

THE ANGOLITE

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Sounds from
the farm

Old and new school
rhythms merge into
universal harmony at
prison music symposium

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Joining the education hierarchy

Graduation ceremony recognizes the academic and vocational achievements of 243 men

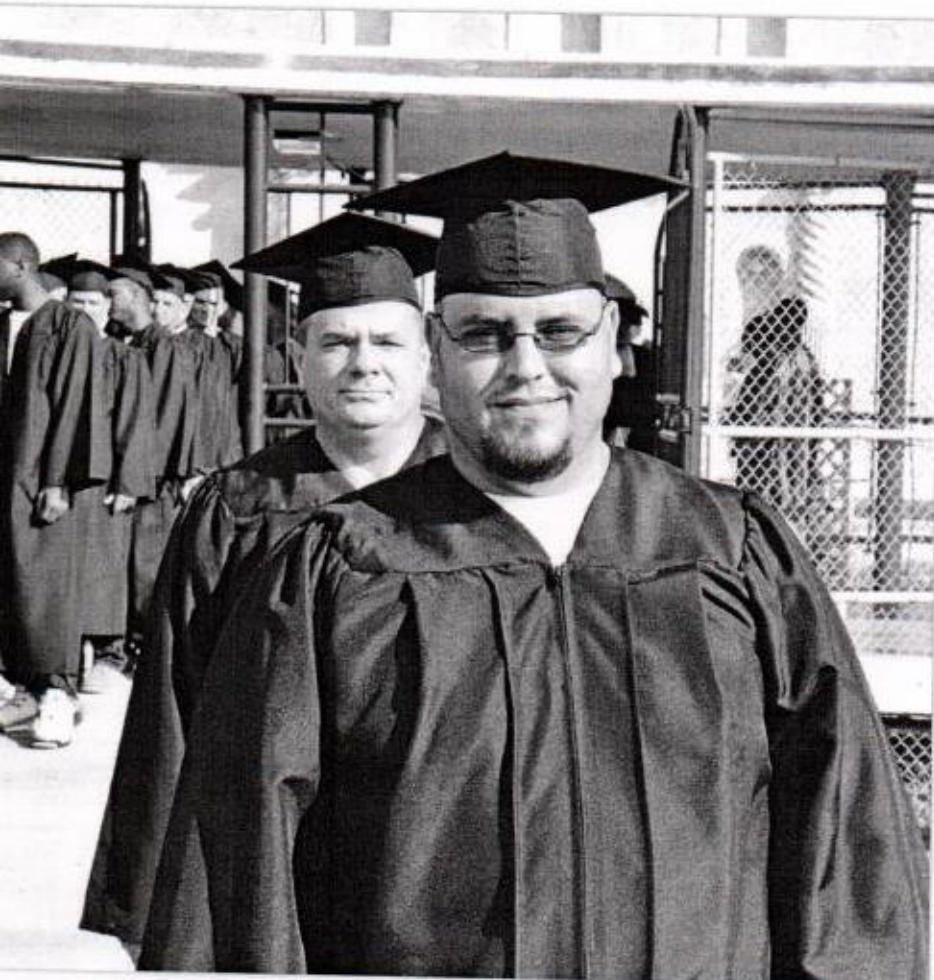
THE LOUISIANA STATE PENITENTIARY AND Baton Rouge Community College sponsored an academic and vocational commencement ceremony on June 29 for 243 inmate graduates that included 68 high school equivalency degrees and 139 vocational diplomas in 13 different disciplines.

Held in the Main Prison Tudy Chapel, families and friends from across Louisiana and neighboring states arrived to show their support and commend the graduates for their achievements. Also among the graduates were 34 literacy program completers and two adult basic education completers.

Dorothy White, of Angola's education department, opened the ceremony. "We thank you for allowing us to assemble this morning in another graduation program," she began. Twenty years ago, White said, only 20 students were in school. "But today more than 200 are graduating." She thanked God for the education department's successes before reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Matthew Nightengale, a graduate in Automotive Technology who earned ASE certifications in three specialties, lines up for the commencement procession

Angola Warden Darrel Vannoy thanked the guests for coming and recognized the work of his education staff, the inmate tutors and mentors, and the accomplishments of the graduates. He told the graduates that whether they wanted it or not, they are leaders in their community. He challenged them to be the best people





RECOGNIZING ACHIEVEMENT. Left: Angola Warden Darrel Vannoy congratulates the vocational and high school graduates. Right: Angola Education Director Monica Miles credited the staff and inmate tutors for the program's successes. Below: East Baton Rouge superintendent of education Warren Drake emphasized the importance of a meaningful education



they can be and set an example for other inmates to follow.

