



News

## OPERATION BOOTSTRAP ADULT GRADUATES CELEBRATE EARNING GEDS

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**LYNN** —Uriah Anderson donned a purple robe and cap and received his high school equivalency diploma before friends and family during an Operation Bootstrap graduation ceremony last week, but he had to wait nearly two years to do it.

"I waited one year and 10 months to get into the program," he said. "It seemed like forever."

Anderson's wait underscores what some see as a monumental problem in the city, the shortage of adult education classes.

According to Executive Director Edward Tirrell, Bootstrap has a waiting list of 1,500 people for adult education classes. GED teacher Daniel Schauben-Fuerst said the list for the high school equivalency exam is not quite as long, but it's still there.

Bootstrap is one of few agencies in the city that offer high school equivalency classes and the only one that offers it four days and four nights a week — and that stuns Tirrell.Â

Lynn has a high population of English-language learners and low-income residents whose ability to support a family is tenuous at best.

"And the city does not have a plan," □ Tirrell said. "We're trying to do our part, but we need help." □

Tirrell said he tries to make an effort to impress upon people how important the need is to have more adult education classes, but nothing seems to have taken hold.

Jimmy Angel can tell officials exactly why it's important, because as a native of Guatemala with no high school education, he knew he had few choices. Operation Bootstrap not only offers high school equivalency classes but English as a second language, college readiness and job training courses as well.

Angel came to the U.S. 17 years ago. His family has always been poor, which is initially why he didn't go to school, he said. He received his high school equivalency diploma Thursday at the age of 35 and said age should never stop anyone from trying to better themselves.

"I'm very happy I'm doing this. This is the result of my hard work," □ he said. "This will open more (doors) to better jobs and a better future." □

### **Who needs the classes?**

Not everyone seeking adult education classes is an immigrant.

Ruth Ann Daly was teased throughout elementary and middle school. She said it got better in high school, but by then she was just tired of it all and quit.

Thursday she stood in line nervous but excited at the thought she was about to finally receive her high school equivalency.

"It means a lot," □ she said. "It means freedom." □

Day said she has primarily done only volunteer work because she couldn't find a job without a high school diploma. Now she plans to go to college.

"I'm not sure what I want to do," □ she said. "I plan to study liberal arts until I figure it out." □

Schauben-Fuerst has been teaching GED classes for about seven years and said he has seen a wide range of students, including border crossers, people from refugee camps and Americans who dropped out of high school for one of a dozen reasons.

Jorge Armenta came to the U.S. from Mexico, where he had been a police officer.

Completing the program at Bootstrap “means everything,” he said.

Armenta said didn’t quite understand the value of education until recently. He began taking the high school equivalency classes nearly eight years ago and passed everything fairly easily except for one thing.

“I passed all the sections except the writing part,” he said. “Oh, my God — those past, present and future tenses and commas and verbs. It was all very confusing.”

After seven attempts, Armenta finally passed.

“Earning my GED has been my life’s work,” he said. “I’m fulfilling a lifelong dream at the age of 44.”

### **From a business perspective**

“The fact is the labor market really rewards education,” said Workforce Investment Board Executive Director Mary Sarris. “It doesn’t have to be a bachelor’s degree, but it has to be at least a high school diploma or GED certificate.”

Kids drop out of high school for all types of reasons — economic, social, even political — but Sarris called it a very costly mistake.

According to Sarris, a high school dropout can expect to make on average \$20,241 a year.

“That’s \$10,000 less than a high school graduate and \$36,424 less than a bachelor’s degree,” she said. “Few jobs, in my opinion, no jobs do not require a high school diploma that have any type of career path that will get you to a decent living.”

And it shouldn’t stop there, she added. People may not need a college degree, but some type of job training or secondary education is needed to get people to the next economic level, she said.

Unemployment rates for high school dropouts are also higher. Sarris said the jobless rate for those without a high school diploma is 12 percent, but it drops to 4.1 percent for college graduates.

From a business perspective, employers need educated people because jobs are becoming more complex. Basic manufacturing programs, which are being offered at North Shore Community College, as well as other places, can lead to jobs making

upwards of \$80,000, and they don't require a bachelor's degree, but they do require a high school equivalency and some college-level math skills, she said.

The struggle is not unique to Lynn, she added.

"This is true in every gateway city," Sarris said. "It's why we have the Gateway City programs to try and reverse this."

Gateway cities are 13 urban communities under 250,000 in population that are struggling with a legacy of success that has been replaced by higher poverty and lower education levels.

### **How to effect change**

Tirrell said he has this "crazy" idea of putting family literacy programs in each school where parents could drop off their kids then attend a literacy class of their own. The classes could be tied to school-related issues so parents could communicate with teachers more easily, he said.

"We could make huge gains for little money, but getting from here to there is not that simple," he said.

What really needs to happen, Tirrell said, is that the city, state or federal government has to make a larger commitment.

Bootstrap operates on a budget of roughly \$1 million, and less than 1 percent of it comes from the city through a Community Development Block Grant.

"The city's contribution is minimal," he said. "I know everyone needs money, but I would think with the thousands of families in Lynn that could use it, this would be a priority."

Jill Thornton oversees the adult learning center on North Shore Community College's Beverly campus. She said nearly every community has a waiting list for adult education classes, and now that a new high school equivalency exam is being launched, the need for better classes will be monumental.

The state is requiring the high school equivalency exams to meet the same Common Core standards as required by high schools. And anyone who thinks there isn't a lack of adult education programs need only look at Bootstrap.

"The 1,500 on the waiting list speaks volumes," Thornton said.

She said she would love to see the issue addressed on larger scale, but for that to happen, "we would need a governor that wants to see it happen and a Board of Education that values it."



Thornton said the state is at a juncture where everyone knows better education is needed but exactly how to get there is still a work in progress.

"Obviously it takes money," □ she said.

Despite his wait, Anderson is grateful that he had the opportunity at all to attend Operation Bootstrap because he has big plans for his future and his grandchildren.

"I hope to get a better job and go on to college," □ he said. "I hope by September next year I will be in college "I and I hope that I am a motivation, particularly for my grandchildren." □