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Helping Bronx Women Earn a GED

By MELANIE GRAYCE WEST

Thursday night is graduation day for a group of South Bronx women.



KELLEY MILLET

More than 100 of them will celebrate receiving their high school equivalency diplomas in a ceremony held by Grace Outreach, an organization that helps women prepare for their GED exam.

After the graduates walk across the stage and throw their white caps in the air, the party begins. Staff and board members from the organization will serve an Italian feast to the graduates, their friends and family members.

The annual ceremony is moving for everyone, says Kelley Millet, president of MarketAxess Holdings Inc., and co-chairman of the Grace Outreach board.

"You take your high school, or your college or even people who have gone on for their graduate degrees and graduation is kind of a ho-hum thing," says Mr. Millet. "But it's a proud and emotional day for these women."

Mr. Millet, 51 years old, became involved with the organization about four years ago and has over the past several years given more than \$100,000 to the group. His interest in supporting a local cause and young women stems from the dedication his parents had in helping him pursue his education. In turn, he says he wants to help these women achieve their goals.

"Without the GED you're stuck in terms of moving up," he says.

Since 2004, the South Bronx-based Grace Outreach organization has provided a no-cost education in a small setting to women who never graduated from high school.

Women are first given a practice test to see how much tutoring is needed. Some need only a quick brush up and others require months of schooling. Almost all need extra help in math.

Each woman is given an individualized schedule and attends class daily from 8:45 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. An after-hours course is available for women who work or only have evening child care. On average, it takes three to four months for most women to complete the program and pass the exam.

The GED preparation is the cornerstone of Grace Outreach's work, but the program also provides some college preparatory counseling and job search advice. Women are referred to job training programs and prepped on how to create a resume and prepare for an interview.

So far, the program has helped 687 women obtain a diploma. The organization says that the all-women atmosphere is the key to helping the students stay focused.

The program also hires back graduates who serve as tutors and the "spark or motivation to the women," says Mr. Millet. The graduates are, in a sense, emotional coaches and role models for the women, he says.

—melanie.west@wsj.com

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