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**Title: LINDSEY HOPKINS TECHNICAL EDUCATION CENTER: Ex-cons get a second chance at education center -**

**A STUDENT WITH A TROUBLED PAST GETS A SECOND CHANCE AT SUCCEEDING IN LIFE, THANKS TO THE LINDSEY HOPKINS TECHNICAL EDUCATION CENTER**

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Yenia Hernandez's vivid portraits and finely wrought imagery suggest the work of a classically trained artist.

But she learned art the hard way -- on her own, while in jail.

Hernandez, 28, has been in and out of Miami-Dade's criminal justice system, spending a total of four years in jail on drug and theft convictions.

Now that she is out again, she is making the most of another chance in life -- like many of her classmates at Lindsey Hopkins Technical Education Center, a part of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools system.

"I think she's got major talent," said Margie Waterman, the Lindsey Hopkins teacher assigned to the county's Turner Guilford Knight Correctional Facility.

Hernandez took part in a Lindsey Hopkins program that brings vocational and basic education to inmates, then continues to work with them after they are released. The program is one of several offered by the school, which is celebrating its 70th anniversary this year.

Lindsey Hopkins, housed in a huge boxy building on Northwest 20th Street and Seventh Avenue in Allapattah, is flanked by Jackson Memorial Hospital on one side and rundown housing projects and an abandoned gas station on the other.

The exterior is drab and unassuming, but inside it's a much livelier place. In Hernandez's classroom, gleaming state-of-the-art Apple computers line the walls.

The art students are in a small class and get individual attention from their teacher, Reinel Ramirez.

Hernandez enrolled in the commercial art class four days after she got out of jail in January. She says it has been a long time since she was in a regular classroom.

Hernandez had only finished seventh grade at Henry H. Filer Middle School in Hialeah, where she says she had been humiliated and tormented by classmates over her sexual identity.

Years later she can confidently describe her identity as "transgender," but while still in middle school, Hernandez only felt confusion over her inclination to dress and act like a boy. In the meantime, she got involved in drugs.

At the age of 11, "my uncle used to send me on deliveries," she says. "One day I took a peek. It was marijuana. I didn't try until I was 13. It was down hill from there."

More comfortable with street kids who weren't judgmental than in school, Hernandez dropped out and tore up school truancy notices before her mother could find them. At 17, Hernandez landed in jail for the first time -- for one night.

Two years later she was back for a 364-day term. This time she met Waterman, whom she credits with turning her life around.

"She's like a mother to me," Hernandez said. "I believe in myself because of her. She's been like an epiphany in my life."

"I'm a mean mother," Waterman said with a laugh. "I encourage people to get a life. I believe in tough love."

Hernandez finished the Graduate Equivalency Diploma in four months and was released from jail in 2000. But she wasn't able to stay clean. Back in jail in 2001 on new charges, Hernandez sought out her teacher again. Waterman welcomed Hernandez back to class.

Hernandez tutored other students in reading and writing, further developed her own creative writing and began her exploration of art, drawing her subjects from her life on the street. Her work resulted in a \$1,000 scholarship award.

Steve Appelbaum, an education specialist who serves as the school's liaison with the criminal justice system, supervised her transition to the outside after her latest release in January from another 364-day term.

"We're taking people who didn't make it and giving them a second opportunity," Appelbaum said.

Appelbaum learned that Hernandez wanted counseling; the next day, a plan was in the works. Counseling was arranged with the cooperation of Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Jeffrey Rosinek, one of a long list of Dade Partners who work with Lindsey Hopkins to provide programs for a wide range of students including the homeless, at-risk teens, refugees and the developmentally disabled.

Most students find employment before they graduate, said Rosa D. Borgen, principal of Lindsey Hopkins. Borgen credits the individualized education plans devised for each of the 3,700 students.

"This is not only a trade school," Borgen said. "We provide, enrichment, remediation, acceleration and the latest in career technical training to our community. Whatever the student needs, we provide."

Scholarships, fee waivers and need-based grants cover most students' expenses. Financial help is also available for tutoring, child care and even bus passes.

Hernandez had the choice of more than 30 career-training programs at Lindsey. After first thinking about learning a trade in refrigeration and air conditioning, Hernandez decided to pursue her dream -- art.

"Maybe I can get paid for doing what I like," she said.

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