

Gunnison prison inmates earn diplomas while doing time



PHOTO COURTESY STEVE GEHRKE

Graduates of the Central Utah Academy stand to be recognized at a ceremony Wednesday, June 19. The academy, located within the Central Utah Correctional Facility in Gunnison, awarded 136 high school diplomas this year.

By Jessica Henrie

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GUNNISON—The chapel within the Central Utah Correctional Facility (CUCF) was full of good feelings Wednesday, June 19 as administrators of the Central Utah Academy presented hard-earned high school diplomas to 136 graduates.

John Irons, the deputy warden of programming, opened the ceremony. He expressed his pride in the education program, in the teachers and in the graduates.

Education gives you three things: knowledge, pride and opportunity, he said. He encouraged the graduates to use their educations responsibly and to find opportunities to give back.

“When you first came into the system, I bet many of you

were upset or angry. How do you feel now? Do you have a little warm feeling?” Irons said. “This qualifies you for life. This study is a training ground. You did it! That tells me a lot about you. I’m proud of all your accomplishments, and I’m happy to take a part in this.”

Deputy Director of Corrections London Stromberg also expressed his pride in the graduates. The ceremony last week in Gunnison was the third Corrections graduation he had been to in two weeks.

In a job that’s often surrounded with negative feelings and situations, watching three groups of inmates rise above their circumstances and accomplish their goals was “extremely gratifying,” he said.

“In my own education, I don’t think I appreciated what I was doing at the time,”

Stromberg said. “I think if I’d understood I would have put a better foot forward. I think you have a stronger understanding, and because of that you’re better off than those of us who were just doing what we were told.”

Stromberg praised the teachers at the academy and implored the inmates to continue their educations beyond high school.

“Don’t stop here. Don’t let this be the end. Keep continuing to pursue your educations. ... Congratulations. This touches us all.”

Student speaker Christopher Clough began by thanking a long list of administrators, corrections officers and the teachers who believed in him and the other men in his

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Diplomas

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class. Next, he addressed his classmates.

“It feels good, doesn’t it?” he said. “Today, the effort we put in has paid off. We are victorious.”

When Clough first learned the number of credits he would need to graduate from high school, he didn’t think he could do it. For the first week, he was really negative about the idea of continuing his education. His decision to go for his diploma came one night when he was unable to sleep.

“I lay awake thinking of all the people who told me I was

a failure and resolved to do it and prove them wrong,” Clough said. “As I got credit after credit, my confidence grew, and to top it off, I got offered a job as a tutor after I graduated. I finished faster than I thought possible.”

Clough waited for this day a long time, he said.

Armando Zepeda had also been waiting for a long time—61 years, he said. But although earning his diploma was long in coming, to him it was worth it.

“We all can look at ourselves in the mirror and know we accomplished something,” he told graduates sitting on the church pews. “Keep your head up high and be proud of yourself.”

He offered a special thanks to all the teachers who had given him and his classmates the chance to learn and graduate.

The final two graduation speakers, Assistant Superintendent Ralph Squire of the South Sanpete School District and academy Principal Mark Hugentobler, encouraged the graduates to continue to choose positive attitudes and pursue new goals beyond receiving their diplomas.

“You’ve heard the phrase ‘spinning your wheels.’ When you spin your wheels, you’re not going anywhere. Having a bearing, or a purpose, is important if you want to get somewhere,” Hugentobler said. “I challenge you not to wait to move forward.”