

## Prisoners earn degrees

The sign on the door of the Quonset hut says "University of Victoria" but it seems so incongruous in the middle of the B.C. Penitentiary.

This unlikely bit of the UVic campus contains a 7,000-volume library, small classroom and smaller typing and seminar rooms. It also contains double steel-bar doors connecting it to the main corridor of the penitentiary.

Here, 22 students, most of them long-term prisoners, take regular UVic courses. This year six student prisoners earned enough UVic credits to graduate with bachelor of arts degrees.

Two received degrees from the University of Saskatchewan.

Their achievement is a large one, emphasized by the fact that none had higher than a Grade 10 education before entering the program.

### High motivation

Dr. Clark Cook, resident co-ordinator at the B.C. Pen, says the motivation for prisoners who stick with the UVic program is extremely high. "These people really get into the subjects," he says.

James Ayers, one of five UVic lecturers who teach full-time at the B.C. Pen and at Matsqui Medium Security Prison,

says he was ready to quit after the first week of teaching philosophy at the B.C. Pen.

"Usually a university class waits a few weeks before there's much feedback. In here, within two minutes, they're giving you their opinions. And they don't accept statements just because they're written in a textbook."

Ayers adds that, after a year, he's enjoying the classes immensely.

Jackie Nelson-Sens, who teaches philosophy, says one class at the Matsqui institution was "the most highly motivated class I've ever been connected with".

Dr. Douglas Ayers, UVic co-ordinator for the program, told those at the ceremony that six former prisoners from the program are now pursuing higher education on university campuses and there are 17 others who have asked for transcripts from the prison program, seeking to enrol in universities.

"This program is succeeding," he says.

### How it began

Ayers and Dr. T.A. Parlett, co-ordinator of occupational development for the western region of the federal corrections branch, originated the program through a Donner Canadian Foundation grant in November 1971.

The beginning, for Parlett, was 15 years ago at William Head Institution out-

side Victoria, where he was teaching inmates. "I was told that inmates were too stupid to learn beyond Grade 8," he recalls. "I soon found out how wrong that was."

Parlett said the introduction of the program into penitentiaries had been "a hard fight all the way, and it's going to be a tough fight to get it into the new Kent Institution which opens next year".

The valedictory address was given by George Burrows, 28, who has served five years of a 24-year sentence. He talks optimistically of the university program's opening lines of communication between two very different culture groups.

"Contrary to the myth that is generally presented to the public, we are an intelligent life form, we are capable of rationally discussing our views and we have something to say."

Federal Commissioner of Corrections Don Yeomans says the corrections system is undergoing major reforms with the realization that life inside prisons must resemble life outside prison as much as possible.

"As long as we have students willing to work, we'll have the best educational system we can afford in our prisons," he adds.

The prisoners' degrees are exactly the same as those conferred on all other UVic graduates. One student, Frank Guiney, has a degree unlike the majority of UVic grads in that he has graduated with distinction and is a winner of a President's scholarship for his high marks.

Guiney, Conrad Gunn, Ronald Sauvé and Florian Schwarz receive UVic degrees while Frederich Haas and Eugene Ostiguy receive their degrees from the University of Saskatchewan.

### Where to now?

Ostiguy, the valedictorian at Matsqui, asks the obvious question. "Where do we go from here?"

He says some graduates are looking towards teaching jobs at universities. One graduate, Sauvé, whose work in theatre productions at Matsqui has drawn raves from Vancouver critics, will seek a career in theatre. Guiney, who recognizes that he will probably never be given a chance to write Bar examinations because of his long criminal record, still has ambitions to enter law school so that he can work as a para-legal.

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The class of '78 (from left to right) Ronald Sauvé, Conrad Gunn, Florian Schwarz, scholarship winner Frank Guiney and Eugene Ostiguy.