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CONTACT Cara Wilwerding, Communications Manager

OFFICE 402-479-5712 | cara.wilwerding@nebraska.gov

Defy Ventures Kick-off at TSCI inspires hope, creates second chances

June 21, 2017 (Lincoln, Neb.) – There was no shortage of passion during Defy Ventures’ kick-off event at the Tecumseh State Correctional Institution (TSCI) on Tuesday, June 21.

Defy Ventures, an organization which hosts entrepreneurship, employment and character development training programs for currently and formerly incarcerated men, women and youth, opened their “CEO of Your New Life” program up to about 60 incarcerated men. Each one seemed eager to get his ideas off the ground.

“I’ll be paroled in 2019,” Rodney White said. “The knowledge that I’ve gained from this kick-off, I can’t put it in words. I’ve always wanted to start my own company.”

White, along with the rest of Tuesday’s attendants, will apply to be an Entrepreneur in Training (EIT) before working through a rigorous six-month course. Local business leaders and community volunteers will be available to guide EITs through nearly every step of the process.

Jeremy Bouman, Nebraska executive director of Defy Ventures, encouraged participants to stick with the program. At the end, EITs will earn a Certificate of Career Readiness from Baylor University’s Hankamer School of Business. Bouman stressed that it would not be easy, but it would be worth it.

“We are a light in dark places and we bring hope to dark places,” Bouman said to potential EITs. “I want to see each and every one of you graduate. We are all in and we expect the same from you.”

Defy Ventures is currently operating in the Omaha Correctional Center (OCC) and the Nebraska State Penitentiary (NSP). Twenty-six men graduated from NSP’s program in front of family, friends and business leaders on April 27. OCC will host a graduation ceremony in July.

TSCI Warden Brad Hansen could not be more thrilled to now have Defy operating in his facility.

“It’s absolutely terrific,” Hansen said. “It’s the start of something new at TSCI. The men and the staff are going to work together to bring a positive change to our culture.”

Defy Ventures Founder and CEO Catherine Hoke did not shy away from the fact that TSCI is not often talked about in a positive light. But the staff working there are ambassadors for change, she explained. They have an overwhelming desire to help incarcerated individuals be the best they can be, she said as prospective EITs and volunteers greeted her words with a standing ovation.

While Tuesday's event was primarily about education, business knowledge and personal development, it was also about community, leadership and forgiveness. Potential EITs, along with approximately 20 volunteers and business leaders, participated in a number of moving exercises together. One exercise in particular, brought raw emotion out of every person in the room.

'Step To the Line' is an exercise in empathy, Hoke explained. Potential EITs and volunteers were placed on opposite sides of the room with two lines in the middle. As Hoke called out statements – each increasing in depth and gravity – participants stepped to their respective line if they identified with said statement. Some statements included: "I regularly judge myself," "I was raised in poverty" and "I heard gunshots in my neighborhood growing up." Participants were encouraged to hold direct eye contact, resist shame and comfort each other as necessary.

"I want to thank you for letting me be vulnerable and understand the person that I am," potential EIT Billy Billups told participants through tear-stained eyes after the exercise. Billups, 61, has spent 40 years in prison and wants to change for the better.

Hoke stressed the importance of second chances and having confidence in oneself. Defy graduates have 3.2 percent recidivism rate – leaps and bounds lower than the national average – and a 95 percent employment rate. The organization has financed and incubated more than 100 startups founded by its graduates.

"Defy does not work with criminals," Hoke said. "We work with people who have had criminal histories in their past and that's a very big difference. Today we take ownership of our past while we transform our future."

Volunteer Christine Cunningham, who seemed to find value in every word spoken during the event, was carrying a box of tissues around with her by the end of the day. Tuesday was her first time entering a prison, but she assured potential EITs that it will not be her last.

"I know that if every one of you were brought into a loving, caring family like I was, you might not be here today," Cunningham said. "I'm just thankful for the fact that you can have a second chance and move forward."

In addition to deep and sensitive exercises, throughout the day participants also danced, cheered and exchanged handshakes, high fives and fist bumps. Potential EIT Rodney Mason, celebrated his 36th birthday during Tuesday's event. He said it was the best birthday he's had in years.

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Encouragement was the name of the game as volunteers and potential EITs exchanged ‘sweet sheets’ – kind of like signing each other’s yearbooks. Potential EIT Ryan Kinstler said the kick-off event was the most positive interaction he’s had since coming to prison.

“I feel very blessed today that I’m part of this program,” Kinstler said. “I also feel optimistic about the future and I’m going to put in 110 percent.”

Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (NDCS) Director Scott R. Frakes has also given 110 percent of his support to Defy executives, volunteers and participants since the program’s inception within NDCS in September 2016. He said community support inspires hope, which is a great thing for both staff and incarcerated individuals alike.

“Changing a culture is not easy, but it can be done with the help of strong programming, committed volunteers and support from facility leadership,” Frakes said. “What you take from this will serve you the rest of your life.”

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See attached photos and visit the NDCS Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/NECorrections/> for more photos.

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Volunteers and incarcerated individuals at the Tecumseh State Correctional Institution banded together on Tuesday to make positive changes with Defy Ventures.

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