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Ex-offender returns to CWC to motivate inmates

FLOWOOD – The graduation of the latest alcohol and drug program at the Community Work Center in Flowood was a homecoming for keynote speaker Courtney Estes.

Estes agreed to return to help inspire and motivate the current inmates to keep working through their recovery. She is now preparing to be ordained as a minister next month, giving credit to the Flowood facility for helping her recovery.

Just eight years ago, Estes was an inmate at the Flowood facility following a conviction for possession of methamphetamine. She decided to change and worked toward that change until her release in December 2024.

“Eight years ago, I was right where you are now. I lived in Room 3 right over there,” she said, pointing behind her. “I am blessed to come back to pour into these women the knowledge and show them they are not alone. They can be successful, and they can be a light to others.”

Program leader George Schmaus said the Flowood program is the only A&D program in the prison system that uses peer facilitators to help inmates through the course.

“It is not a small thing to graduate from A&D,” Schmaus said, noting that the class started with 21 inmates. “This is a really big accomplishment, and we have a wonderful team of peer facilitators who work with the participants.”

The class of 13 women celebrated completing the 25-week rehabilitation program. The women are incarcerated mostly on drug convictions.

Among the graduates were Melissa Ann Buse and Emily Stuart. Buse said the program helped her focus on the root cause of her addiction and its effect on her family. Stuart said it made her realize she had been wrong about whether it was relevant to her. “I never realized how serious my addictions were until I started recovery,” Buse said.

Being involved in drugs for about 40 years, Buse said, "I have a long way to go, but I am on my way." The 59-year-old is serving a 20-year sentence for possession of a controlled substance in Stone County.

Stuart, who was convicted of identity theft, said she did not fall into the typical drug stereotype, but drugs still inflicted devastation in her life.

"I enrolled feeling like an outsider. I had never used drugs, so I thought this program was not relevant. I was wrong. I was not a user, but I was a by-product of it," Stuart said. "I was with others who were addicted, and I made poor decisions. I was angry and destructive. I was hurt, and what does a hurt person do? They hurt others."

The women can change, as evidenced by Estes. Estes described how she started her decline through methamphetamine, and by age 18, she was using almost all kinds of other drugs. She became pregnant, divorced, and continued with abusive relationships. She was eventually arrested and convicted of possession of meth with intent to distribute.

"I really don't know how I even got here because I came in the door high. The Lord paved the way for me," Estes said. While at the Flowood CWC, Estes said she made a life-changing decision. "I was sick and tired of being sick and tired. I was not going to leave the way I came in," she said, describing the changes made in her attitude and mindset. "I started being compliant. I started doing my programs. I started taking my sobriety and recovery seriously."

Finishing her new mission was a major milestone for Estes. "Whenever I graduated A&D, that was the first thing I had ever graduated from in my entire life. I had a GED, but I had not gotten a diploma. I had never shaken someone's hand to accept a diploma for anything. That fire boosted me," Estes said, describing how she began rebuilding her life, reestablishing connections with family, and finding her career after her release.



