

# Inmate graduate: 'We are not our mistakes'



Photos by Tony Judnich

Fourteen inmate students graduated from the Prison Fellowship Academy on Oct. 16 at the Okaloosa Correctional Institution.

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The Bible-based, intensive and yearlong Prison Fellowship Academy program at the Okaloosa Correctional Institution “taught me to open up about a lot of things buried deep in my soul,” Richmond Fishburn III told his 13 fellow inmate graduates at the Oct. 16 academy graduation ceremony.

The academy program “taught me to forgive myself” and that “on this journey, I wasn’t alone,” Fishburn said before receiving his graduation certificate in the prison’s chapel.

He then walked to a pew and hugged his mother, who he had not seen for 25 years.

Inmate graduate Gustavo Vasquez, who has been in prison for 20 years, said during the ceremony that he was the cause of hurt in his family before God and the academy program helped transform him.

“Before, I was broken,” Vasquez said. “Now, I’m filled with holiness.”

The ceremony marked the academy’s inaugural graduation service at the 40-year-old Okaloosa Correctional Institution by the south end of Crestview.

The prison houses inmates serving sentences that range from one year and one day to life, OCI Assistant Warden of Programs Susan Dove said.

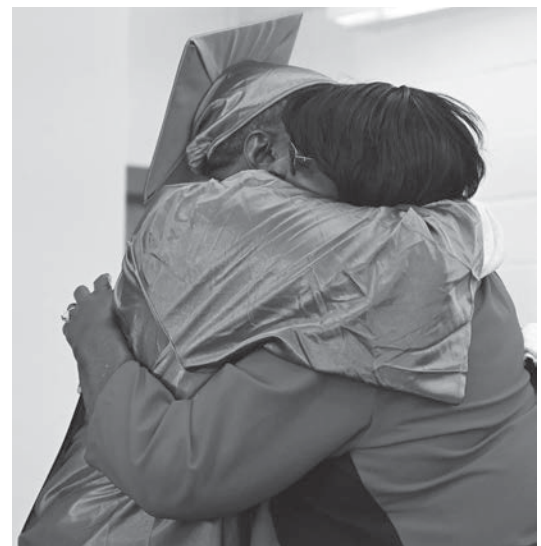
She said the inmate graduates have various time periods left to serve.



Inmate graduate Michael Salgado-Soto hugs Prison Fellowship Academy Program Manager Brian Adams during the Oct. 16 academy graduation ceremony at the Okaloosa Correctional Institution.



David Alabi, director of correctional programs for Prison Fellowship’s South Atlantic region, delivers remarks at the Prison Fellowship Academy graduation ceremony.



Inmate graduate Richmond Fishburn III hugs his mother after receiving his graduation certificate.

The nonprofit Prison Fellowship, based in Lansdowne, Virginia, is the nation’s most extensive outreach to inmates and has been restoring men and women behind bars for over 40 years, according to information from the Florida Department of Corrections.

Among other lessons, the academy program

teaches the values of good citizenship, how to be productive members of the community, and how to give and receive affirmation of God’s goodness, Academy Program Manager Brian Adams said before the Oct. 16 ceremony.

To graduate from the academy, each inmate student must complete an overall, 500-hour curricu-

lum led by Prison Fellowship staff and volunteers.

During the past year, Adams mentored the inmate students at OCI for three hours a day, three days a week.

At the ceremony, inmate graduate Terrance Burrows said academy leaders taught healthy ways to cope with problems and emphasized

being accountable.

“We are not our mistakes,” Burrows said.

As the academy program progressed, the inmate students’ pain, guilt, and shame surfaced, and they became open and honest and learned to trust one another, he said.

“We became peacemakers,” Burrows said.

David Alabi, who is the

director of correctional programs for Prison Fellowship’s South Atlantic region and served as the ceremony’s keynote speaker, told the graduates to use their past to help others.

“Anyone can change if they are willing,” Alabi said. “Don’t let this Prison Fellowship Academy graduation be your last achievement.”