

Grads credit education for recovery

Leigh Ann Dewey / Staff Writer / Newspaper article taken from the March 11, 2001 North County Times.

VISTA - Graduates of a unique adult education program in Vista collected their high school diplomas Saturday.

"It's been a long time coming," graduate Jeff Lang said, holding up his diploma. "This is for my mom. She never got a chance to see me graduate. I wanted to do this for her and myself."

"I'm overhoyed," graduate Steve Harvey said. "Words alone cannot express the way I feel right now." Harvey acknowledged his teachers and fellow students for their support, giving special thanks to Peggy Hamilton, his parole officer.

"I'd like to thank her because she allowed me to come here," he said.

Lang, Harvey and the other 13 graduates are all residents of the Amity Continuance Ranch, a transitional home that helps former prison inmates with a history of substance abuse move successfully back into society through education and drug recovery programs.

Located for nine years in the Shadowridge area, the 4-acre ranch is owned by the Porterville-based Amity Foundation of California.

The foundation runs educational programs within the state prison system, providing teachers and classes to prisoners who did not graduate from high school and want to earn their diplomas.

Once released, they can be referred to Amity facilities like the Vista Ranch, where they continue their course work to earn their diplomas. The goal is for the residents to eventually hold jobs and move on to smaller group homes. In conjunction with education, the ranch also offers drug recovery programs.

Education aids the recovery process, said Senior Counselor Mark Carpenter. A former heroin addict, Carpenter passed his high school equivalency exam, but decided to take the classes necessary to also receive his diploma Saturday. He and the other graduates became the first Amity students to earn their high school diplomas under the People in Transition Academy Program at the ranch.

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About 140 people, including ranch residents, staff and family members attended the graduation ceremony, coordinated by education specialist and math teacher Joan Peace.

Though she admitted she had fears about working with the men when she took her job last September, Peace talked about how residents and staff members have become a close-knit group and how the students inspire her.

"I've been treated with the utmost respect and kindness," said Peace, whose daughter

Rebekah works in the ranch office. "Amity has become a second home for me ... You all have my utmost respect. You have made decision to turn your lives around ... Yoou guys are awesome."

"It's truly been an honor to work with you," echoed computer teacher E.J. Whitehead. "I can't begin to tell you what an enriching experience it has been to spend the past few months with you."

Before receiving their diplomas, graudates received special achievement awards and heard from the valedictorian Rey Mendez and former Del Mar mayor Andy Schooler, the keynote speaker. Schooler is now a representative for Write Your Congressman, a national organization which offers unbiased information about issues and encouragement. He told the graduates they were part of a pro-active minority in the country.

"There are not a lot of other people like you," Schooler said, "and I'm honored to be here. A winner is part of the answer (and) a loser is part of the problem. A winner says it's difficult, but it's possible, so you are all winners. Anything is possible if you put one foot in front of the other."

Mendez said he has achieved his goals at Amity of earning a high school diploma, staying clean and sober, getting his children back into his life and finding a job.

"If I can accomplish those things, it is possible for others to accomplish them," he said.

