

Retired TV news anchor applauds GED graduates

By Shaun O'Malley
of The Daily Times Staff

"Get a life ... a real life," was the message retired WBIR news anchor Bill Williams gave to 2006 graduates of the Adult Education Program's GED fall graduating class.

"You graduates have something no one else has," Williams said, and that one thing is that you are all unique. "Tonight you can say, 'I am somebody' ... and no one can ever take that away from you."

"No matter how many diplomas you get, you are still a student and learning things all the time ... The classroom is out there, it is everywhere," Williams said.

"Sometimes life isn't a bowl of cherries. There are disappointments, but it doesn't take the value away. You are somebody, and don't forget that."

On Dec. 8, 30 students walked across the stage of Heritage High School's auditorium to receive their diploma from Director of Blount County Schools Alvin Hord.

Chastity Vandana, speaker for the Class of 2006, said the diploma means everything to her. She had to drop out of high school because she was pregnant — and having her child is something she would never change, Vandana said. Once her children were old enough, she made sure that they got involved in school and stayed involved. Once her kids were in school, she could decide what to do with her life.

Vandana said there were two reasons she went back to school to complete her GED.

"I wanted to do it for my kids, to let them know how important it is." She also wanted to do it for herself, to show what she could accomplish when she put her mind to it.

Vandana said it was a good way to provide closure to that chapter of her life. After receiving word that she completed her GED, she received a good job offer she would not have gotten without the diploma.

Vandana attended classes at Everett High School from 8 a.m. to noon Monday through Friday for a little over two months before she was ready to take her GED exam.

The toughest task

Vandana said the hardest part was choosing to go back to school. At first, she was unsure of herself because it had been so long since she had gone to classes. She was afraid she would not be able to comprehend the material.

She said she applauds the teachers at the Adult Education Program because they know how to break down the lessons so anyone can learn. She further applauded the one-on-one teaching she got, something she never had in high school.

Vandana said the experience was one of the most rewarding in her life, and she encouraged those without a high school diploma to get their GED — no matter what their age.

Learning the language

Maria Soledad Hernandez was another graduate at the ceremony elated to finally receive her GED diploma.

Hernandez and her family moved to the area from Mexico about five years ago. She spoke very little English. Before Hernandez could even start taking classes for her GED, she had to take English as a Second Language (ESL) classes so she could understand the teachers.

Hernandez said it took about nine months to complete the GED program by taking classes from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday, Wednesday and Friday. On Tuesday and Thursday Hernandez took ESL classes.

Hernandez said she set the GED diploma as her goal. Her motivation was simple: Just like when playing a game to win, in order to succeed in America she needed to "know the rules."

When she first arrived, Hernandez said she was amazed by the opportunities. As a single mother, she and her kids have a wealth of opportunities in America to learn and be educated — better opportunities than in Mexico.

Her future plans include college classes, but for now she is going to continue promoting the GED program. She wants to encourage others to get their GED and to reach their goals, especially Hispanic people.

Ultimately, she wants people to understand what she tells her children: "Don't Stop. Never give up. If things aren't easy, never stop."

The Adult Education Program is celebrating 40 years in Tennessee. The program holds graduation ceremonies each fall and spring. It is free to the public and offers both day and night classes. The program also offers free ESL classes and computer classes.

Individualized programs

Carol Ergenbright, director of the Adult Education Program in Blount County, said the programs are individualized. Before taking classes, students take screening exams to determine the areas they need to work on and the study patterns that will work best.

The length of time it takes for a student to graduate is up to the individual. It can take weeks, months or even years, depending on how quickly the student learns the materials and the hours put into the program, Ergenbright said.

For information on the Blount County Adult Education Program or how to get involved in its programs, contact the Everett Learning Center at 982-8998.

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