

## Gemeinschaft Home Graduates Excited And Anxious

### Men Look Toward Freedom

By David Reynolds

**HARRISONBURG** — While doing electrical work at a detention center in Winchester, Larry Gammon photographed several of the cells — a part of his past he plans to remember in the future.

Next week, Gammon will quit the job at Trumbo Electric where he's worked during his stay at the Gemeinschaft Home and return to Prince George where his life took a wrong turn four years ago.

When he leaves Harrisonburg, he's taking the pictures with him as reminders of what he's learned in his six-week stay at the Gemeinschaft Home. Lessons he hopes will keep him out of trouble.

"Guys get out and they forget where they came from," he said. "You start to get off-track."

Gammon and seven other men graduated from the Gemeinschaft Home on Friday, during a ceremony at EMU's Discipleship Center. It was complete with caps and gowns in part to honor four graduates who earned their GED while in the program.

But along with the excitement, their impending freedom brought a touch of nervousness for some. For six months, they've had the home's support network of counselors and staff to help them stay straight.

Now, that will be up to them.

### The Gemeinschaft Home

So amid the celebration, Executive Director Jennie Amison gave a stern warning, telling the men that they're never more than one bad choice from their past.

"Please do not be mistaken, this is not a graduation," Amison said. "The struggle and the fight is still there. What we deal with is an education without graduation."

Since 1986, the Gemeinschaft Home has provided drug and alcohol treatment for ex-offenders, while serving as a transition for residents as they move from confinement in a middle-security prison to eventual freedom.



**Graduates of the Gemeinschaft Home program for nonviolent offenders (left to right) Larry Gammon, David Bell, Michael Bullock and Brian Hutchinson applaud following a musical performance Friday. The Harrisonburg home offers counseling services as well as other training to help men make their way back into society following confinement in a medium-security prison. Photo by Mindi Westhoff**

The inmates work jobs, volunteer, and meet with mentors from local churches and tutors from area colleges. They also earn money to start a new life or pay back restitution.

### **Making The Most Of It**

Several of those graduating said spending the last six months of their sentence in a facility in Harrisonburg was a privilege that prepared them for release.

“It’s a lovely place; you can get some peace of mind,” said Vincent Batten, 40, looking over Harrisonburg from a hilltop outside the Discipleship Center.

The chance for a smooth transition was not something Shawn Dingle was going to pass up. Dingle, 35, was raised in Portsmouth, and struggled with legal troubles and drug addiction until 2001, when convictions for cocaine and heroin and heroin possession landed him in prison for 3½ years.

Prison gave him the motivation as well as the time to reassess his life.

“I always stayed hopeful that I would get clean and get a job and start doing right,” he said.

While at Gemeinschaft, he’s worked the night shift at Tyson Foods in Harrisonburg and has started going to school at Massanutten Technical Center to get certified in industrial maintenance.

Along the way, Dingle has built on the sobriety he began in prison. Clean for four years, he now has confidence that he’ll stay sober the rest of his life.

On Tuesday, Dingle will enter an after-care program that’s required for those Gemeinschaft residents who are allowed to stay in Harrisonburg after their release.

### **Greatest Challenges Ahead**

Although finishing Gemeinschaft and regaining their freedom was cause for celebration, both the residents and directors cautioned against being too excited.

Michael Bullock, 22, says he spent seven years in juvenile and adult prison for a grand larceny conviction.

But his struggle isn’t over.

After graduation, Bullock must start paying back \$37,000 in restitution for the grand larceny that landed him in jail as a teenager, he says.

Gammon also says he’s nervous about the future — a return to Prince George — the community where he got in trouble.

But he thinks Gemeinschaft has prepared him.

“It’s a hard program, but it lets you know what the world is like,” Gammon said.

Just in case, Gammon has pictures he’ll keep on his refrigerator and in his truck to remind him that his past isn’t that far behind.

“If I ever think about doing something stupid,” he said. “I’m going to look at that.”