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Berkeley Bread Project helps aspiring bakers

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Twenty-seven-year old Charles Thomas, of Berkeley, served 18 months in prison for drug possession and sales.

Now he's a baker.

Thirty-three-year old Misty Williams, of Hayward, served three years for crimes she doesn't want to talk about. Now she's a baker too.

And she wants to go on to culinary school to become a pastry chef.

Both graduated last week from the Bread Project in Berkeley, a nonprofit celebrating its ninth year and 650 graduates from a program that teaches nonviolent ex-prison inmates like Thomas and Williams how to get jobs baking pastries, cakes and cookies free of charge.

"A lot of these students are sick and tired of their lifestyle and they are ready to change as I was," said Student Recruiter Raymond Washington who says he was a burglar before going through the program in 2001.

"For me, I got tired of going in and out of jail. But to get in here, they have to show a desire to start working with the system, instead of against it." If numbers are any indication, Washington is doing a good job recruiting.

For each class of 20, there are 100 on the waiting list, said Executive Director Dagmar Schroeder-Huse. And the project boasts that 75 percent of its students find jobs and 85 percent of those who find jobs stay in them for at least a year.

The nonprofit also teaches students how to resolve conflict and how to manage money, and how to talk about your criminal background during a job interview.

The project runs out of the Berkeley Adult School and similar facilities provided by the Oakland school district.

While about 60 to 70 percent of the students participating in the nine-week course are on

probation or parole, others are in low- income brackets, homeless or people with learning disabilities.

Schroeder-Huse said baking is a good way to get people who have had trouble in their lives into the job market.

"Baking and the food industry offer entry-level jobs, you can train people in a short amount of time, and it's open to people with different backgrounds," she said.

Thomas, who was surrounded by extended family members at a ceremony for recent graduates last week, said in addition to baking, he learned how to control his anger.

The same went for Cheikh Camara, who spoke during the graduation.

"Nine months ago I didn't know anything about baking," Camara said. "Now I'm a baker. But baking was not the hard part. The hard part was learning to deal with people."

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