Vannoy said that the graduation was important to Angola and the Department of Corrections. He credited Corrections Secretary James LeBlanc, who created one of the department's first re-entry programs 16 years ago while warden at Dixon Correctional Institute, with the expansive education and re-entry programs Angola has today. LeBlanc has long advocat-

ed that rehabilitation programs are the first step in bringing down the state's recidivism rate.

The department is evolving into a new area with re-entry programs Vannoy said, and he welcomes the changes. He recalled a time when inmates would serve out their sentences and were given a bus ticket and \$10 upon their release. But now, he told the graduates and guests, the prison has programs that can help the in-

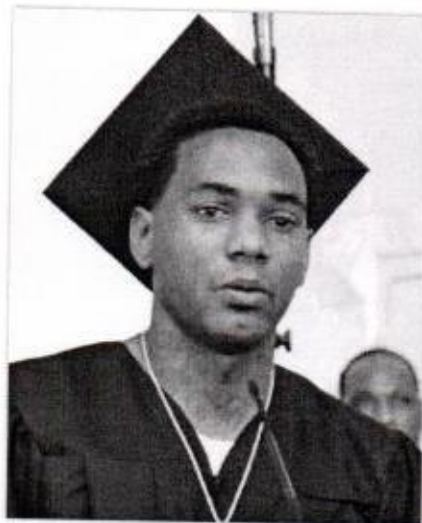
mates make a successful return to society. He expressed the hope that every inmate will take advantage of the programs and earn at least a high school equivalency degree and one trade before returning into society.

Angola education director Monica Miles also commended her staff and inmate tutors for their dedication to helping the students reach their goals. Miles asked the audience to give them a standing ovation as they stood to be recognized. Afterward, Warren Drake, East Baton Rouge Parish superintendent of education, addressed the students and guests.

"It is an honor to be here today and I am truly humbled," he began. Drake said billions of people in the world do not have the level of education the graduates just completed, so they should be proud of what they have accomplished. "You are now part of the world's education hierarchy."

After spending nine years as an educator, Drake told the assembly he decided to retire and become a millionaire. He bought a hardware store and opened a snowball stand, but after four hard





Above: Representing the graduates (left to right) Jonathan Bush, Marcus Haynes and Charles Grace thanked their families for supporting them and spoke about how earning their education has inspired them. **Below:** Outdoor Power Equipment graduate Charles Winfrey

years Home Depot came to town and his businesses failed. Out of a job, he returned to what he knew best, which was being an educator. His failure, he said, did not keep him from reaching his full potential. Rather, he learned from it and eventually become the school superintendent.

Drake said all people have challenges and problems. He wanted the graduates to know that they have endured and conquered and achieved something that most people never achieve. He told them never to underestimate their abilities and always to strive to be better.

Speaking of the challenges they faced while earning their diplomas, inmates Jonathan Bush, Charles Grace and Marcus Hayes represented the graduates. "I want to give a special thanks to the families. Because to be honest, it is you people who keep us going when times are hard," said an emotional Bush. "You people give us the strength and something to look for-

ward to, and I want to give you a special thanks for coming out."

Expressing his sorrow for causing his mother pain when he was free, Bush said it was his disobedience that caused him to lose his freedom and break her heart. Wanting to make her proud, he enrolled in school and earned his high school equivalency degree. Before returning to his seat, he told the audience that they also can achieve any goal if they put their mind to it.

Earning a welding diploma gave Grace a feeling of purpose

and personal satisfaction. Even sweeter, he said, was that it encouraged his children. His dedication to his goal influenced Grace's older children to complete their education. Grace told his fellow graduates that they are all headed in the right direction and it is up to them to continue on the path.

Earning a diploma in HVAC technology, Hayes thanked the education department and his fellow classmates. Telling them that he came to a turning point in his life when he reached the very bot-

tom, he acknowledged the inmates around him who helped him realize that success requires diligence and patience. Prison, he said, helped him see that success is possible if you put your heart into it.

After the conferring the diplomas and certificates, the ceremony ended. The graduates and their guests then moved a short distance to the Main Prison A-Building for a reception.

—Jim Nguyen

