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ALTERNATIVE TO INCARCERATION PROGRAM HOLDS GRADUATION CEREMONY

BY EDWIN J. VIERA



Benay Rubenstein hugs a graduate at the College Initiative Upstate graduation ceremony last week at Coltivare.

(Photo: Casey Martin)

With fanfare and much applause, a graduation ceremony was held for the students of College Initiative Upstate (CIU) to not only celebrate their achievements within their respective college careers but also to celebrate fulfilling many of their dreams that, a short while ago, might have seemed impossible.

Benay Rubenstein, director of CIU, and Suzanne Burnham, the academic counselor at CIU, led the ceremony at Coltivare on June 6. The ceremony began with comments from Burnham and Rubenstein about how they have watched each of these students overcome significant obstacles to reach new heights of success, as each student in the class had been arrested at some point and directed to CIU as an alternative-to-incarceration program, often as a result of a drug-related offense.

Since the program partners with Tompkins Cortland Community College (TC3), President Orinthia T. Montague briefly spoke about how she has watched these students take on the challenging material and realize their own potential.

Following President Montague came the keynote speaker, Ithaca Mayor Svante Myrick, who spoke about the hardships he faced while he was growing up impoverished. He delivered an impassioned speech about being in politics and being one of the people who can make decisions that will have a profound effect on people for years to come.

Afterward, students were given awards for their achievements within the program as well as in their college careers. Students were given a gold cord with a special pin identifying whether they were on the dean's list during the fall 2018 and spring 2019 semesters, with some students having made the list during both semesters. For Rubenstein, this was a moment of great pride.

"Seeing progress that students make keeps me going," Rubenstein said. "For most CIU students, attending college brings a powerful

ITHACA TIMES

CIU GRADUATION

'identity shift' where students begin seeing themselves as worthy, smart, and capable. I'm thinking of Amy Heffron, who recently graduated TC3 with a criminal justice degree. She is now taking a leadership role on the Criminal Justice/Alternatives to Incarceration Board. Several other students have graduated and [are] now working as counselors in local agencies. It's thrilling to see how quickly lives can change with the right opportunities and support."

Closing out the ceremony was a spoken word piece written by students about their different experiences, highlighting both the triumphs and hardships each one has faced before and during the program. As they watched their students move on to new phases in their lives, Burnham and Rubenstein were glad to know that despite some of the challenges, this journey was rewarding enough. Some of the recurring challenges for this program, according to Rubenstein, have been securing funding and working with people who are on the road to recovery. However, this did not deter her from ensuring these students got the college education they deserved.



(Photo: Casey Martin)

"It is a challenge to find the proper funding to bring College Initiative Upstate to a sustainable place for the long run," Rubenstein said. "Funding streams often go to urban areas with large numbers while programs in Upstate regions with the same critical issues, but smaller numbers, have a difficult time finding appropriate financial support. The majority of CIU students are in recovery, and one of the biggest challenges is how best to support sobriety. We have seen how the structure of college classes, the support of professors, new student friendships, and having positive goals and renewed optimism go a long way. Yet, recovery from years of struggle with addiction is extremely difficult."

Rubenstein is looking to advance the program in the years to come, with a three-year plan being thought up to figure out some new additions for the program. She wants to see CIU expand its reach throughout Tompkins County but also replicate their work in other counties around the state.