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Adult learners show it's never too late to achieve dreams

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Brenda Slocum-Pearson did not go to high school. Instead, she had children and dealt with some health issues. But as the years went by, she never let go of her dream of getting her high school diploma.

On Wednesday, that dream came true when Slocum-Pearson joined more than 150 adult learners at Temple University's Mitten Hall for a citywide graduation ceremony to receive her Commonwealth Secondary School Diploma (CSSD) from Philadelphia's Office of Adult Education.

"Today I will not bring my past into my present, for my future begins today," said Slocum-Pearson, who hopes to work as a midwife someday.

"I've accomplished something that very few complete after dropping out of school."

Philadelphia's Office of Adult Education, formerly known as the Mayor's Commission on Literacy, holds the citywide graduations to recognize adult learners' work and achievements.

This year's event – sponsored in part by iHeartMEDIA and Comcast, which provided caps and gowns for the event – is the third annual ceremony, and this year, 176 adult learners were awarded their CSSDs. The diplomas, issued to non-traditional students, are the equivalent of a high school credential.

Diane C. Inverso, executive director of the Office of Adult Education, said that when adults obtain their CSSD outside of the formal school system, recognition is often limited to individual programs from which the student graduates. Sometimes the organizations are so small that the number of graduates doesn't support a full-fledged ceremony.

"So, a couple of years ago we decided that it would be really nice to bring together some of these organizations and do a citywide graduation. That is the reason for the ceremony," Inverso said.

Antoinette Early said she felt amazing after the ceremony. Early said she wants to become a dental hygienist and looks forward to taking the next steps on her journey.

"I just want to encourage anyone that might be having any doubts about going forward or who may stop and start and stop and start, to just continue to strive," she said.

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“It’s really worth it at the end, and I just encourage anyone to keep going, push forward, and live your dreams because it can happen.”

Michael Banks, president of the African-American Chamber of Commerce, was the keynote speaker for the ceremony.

“You’ve got to understand yourself. You had to survive so you could get here today,” Banks said.

“You did something that a lot of people cannot do: You stood the test of time. You refused to give up. You were told you would amount to nothing, but here you are today.”

Philadelphia’s Office of Adult Education oversees more than 80 literacy and workforce development programs ensuring that literacy and academic rigor are available to everyone, not just kids in school. It enrolls adult learners from across the Philadelphia area and allows students to take classes at various myPLACE campuses throughout the city or online. Classes cover general high school subjects and/or English language learning. The myPLACE system was created nearly four years ago in an attempt to bring the community of adult learners together with education providers. The programs have helped an estimated 550,000 adults in Philadelphia who have never graduated from high school, have trouble speaking English, and who struggle with literacy.

Students who participate in the programs have succeeded to pass the traditional General Education Diploma (GED) test or the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET), a new way for people who didn’t finish high school to receive the commonwealth diploma. Inverso said that the graduates are different ages, some still teenagers and some in their 40s.

Inverso said that she thinks the ceremony motivates the graduates, but others as well.

“Even the young ones in the audience realize the impact of education,” she said.

Inverso said she would like to see the program continue and get more participants. During its inaugural year, there were 40 graduates. The following year had close to 70.

“I think every person who has this opportunity in getting their diploma should also have the opportunity to celebrate,” Inverso said.

Summing up the evening, Banks told the graduates, “You’ve got to keep writing your story. Whatever you do, just write your story. If you don’t write your story, who’s going to write it?”