

GUSSIED UP FOR GRADUATION

When **Philip Wolf** and **Erin Raineri** were brainstorming ways to motivate their students in the classroom, the answer hit them like an anvil on the head.

Most teachers would agree that motivating students is one of their job's biggest struggles. For **Philip** and **Erin**, however, the challenge proves particularly difficult, because their students are inmates at the Pinellas County Jail.

Philip and **Erin** teach Adult Basic Education (ABE)/General Education Development classes at the jail through the Dixie Hollins Adult Education Center.

Through the program, inmates from multiple jail divisions can voluntarily sign up for GED courses, which are offered in nine unique classes that meet for 1 ½ hours a day, two or three times a week.

Even with the desire to improve themselves, without physical incentive, it can be easy for students – whether they live at their parents' house or in a jail cell – to lose motivation, grow distracted or impatient, and feel their final goals are out of reach.

This is why, despite the about 35 inmates who have graduated with GEDs through the program, **Philip** and **Erin** strived to develop atypical incentives to fit their students' atypical situations.

A quick search on Amazon.com, and – KABLAM! – they found their answer.

In April, **Philip** purchased a bright white suit, speckled with cartoon bubbles, exploding bombs, puffs of smoke, and various onomatopoeias punctuated with exclamation points. He wears the suit and matching



tie to class – and in public on the way there and back – when a student receives his/her GED diploma.

The idea is not only to bring a little light-hearted humor to the inmates, but also to bring their attention to the fact that their classmates are, in fact, finding success through the program, and they can, too.

"It is for motivation and to celebrate their success," **Philip** said. "We encourage them, and we are also starting to have graduation ceremonies for students who are still here."

The response, **Philip** said, has been overwhelming.

As students' apparent interest in his suit grew, so did **Philip's** graduation-day wardrobe.

At a ceremony in June, **Philip's** bright orange Mad-Hatter-style get-up, complete with ruffles and oversized top hat, inspired not only the inmates, but also his colleagues.

"The jail loves seeing **Phil** in his suits for his students' accomplishments," said **Brenda Vlach**, Pinellas County Schools Adult Education administrator. "They smile and call each other to come see **Phil's** latest outfit."

Through the comical costumes, the graduation ceremonies, and their every-day hard work, **Philip** and **Erin** demonstrate their dedication to their jobs and desire to bring well-deserved positive attention to the program.

"A diploma can make a difference in these students' lives," **Brenda** said. "They have opened up their choices to a better life."

