

PROGRAM CHEERS FORMER INMATES

"This is about people coming out of jail and making it," says Susan Bergeron, the women's support coordinator.

Springfield - At a recent celebration, when it came time to introduce Michael J. Ashe, Sheriff of the Hampden County House of Correction in Ludlow, the roar of cheers came from a genuinely sincere staff as well as from another surprising group - hundreds of ex-inmates and their families and friends.

The occasion was the 8th Annual After Incarceration Support Services Graduation/Recognition ceremony, a long bureaucratic name for a simple but highly festive ceremony that resembles a revival and celebrates the accomplishments of people who have built new lives. Some 300 people attended the ceremony last week at the Greek Cultural Center.

"We're honored to have you and your family here," Ashe told them, a remark that from any other elected official would have sounded hollow to the audience, a mix of people who have served time for drug trafficking, drug use, prostitution, robbery and assault.

But coming from Ashe, a nationally recognized innovative sheriff who seeks to restore dignity, skill and hope through a series of programs both in the jail and on the outside into the lives of people everyone else gave up on what he said transformed the faces of many and they raised their chins just a little higher.

And it was an evening of honor as nearly three dozen ex-inmates received certificates and gold medals from their former jailers and counselors to recognize the life-changing decisions they had made from depending on criminal activity to get by to living the law abiding, clean sober life.

From the first moment a person lands in Ashe's jail, counselors and programs are coordinated to assist that person in shoring up their self-esteem, job skills, outlook and educational opportunities. The goal is to help ensure that he or she forever remain free.

I'm here to celebrate the fact that you are a wonderful person," said Ashe, drawing thunderous applause from the audience that included ex-inmates' entire families with young children and babies and parents. "That's what we have felt from Day I - that you have so much to give."

Surrounded by the staff that run the after-jail release program, among them its program manager, Jennifer Sordi; Susan Bergeron, the women's support coordinator; and Irving Lewis, a program coordinator whose talent as a singer placed him as the front man the live band Victory at the event, Ashe acknowledged that pain and despair drove many of the ex-inmates to break laws, and applauded them for overcoming terribly difficult odds just the same.

A special award was given to Penny Belisle, a former inmate who turned her life around with help from others and hope she uncovered in herself.

Using words like "tenacious," "respectful," "responsible" and "courage," Sordi said Belisle is an example of all those meanings and that's why she was the recipient of the Hampden County House of Correction Exemplary Aftercare Award, which is not given every year, only as people's lives warrant its presentation.

As Belise accepted the plaque, trembling and tearful, Ashe and a dozen aftercare staff surrounded her tightly, as close to a group hug as a dozen people can manage. As a special surprise, her parents Raymond and Constance, of Ludlow, joined her and cocooned her in their arms.

"This is about coming out of jail and making it," said Bergeron.

It's been six years since Belisle, who had served time for on and off for years, has changed her life. A former part-time senior mentor at the jail, Belisle recently was offered a full-time job at a drug rehabilitation program. She has a certificate from Holyoke Community College, a pretty home with a flourishing garden, and is raising her youngest children.

Her watery eyes searching the air for the phrase that best summed her turn around, Belisle told the audience, "Don't ever think you can't. Take it one day at a time."

