



PORT TOWNSEND & JEFFERSON COUNTY LEADER

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Education

Clemente graduates unique 13

By Janet Huck
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Jeff Crotty was in trouble.

In Jefferson County District Court, he read an eloquent statement to Judge Mark Huth to get himself out of trouble - and landed in college instead. The judge recognized his writing ability and suggested the father of three attend a unique college, humanities program.

"It was an eye-opening talk," said Crotty.

Last Thursday, June 27, Crotty and 12 single moms - people caught in dead-end jobs and overcome by substance abuse at some time - graduated from the Bard College Clemente Course offered by Washington State University's Community Learning Center (WSU) and Washington Commission of the Humanities.

Over the five-month college course, the students read Plato and French philosopher Descartes. They studied U.S. history and the history of arts and literature, worrying how they would ever get all the voluminous papers written before graduation. They did.

"It woke up my mind again," said Crotty. "After all the years of wasting time with alcohol abuse and prison, it shocked me back to society. I have a role to play."

All 13 Clemente graduates received all or part of the six Bard College credits for the course at the graduation in District Court. They also received a certificate and Wayne Dyer's book, *Wisdom Through the Ages*.

Clemente board member Huth was the keynote speaker.

"I interrupted my education out of ignorance," he confessed. "When I returned to education, I was intimidated by it, but through studying the humanities, I found courage and the ability to branch out in life and accept responsibility."

The free, college-level course is based on the belief that anyone, if given the opportunity, can acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to transform his or her life with the study of humanities.

The avant-garde program was conceived in prison. "An educator and social critic who worked with people in prison once asked them what was the big difference between people in poverty and people in the middle and upper class," explained Clemente Academic Director Lela Hilton. "One person replied that they didn't have the same access to uptown moral culture. She was saying they didn't get the same humanities education so they didn't understand the cultural underpinnings of democracy."

So Clemente's founder, Earl Shorris, decided the study of humanities could reconnect the poor to democracy, public life and civic involvement.

It seems to work here in Jefferson County. "The course brought me closer to the community and closer to my neighborhood, said Crotty.

One 2000 Clemente graduate lamented, in a speech to the East Jefferson Rotary, how long it took for women to get a vote in the United States. Then, embarrassed, she confessed she had never voted before she took the course. Now she votes and tells all her friends to go to the polls.

"They learn they belong to a community and are more willing to be active," said Hilton. "Clemente is not about getting a Ph.D. but seeing themselves as citizens."

Yet the course encourages many graduates to pursue college. Of the 13 graduates in 2002, half of them are planning to attend college next fall. One is contemplating Bard College in New York.

In the 2000 class, 13 of the 15 graduates received six credits of college, four graduated with an associate of arts degree this June, and two or three more will start college this fall. Keri Shepherd starts at WSU in Pullman next January.

Cara Leckenby, a single mother and 2000 graduate, went on to Peninsula College, graduating this June. Next fall, she will start at WSU with the distance learning program in business.

"The program opened the doors and took down the barriers," she explained. "It showed I could be a mother and a successful student."