



Wisconsin Department of Corrections

Governor Tony Evers | Secretary Jared Hoy

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Ceremony honors 29 HSED, mechatronics graduates at Racine Youthful Offender Correctional Facility

Harvard researcher and former resident delivers words of encouragement

RACINE, Wis. — Residents at Racine Youthful Offender Correctional Facility (RYOCF) are often reminded what can be possible through the power of education, but during a June 2 graduation ceremony, they had the opportunity to see it for themselves.

Christopher Medina-Kirchner, who more than 20 years ago was incarcerated at RYOCF, was the keynote speaker during a ceremony honoring 29 graduates — 20 receiving a High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) and nine earning technical certificates in mechatronics from Gateway Technical College.

Medina-Kirchner earned his HSED at RYOCF in 2005, but he didn't stop there. He went on to earn his bachelor's degree at UW-Milwaukee and doctorate at Columbia University before landing at Harvard University, where he is a teaching fellow and post-doctoral research scientist at Harvard Medical School.

Medina-Kirchner's attendance at the ceremony was his first visit back to RYOCF since his release, and he admitted being overwhelmed with emotion. During his speech, he reflected on his time at RYOCF and the challenges of earning a degree while incarcerated.

"If you don't believe that a future is possible, you're never going to pursue it," he told graduates. "What you've accomplished here is extraordinary. I've studied in prison, I've been here. I've also been in the Ivy League in these prestigious universities, and I really think that what you did takes more courage. At places like Harvard, students have world-class libraries, guest speakers from across the world. Getting an education here in prison you have to navigate challenges that

most students will never understand. You have to stay focused in an environment that makes that difficult.”

At Harvard, Medina-Kirchner’s research involves the neuropharmacological and behavioral effects of 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA). He hopes that this type of research can help lead to evidence-based approaches to drug education and public policy.

Graduates at Tuesday’s ceremony were honored by staff, teachers, and more than 30 family members. Following the ceremony, as students visited with their loved ones and posed for pictures, Medina-Kirchner spoke individually with graduates to offer of encouragement and answer questions about the opportunities and challenges that await them following release.

“I hope you never stop believing in yourselves,” he said during his speech. “Your future is not limited by where you started. It’s not limited by your mistakes, by your felony, or what anyone else thinks about you. ... Your greatest accomplishments likely still lie ahead of you. I want you all to reach for the stars, because I’m standing here proof that sometimes when you reach for one you can actually grab it.”

Of the 20 HSED graduates, seven earned their Multi-Craft Core Curriculum (MC3) HSED in partnership with the Literacy Services of Wisconsin. The MC3 HSED includes a pre-apprenticeship element within the construction building trades.

The mobile mechatronics lab at RYOFC is made possible through a partnership between the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC) and Department of Workforce Development (DWD). The lab can serve up to 12 people per cohort, and students are able to earn 18 college credits while obtaining their Mechatronics Technical Certificate. The program builds the skills needed to gain employment in the advanced automated manufacturing industry.

“A degree can open countless doors to a brighter future, and Dr. Medina-Kirchner is a shining example of what’s possible for those who make a strong commitment,” said Secretary Jared Hoy. “Just last month the University of Wisconsin System honored its [first incarcerated bachelor’s degree recipients](#) in more than 50 years. There are a growing number of opportunities available to those in our care, and it’s worth celebrating the men and women who take advantage of them.”

RYOFC hosts three graduation ceremonies each year to honor student achievements. During the 2024-25 fiscal year, 142 residents graduated from high school or post-secondary programs at the facility.

Those in DOC care who complete educational programming are shown to have lower recidivism rates than their peers who have an educational need but choose not to participate. More information on programming and recidivism can be found on [DOC’s interactive dashboards](#).