

June 15, 2007

## Helping Ex-Cons Find a New Label: College Graduate

By DALTON WALKER

Mikki Hidalgo's moment of clarity came on Memorial Day weekend in 1993, as she sat on her girlfriend and threw punches at her.

"What are you doing to yourself?" the girlfriend asked as she was being beaten. The words echoed through Ms. Hidalgo's head, stopping her fists. Ms. Hidalgo, then 37, was a heroin addict and street hustler who had already done two stretches in prison for robbery and selling drugs. She was released for the second time in 1992.

A year later, after beating her girlfriend, she checked into a rehabilitation center. She left on June 8 of that year, and has not used any illegal substances since, she said.

Gone are the needle marks from the many drugs she took.

"I have more marks on the inside," she said.

Today, Ms. Hidalgo, now 51, will celebrate another milestone. She and 17 other former prisoners who earned associate's, bachelor's and graduate degrees through a program for former prisoners will be honored in a ceremony at the [City University of New York's](#) Graduate Center in Manhattan. Ms. Hidalgo, who lives in the Bronx, received her bachelor's in health and behavior last week from [Lehman College](#), part of CUNY.

The program, run by the College and Community Fellowship, a nonprofit social service organization based in Manhattan, helps ex-convicts complete college by providing academic counseling, tutoring and mentoring, helping to shape leadership qualities in people who were once on the margins of society. The participants sometimes receive a small stipend to cover expenses as well.

The program is not a free pass through college, the organization's executive director, Vivian Nixon, said in an interview this week. Students are encouraged to apply for scholarships or find other ways to pay their tuition.

"Seventy-five percent of our students have part-time or full-time jobs," Ms. Nixon said.

CUNY's Graduate Center provides space rent-free for the college program, which is privately financed through grants from foundations. In the program's seven years of existence, 74 former prisoners, mostly single mothers, have graduated. Not one of them has ended up back behind bars, Ms. Nixon said.

"It's an opportunity for higher education," Ms. Nixon said. "Just a high school diploma is not going to get you a job to feed your family."

The program was created for women only, but has gradually allowed some men to join. Fewer than 15 men

have taken part. One is Cruz Rodriguez, 37, a former drug dealer who lives in East Harlem.

Mr. Rodriguez said he went from “selling drugs, living the life of the hustler,” to reading college textbooks behind bars in the Mohawk Correctional Facility in upstate Oneida County in the late 1990s. He served two prison terms, then was picked up again in 1997 after just two months of freedom on the streets of the Bronx, where he had grown up. After his release in 2000, he started taking night classes at a community college.

In January, Mr. Rodriguez graduated with a bachelor’s in social work from Lehman College. He said he would like to start working on his master’s this August at [Yeshiva University](#).

He has many loans to repay, but accepts his debt as part of his struggle to improve himself. “It’s better to owe \$45,000 and have a master’s degree than don’t owe anything and have nothing,” Mr. Rodriguez said. “They can’t take that away from you.”

Yolanda Johnson-Peterkin, 41, a single mother from Brooklyn, joined the program after spending 21 months in prison for selling drugs, and earned her graduate degree in human services two years ago from [Hunter College](#), another CUNY campus. But she still remembers her struggle to finish graduate school on top of raising her young son and caring for her sick mother.

“I wanted to quit,” she said.

Then Ms. Nixon, herself an alumna of the program for former prisoners, asked to meet with Ms. Johnson-Peterkin. “You’ve come this far and you’re six months away from graduation,” Ms. Johnson-Peterkin recalls Ms. Nixon saying. “Although you have outside stresses, I cannot accept you giving up.”

She did not quit.

Ms. Johnson-Peterkin has continued her association with the organization. She mentors students and participates in a handful of other programs that College and Community Fellowship runs, like its theater group, which will perform during the graduation ceremony today.

“For formerly incarcerated people, C.C.F. is very important in our lives,” Ms. Johnson-Peterkin said.

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