

CHS to Host Largest Graduating Class Ever

Reported by Annie Scholz

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Two hundred and sixty-three students- the region's largest graduating class ever -- will get their GED this week. Students from Charlottesville, Albemarle, Fluvanna, Greene, and Nelson counties will get their long-awaited certificate on Thursday.

Carol Coffey with the Adult Education Center shared how perceptions of getting a GED are changing. She said, "There is not a stereotypical GED student. My mental model of that has really been expanded because we have so many folks from all ages, all socio-economic backgrounds that come to get the certificate for so many reasons. There's lots of reasons people don't finish high school."

The GED ceremony will be held Thursday at 7 p.m. in the Performing Arts Center at Charlottesville High School.

263 students get 2nd chance at degree

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In 11th grade, Jesse Reeves dropped out of high school due to academic and discipline issues.

"I was a huge troublemaker," Reeves said. "Everyone hated me. I was that girl, always getting into fights. School didn't matter to me."

What a difference two years makes.

Tonight, Reeves - who is only one semester shy of receiving an associate's degree in child psychology from Piedmont Virginia Community College - will be one of 263 area residents receiving a GED in a graduation ceremony at the Charlottesville High School's Martin Luther King Performing Arts Center.

This is the largest graduating class ever, according to Carol Coffey, the regional GED examiner for Charlottesville's Adult Learning Center.

Reeves, 18, will be one of three graduate speakers. The other two are LaWanda Quarles - a tractor-trailer driver - and Davey Henry - a local pastor.

After dropping out of school, Reeves entered the GED program and took classes with fellow teens. But her discipline problems continued and she was kicked out of the program after a few months.

Reeves re-entered the program last fall and took classes with adults. She focused on math and science, subjects she had struggled with in school.

After about four months, she took the GED and passed with a score that she was told was the highest in the region.

Reeves credits her turnaround to GED teacher Julie Thisdell.

"She was the one person in the program who believed in me when no one else did," Reeves said. "She helped me see that school matters and that I was not going to get anywhere without a GED. I thank her very much."

The keynote speaker tonight will be Ramona Gordon, a former GED graduate and the director of admissions at National College. Gordon, who got her GED when she was 21, plans to encourage the graduates to continue their education.

"The GED is a first step and they can go anywhere with it," Gordon said. "I want to motivate them to go on and keep learning."

Gordon got married at 16 and had children soon after. She was inspired to get a GED after substitute teaching and seeing that children had notations in their profiles on the education level of their parents.

"I realized I at least needed to get a high school education," she said.

Gordon went on to get a bachelor's degree at James Madison University and a master's degree at Widener University.

Coffey attributed the record number of GED graduates to steps taken under the "Race to GED" initiative implemented by former Gov. Mark Warner in 2003.

"The GED opens doors for people, especially in this area," Coffey said. "You have to have this as a minimum to get a job that will allow you to have sustained economic success and provide for a family."

Equally important, Coffey added, is the personal satisfaction people get from earning a GED.

"It does a lot for self-confidence," she said.

Over the past few years, according to Coffey, the GED program has become more accessible, with an increase in testing locations as well as distance and e-learning opportunities.

The program has also increased promotional activities to raise its profile in the community.

PVCC will admit a person without a GED but that person must get a GED before he or she can receive an associate's degree, according to Coffey.

Coffey said that the GED program offers a second chance to students who fall off the high school track.

"There are a lot of bright kids who get disengaged from the traditional high school route for various reasons," she said. "The GED opens doors to college, as well as entry-level jobs."

According to Coffey, adults with a GED earn an average of about \$7,000 per year more than those without a high school diploma.

Coffey said that a GED is in no way inferior to a high school diploma.

She said that 40 percent of high school graduates would not be able to pass the GED, a battery of five tests in different subject areas.

"It is a valid credential in the market place," she said.

GED classes are offered through the Charlottesville, Albemarle, Greene, Fluvanna and Nelson school divisions.

Local Grandmother Reflects on GED Program Graduation

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Next Thursday, dozens of adults will walk across the stage at graduation and receive their GEDs, including one special graduate who says she's fulfilling a life-long dream.

Lawanda Quarles never made it past the 11th grade at Louisa County High School.

She had a baby and school priorities fell wayside to family life.

"At some points I wanted to go back and I did try a couple of times but it didn't really work out for me," said Quarles.

Quarles says the best day of her life was seeing her youngest son walk across the stage at graduation.

Soon after Lawanda got more good news; she had received a scholarship to take classes towards her GED.

"I never missed a class, I was totally dedicated and motivated within myself that I could do this," said Quarles.

She also said that the opportunity allowed her to fulfill a dream she's always had and if she's learned anything, it's that there's no expiration date on education.

"I don't want anyone else to feel that they cannot achieve that, because anything that you can see is within your grasp," said Quarles.

At 46-years-old, Lawanda is both a mother and a grandmother and now she can add graduate to that list.

"I've always seen myself walking across the stage and I've always seen my family cheering saying, Lawanda you did it," said Quarles.

With her class ring to show-off, Lawanda says she's now proud to tell everyone that she's a member of the Class of 1980.

"I am really looking forward to my next class reunion because I'm going to be there and I'm going to let everybody know, Lawanda did it, she said.

Over 250 graduates from Charlottesville, Albemarle, Greene, Fluvanna and Nelson

