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Recidivism down in South Carolina thanks to prison programs

Sinclair Broadcast Group

COLUMBIA, SC (WACH) - 14 student inmates at the Kirkland Correctional Institution will receive their Associate of Arts Degrees Friday.

It's all made possible through the Columbia International University Prison Initiative Program.

Fraendy Clervaud spoke with a former inmate who took part in the program.

He says it helped to get him back on track after serving time.

"I'm evidence that there is a chance for anyone to succeed," says Jerry Chambers.

Succeed even after being in prison for 20 years.

Jerry Chambers says he was convicted of murder.

He says he didn't want that mistake to define who he was.

While in prison he heard of Columbia International University's Prison Initiative Program.

"It's an associate program so it's a two year program qualified inmates study with them for two years they graduate and then they are transferred to different institutions across the state and there they will serve under the Chaplain's of those institutions," says Pastor Andre Melvin, Executive Director CIU Prison Program.

Pastor Melvin says the program started nearly eight years ago.

The South Carolina Department of Corrections allows programs like this to meet with inmates while their serving time.

Inmates are taught the Bible, life skills and how to transition back into society.

But not every inmate is selected for this particular program

"They also have to qualify by having at least 7 years left on their sentence. We want 7 years because we want them to study with us for two years and for 5 years serve in an institution making a difference behind the walls," says Pastor Melvin.

15 inmates are selected every year and the program is privately funded.

In total so far 95 inmates have graduated from the program.

So you might be wondering do programs like this actually work?

Are there less inmates going back to prison? In South Carolina the answer is yes.

We've learned through the state's department of corrections recidivism now stands at 24.9%.

That's down from 27.5% back in 2010.

Officials say it's all thanks to programs like this and sentencing reform that numbers have gone down.

Reporter Question "Pastor what do you say to those who watch and look and say it's not fair that someone behind bars is given a second chance?

"Our program really speaks that even inmates, those who have done horrible crimes and horrible mistakes, God can still use them," says Pastor Melvin

As for Jerry right now he's pursuing a Bachelor's Degree at CIU.

He's also an associate minister at his church Temple Zion Baptist.

Pastor Melvin says this program is for both male and females.

This program is based on a similar program at the Louisiana State Penitentiary.