

Young inmates find hope

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Staff Writer

On a hot, muggy Monday in the southwestern corner of Delaware County, a teenage girl dressed in a white cap and gown walked down the aisle of a half-filled gymnasium. Her hand covered her face in an attempt to hide the tears streaming down her cheeks, but those she passed could see the wet sheen on her face and called out words of encouragement.

It was the beginning of a new day for her, a day in which she would earn her general educational development diploma, but this morning she still awoke behind a curved black fence locking her within the grounds of the Scioto Juvenile Correctional Facility.



Submitted

On Monday, nine female juvenile defenders from Scioto Correctional Facility lined up to receive their GEDs, or high school diploma at a ceremony at William K. Willis High School.

HOPE

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A total of nine young women, ranging in age from 16 to 18, graduated from William K. Willis High School at Scioto Juvenile yesterday. Eight of this summer's Willis Diamonds earned their GED and one her high school diploma.

Scioto officials said, on average, girls entering their Home Road facility are four grade levels behind in both reading and mathematics.

While all juvenile inmates at the facility must attend school classes, not all have the dedication or desire to earn their high school education, officials said.

One girl, Sofonda, 16, has already served her time, but remains at Scioto as she awaits placement with a foster family.

She was featured as the graduate speaker for the commencement ceremonies, where she expressed regret for previous actions and hope for the future.

"I'm going to show everyone I can make it," Sofonda said as she stood in front of Ohio's

First Lady Frances Strickland, herself a one-time juvenile counselor at a residential detention facility in Lexington, Ky.

Saying she has been kicked-out or expelled from numerous schools in the past, Sofonda told the assembled juvenile offenders in the audience they can overcome their current situation.

"You have made a mistake, but you can turn it around," she said.

Strickland, the guest speaker at the commencement, told the graduates Sofonda had touched on all three issues she wanted to highlight in her speech.

She said in her time as a juvenile counselor, she was always able to judge a child's success rate after their incarceration ended by whether they were able to identify with a staff person and build a bond, were eager to learn and were willing to accept responsibility for past actions.

She also lamented watching children with which she had developed a bond leave the facility.

"You know you will miss them, but you don't want them

to come back here either," Strickland said.

After the ceremony, a slideshow presentation offered the hopes and dreams of the graduates. Some wanted to be medical professionals, others business people and even one aspired to be the first woman to join the National Football League.

Those dreams may not have been possible before they were incarcerated, Sofonda said.

"It was worth it. I wouldn't change a thing. I'm a lot stronger than I used to be," she said.

With that, she smiled and turned to join the line of graduates as they filed out from the gymnasium for a reception. Following the reception, she would return to her room at Scioto and wait for the day her life will start anew outside the curved black fence that locks her away from the outside world.

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**The last name of Scioto Juvenile Correctional Facility inmates have been withheld.*