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## MRI graduation held at state Penitentiary

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PARCHMAN – Graduates of the inaugural commencement of the Mississippi Rehabilitation Initiative (MRI) at the Mississippi State Penitentiary were reminded to continue improving.

“Let this not be an end, but a starting point for your next phase of improvement and greatness,” said MRI Program Coordinator Teela Rivera in closing remarks last week. The ceremony at the Chapel at Unit 30 was marked by emotional testimony from among the 37 graduates, including Inmates Willie Malone, Mekel Crumbly, Javari Harris, and David Weatherspoon.

Malone, 42, compared himself to a "broken crayon that still colors." Having survived being shot 13 times and the consequences of his past choices, Malone said, “I am not just graduating from a program; I am graduating into a new version of myself, fully equipped to be a productive citizen.”

Crumbly, 28, reflected on the mental shift required for success, noting that many had entered with a survival mindset rooted in past mistakes. “This program taught us that our past may explain us, but it does not define us,” Crumbly said. He shared lighthearted success from the program’s reentry simulator, noting that while he "went to jail" twice during the simulation, the training ensured he knew exactly how to get it right the final time.

Inmate Harris, 30, credited his family’s support and emphasized that "education was the key to changing my life," while Inmate Weatherspoon, 63, energized his peers by quoting a classic anthem: “There ain’t no stopping us now, we’re on the move!”

Chaplain Chauncey Smith, a formerly incarcerated individual now serving at Parchman, delivered the keynote address. He challenged the graduates to surpass his own success. “I made it without the tools you now hold,” Smith said. “If I can do great things without them, you are bound to do even greater works.”

The ceremony also featured a rendition of “Wake Up Everybody” by graduate Tora Bennett, and a charge from Inmate Instructor Travon Brown, who commended the men for their dedication inside and outside the classroom.

Deputy Commissioner Kelley Christopher, the architect of the MRI, designed the program to be intentionally intensive, ensuring graduates are truly prepared to break the cycle of recidivism. She shared the poem “Forged in Fire.”

"When God wants to make a person powerful, He doesn't crown them first—He refines them. The burning challenges you have faced were not meant to destroy you, but to transform you into a vessel capable of holding greater purpose. This journey was 'forged in fire' to strip away the old and shape you into something strong and new. Steady your crowns and be ready; there is great work waiting for you to do."

Superintendent Sequcia Wren and Rivera closed the ceremony by reaffirming their vision for Parchman as a place of true rehabilitation.

