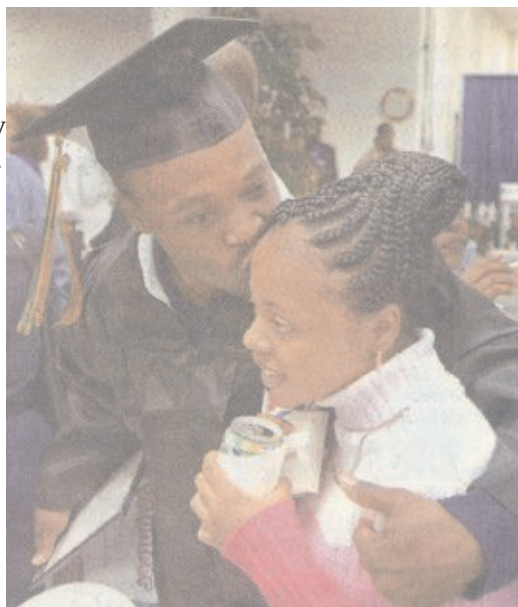
Some of the graduates plan to continue their education, and some have already enrolled in community colleges.

Graduate Steve Harvey, 40, spent nearly four years in Solano

State Prison in Vacaville for petty theft. Now he wants to attend Palomar College to study computers and business administration.

"It wasn't easy at times," Harvey said. "I had to keep going. It was time for me to keep going and win this time."

The winning attitude, says Kathleen Hermsmeyer, director of Eagle Peak Charter School, which operates



Steve Harvey hugged his niece Dainnese Jackson after he received his high school diploma with 14 other parolees. Scott Linnett / Union-Tribune

K - 12 education programs, is important for any student but especially for those who have never tasted success.

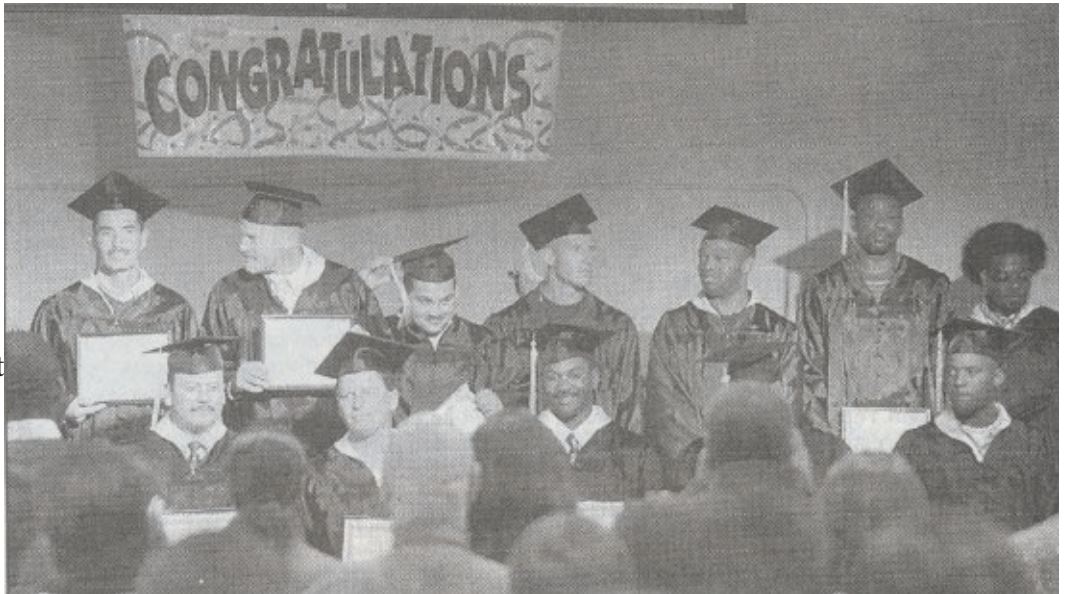
“We are trying to get them up and running academically - to give them practical knowledge,” she said.

Eagle Peak started in 1999 with 14 students. In just its second school year, enrollment has jumped to 650 students in San Diego, Riverside and Orange Counties, Hermesmyer said. The PITA students live at the 50-bed Vista Continuation Ranch. The ranch helps the men adjust from prison life on the outside, said Mark Faucette, director of project development for the Amity Foundation, which operates the Vista Ranch and others like it around the state.

The education starts while the inmates are in prison. When they are paroled, they go to the Vista Ranch to live, study and adjust to a new life.

Once the students complete high school, many will move on to vocational programs at Palomar College, which is another key to their success. People need an ability to earn a decent living, so they do not feel the need to commit crime to survive, Salzano said.

“They are out of that negative pattern that got them into prison,” Salzano said. “Eighty percent of these guys will never see the inside of a prison again.”



In all, 15 parolees received high school diplomas yesterday from state-funded people in Transition Academy. The new program's aim: education, then success.

Scott Linnett / Union-Tribune

