

Perseverance pays off for Framingham GED diplomas



By Scott O'Connell/Daily News staff
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FRAMINGHAM — The GED diplomas the seven graduates received Friday were just pieces of paper. But they might as well have been sledgehammers.

"Because without a GED, there was a wall," said Andrew Marshall, a teacher at the South Middlesex Opportunity Council's Joan Brack Adult Learning Center. "Now there's a door in front of you."

That metaphor was embraced by students like Kfir Mizrahi at Friday's graduation ceremony at SMOC's Howard Street headquarters. After serving three years in the Israeli army 13 years ago, Mizrahi was working at a hospital when he realized his lack of education was holding him back.

"I had never finished high school. The reasons don't matter now, because the fact is, if you don't finish, you're not going to get anywhere," he said. "I felt like a loser - like nothing."

Mizrahi decided to move to the U.S., where, despite not knowing English, he gradually worked toward his GED. With that out of the way, the Framingham resident now plans to obtain a nursing degree at MassBay Community College.

"Sometimes I cried, sometimes I wanted to give up," he said. "But each time, I told myself, keep going - one day you will pass."

Graduate Marie Valerus, who also plans to enter a nursing program at Quinsigamond Community College, had a similar tale of perseverance, having spent the last 13 years working

toward her GED. A native of Haiti, Valerus came to the U.S. 28 years ago "to accomplish (her) dreams."

"When I came here (to the program), I had no idea it was going to be this hard, but with resilience, I made it," said the Shrewsbury resident, a mother of four. "I could spend all day telling you about the people who helped me, but a day wouldn't be enough."

SMOC Executive Director Jim Cuddy said the graduates deserved every bit of their accomplishment.

"I've witnessed all of you guys in the classrooms, with the teachers, with the books," he said. "I know how hard you worked."

Framingham school board Chairwoman Beverly Hugo, one of the keynote speakers at the ceremony, said the graduates had plenty of chances in life to roll over.

"But you persevered, you chose the path to success," she said, urging the students to "never give up" on the rest of their journey as well.

"You guys made that really big step of being open to new possibilities," said Rep. Chris Walsh, the other keynote speaker on Friday. "I can't tell you how much I admire you for taking that step."

While their full potential still lies ahead - Marshall said students in the program typically go on to higher education, a certificate program or join the workforce - this year's graduates shouldn't forget this milestone, Cuddy said.

"My advice to you is when you're having a bad day, think about today, think about this moment in time," he said. "Nobody can take this away from you."

While only seven received diplomas in person at Friday's graduation ceremony, there are 12 students total in the Joan Brack Adult Learning Center graduating class of 2013. They are:

Marie Valerus
Lucia Lage
Sage Holt
Mallory Melcher
Abraham Zayas
Haylee Hayes
Tammy Rodriguez
Jhozilene Grabau
Kfir Mizrahi
Kaliopi Rivera
Miguel Cancel
Kevin Suarez