

Framingham: SMOC grads overcome adversity

By Brittney McNamara/Daily News Staff

Posted Jun. 20, 2015

FRAMINGHAM – Charlee Cross stood up in front of her peers, teachers, friends and most importantly her daughters on Friday as a different person. Receiving her high school equivalency diploma from the South Middlesex Opportunity Council, she said, has changed her life.

On Friday afternoon at Framingham's Memorial Building, nine students graduated from SMOC's Joan Brack Adult Learning Center high school equivalency program and 16 from the English as a Second Language program. Many of the graduates could not attend because of work or other commitments, a testament to what SMOC program coordinator Andrew Marshall said is the students' overwhelming drive to do better.

Through passing the high school equivalency test, HiSET, similar to the GED, Cross said the staff at SMOC motivated her to get through tough classes and stressful tests.

"I'm 27. I have my three beautiful daughters. Before SMOC, I was a wild child, homeless," Cross said, tearing up. "This really helped me a lot. After I got my diploma and graduated, I am now going to Quinsigamond Community College. I am going to keep furthering my track and doing good for my kids."

Like Cross, guest speaker Yves Salomon-Fernandez, vice president of Mass Bay Community College, said she knows how hard it is to overcome adversity for education.

"I relate a lot to your stories," said Salomon-Fernandez, who has a PhD. "I know the kinds of challenges and obstacles you had to overcome to get here."

As Cross struggled with homelessness and adversity to get her education, Salomon-Fernandez said she endured an abusive relationship, slept in parks abroad and in the basement at graduate school to get to where she is now.

"If you come from where I came from, you have to work multiple times harder because you were not born with that silver spoon in your mouth," she said. "I did not let my humble beginnings define my future."

ESL graduate Sonya Paula said her new English skills will help define her future.

“This program was a different experience because we had the opportunity to gain knowledge of basic grammar, (what) to do in emergencies and how we can find help,” Paula said in clear English. “I am very happy to tell you that we enjoyed these classes.”

Miriam Gierges, who also gained English fluency, told the crowd she is now attending Mass Bay Community College for hospitality.

“I spent one year at SMOC,” said Gierges, who came to America from Egypt in 2012. “It was the best year I’ve spent in the U.S.A., not only because I’m learning English, but because it helps me learn about the community.”

Students emerged from the program as friends, Gierges said, who completed some type of journey together. However, Salomon-Fernandez reminded the graduates that their journey is not yet over.

“Today is just the beginning,” she said. “You can’t stop now.”

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