

Locals Graduate from SMOC HiSET, ESL programs

Posted June 20, 2017



SMOC Joan Brack Adult Learning Center ESL and HiSET graduates take part. HiSET graduate Armenia Alvarez led the way. [Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Art Illman]

FRAMINGHAM – Chasing her dream of becoming a biologist seemed impossible to Jennifer Fernandez-Urrego mere months ago.

The mother of four-year-old twins lacked a high school diploma and did not think she would achieve her goal until she learned about the South Middlesex Opportunity Council's Joan Brack Adult Learning Center. The center offers a High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) program aimed at helping adults earn their high school diploma.

The Marlborough resident enrolled in March. After months of studying and working with SMOC staff, Fernandez-Urrego received her GED to cheers from family members and friends.

"I made it," she said. "I was determined. I wanted to be part of this class."

She is now applying to colleges to study biology and come closer to achieving her dream.

“It’s exciting and scary,” she said. “Challenge yourself. Get out of your comfort zone.”

Fernandez-Urrego was one of 17 local residents to graduate from SMOC’s HiSET and English as a Second Language programs during a ceremony at the organization’s headquarters Friday.



ESL graduate Sidro Alejandro Castaneda-Santos about to receive his certificate Friday. Seated from left: ESL Assistant Tim Hamilton; German Tsakhaeva, 7, and his mom and ESL graduate, Elena Tsakhaeva. [Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Art Illman]

Moving from Russia to America less than a year ago, Elena Tsakhaeva could not speak a lick of English. Tsakhaeva stood in front of her peers, family and several state legislators and told her story in what state Sen. Jamie Eldridge, D-Acton, described as perfect English.

“Before, I never spoke English,” she said. “My level was zero.”

Tsakhaeva called SMOC’s ESL course a pleasure to be in and said it has helped her learn about and adapt to American culture.

“The lessons were difficult, but it was a fun time,” she said. “I think it’s a great result.”

State and local officials praised and encouraged the graduates.

“SMOC unlocks so much opportunity in people, particularly this program,” said Framingham Town Manager Bob Halpin.

State Rep. Jeff Roy, D-Franklin, said the ESL and HiSET students’ achievements will help them thrive.

“I’m so inspired by what I am witnessing today,” he said. “You are giving yourselves the foundation for the American dream.”

Cheryl Tully-Stoll, Framingham selectmen chairwoman, lauded the graduates for overcoming obstacles in their lives.



Jennifer Fernandez-Urrego was a student speaker Friday. [Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Art Illman]

“You have proven you have strength,” she said. “You have proven you have intelligence. You have proven you have discipline. ...A lot of folks don’t have that.”

Jeff Malachowski can be reached at 508-490-7466 or jmalachowski@wickedlocal.com. Follow him on Twitter [@JmalachowskiMW](https://twitter.com/JmalachowskiMW).