



Statesman Journal: Hillcrest holds final graduation ceremony

By Natalie Pate, Statesman Journal
July 1, 2016

Hillcrest Youth Correctional Facility held its final graduation ceremony Wednesday.

The juvenile correctional facility, run by the Oregon Youth Authority, will combine with the MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility over the next year.

The event was held at Hillcrest to celebrate the graduations of 19 youths.

The young men earned barbering certificates, GEDs or high school diplomas.

The Hillcrest gym was filled with a few hundred staff members, families, friends and fellow youth.

As the graduates entered the gymnasium, dressed in cap and gown, they walked around the cheering audience.

"At some point, did you think you wouldn't make it? That you wouldn't graduate?" asked Superintendent Troy Gregg. Almost all of the graduates raised their hands.

"If you're sitting here, you've had some hard times," he said. He told the students they needed to stay focused on their goals and move forward from the negative things in their pasts.

Fariborz Pakseresht, director of the Oregon Youth Authority, said the decision to combine Hillcrest and MacLaren was prompted by the Legislature's request that the agency examine the physical facilities.

Almost everything was equal between the facilities but MacLaren was better to invest in, he said. Less space is needed because there has been a gradual population decline during the past 10 years, both locally and nationally.



Aisea F. dons sunglasses while receiving his high school diploma during a ceremony for the Oregon Youth Authority at the Hillcrest Youth Correctional Facility in Salem on Wednesday, June 29, 2016. This is the last-ever graduation at Hillcrest before the facility is closed and students and staff are transferred to MacLaren in Woodburn by this time next year. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal

By combining at MacLaren, Pakseresht said, there was a great opportunity to foster a "positive human development" environment for both the youth and staff.

The Legislature authorized \$49 million in bonds to pay for the first two years of the 10-year plan created to address this, which includes needed work at facilities around the state, said Sarah Evans, a spokesperson for the Oregon Youth Authority.

She said the largest portion — about \$31.5 million — is dedicated to constructing new buildings and renovating current buildings on the MacLaren campus in preparation for moving Hillcrest youth, staff, and programs by next June.

Evans said the state is looking into eventually selling Hillcrest and is getting a valuation of the property to determine its potential price. In the meantime, she said, the agency is preparing to maintain the property and keep everything in basic working order.

"It's a bittersweet event here," Pakseresht said about the graduation. "Literally hundreds have graduated from high school here.

"I look around ... and there's a lot of history."

Hillcrest opened in 1914 as the State Industrial School for Girls. It changed names several times. It housed only girls until the mid-1970s when it added boys. It became an all-male facility in 2008 when OYA opened Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility in Albany.

The Albany facility houses all of the state's female youth offenders.

Hillcrest houses about 125 youths, which is about the same as MacLaren. The two are the authority's largest closed-custody facilities. They serve youths ages 12 to 24 who commit crimes before their 18th birthday.

Hillcrest includes multiple programs to help youth, including Robert Farrell High School, treatment programs, and vocational opportunities such as the barbering and culinary programs.

One student, Andrew (identified only by his first name in this story to protect his safety) said he felt cool, excited nervous after receiving his diploma Wednesday. One of his teachers brought him his first college textbook — an elementary algebra textbook, which had arrived that day.

Smiling, he examined the book before giving it back to her to keep until he needed it.

Andrew's family talked excitedly about his starting college.

Andrew said he wants to work in accounting one day because he likes math and would like to be able to travel.

His definition of successful was to be "motivated, prepared, and live life the way" he wants.



Timothy P. arrives for his high school graduation ceremony. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal

Another student, Reynaldo, said he was "happy I finally made it."

With diploma in hand, he said he plans to pursue his certificate in barbering and eventually a college degree.

"This is great, but I know there is more out there than just high school," he said.

Reynaldo wants to mentor children, hoping to help them before they become "part of the system."

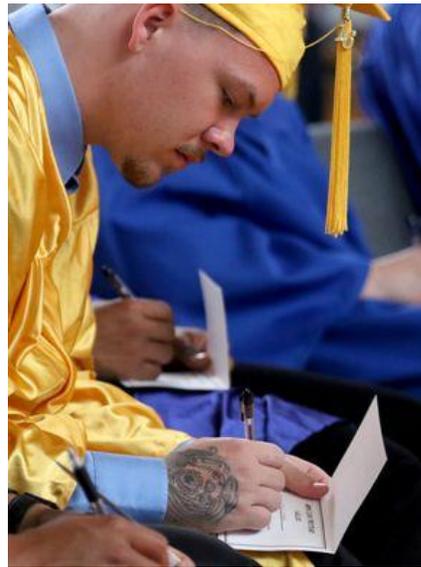
He had 13 of the 24 credits needed to earn his diploma before completing his degree at Hillcrest. It took him about 17 months to finish.

Noah Schultz, a former youth at Hillcrest and MacLaren, gave the keynote speech.

"The odds are against you," he said. "But you are breaking the statistics today."



Timothy P. walks up to receive his high school diploma as members of his family, from left, Jesse Smart, Tammy McVay, Tanner Henderson, Sara Perdue and Timothy Perdue, all of Salem, cheer him on. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



Zachary S. writes a goal for himself before earning his GED. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



Jon Millage, 48, of Portland, cheers on his stepson, Tyreik C. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



Nicholas C. arrives for his high school graduation ceremony. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



Principal Michael Conn congratulates Devante J. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



A graduation ceremony for the Oregon Youth Authority at Hillcrest. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



Devante J. gets a kiss from his son following a graduation ceremony. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



Noah S., who is currently living at Camp Florence Youth Transitional Facility, gives the keynote address. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



Aisea F., facing, hugs Johnathan B. after the graduation ceremony. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



Cupcakes are served following the ceremony. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



A graduation ceremony for the Oregon Youth Authority at Hillcrest. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



Marcos M. smiles before receiving his barbering certificate. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



Shara Brazzle cheers on her stepson, Justin H., during the ceremony. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



Superintendent Troy Gregg speaks during the ceremony. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



Darren M. arrives for the ceremony. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal



Cesar Velazquez, 22, of Salem, left, and Alexander Mendez, 23, of Phoenix, cheer on their cousin and brother, respectively, Darren M. Photo by Anna Reed/Statesman Journal