

Educational non-profit helps women succeed

By Emily
Lavin

Education



A GED preparation class at Grace Outreach Photo by Emily Lavin

Mott Haven GED program gets results

There is a working elevator at Immaculate Conception School on East 151st Street. But none of the women going up to Grace Outreach are allowed to use it.

Instead, to get to the program on the fifth floor that prepares them for the GED test that will earn them a high school diploma, students must climb the stairs.

It's the program's way of sending a message to its students—a rule it would impose even if Immaculate Conception didn't wish to reserve the elevator to its own staff and students.

“A lot of the women who come in here have a lot going on in their lives,” said Andrew Rubinson, the program's executive director. “When they walk up those stairs, it's kind of like saying, leave all of those issues downstairs. You're here to do something for yourself.”

Since it was founded six years ago, the Mott Haven-based non-profit has worked exclusively with women. In 2009,

100 of its students passed the GED exam. For many, passing the exam led to a job, for others to higher education. Nearly a third of them are now enrolled in local colleges.

Many Grace Outreach graduates go on to college

By Emily Lavin

Over 90 percent of Grace Outreach's 105 current students are from the Bronx, and they all come to the program for different reasons. Lisa Bradley, 19, didn't like the quality of education she was receiving at Truman High, so she left. Nalina Cummins, 27, dropped out of high school when she got pregnant. Bianette Morales, 31, said family issues prevented her from finishing high school—twice.

They walk into Grace Outreach because they want something more out of their lives.

"It's like a sense of relief, being here," said Jeisy Mendoza, 27, who was hoping to take the test in the beginning of March. "No more sleeping 'til noon, no being at home and just doing the cooking and the cleaning."

Darrien Robinson said she felt a similar sense of purpose.

"I just started looking at my life and I realized there were no excuses," she said. "If I don't apply myself, where will I be?"

Robinson enrolled at Grace Outreach after watching her mother complete the program.

"I have this sense of pride from seeing her actually do it," Robinson said. "Looking at how hard she's worked makes me want to work hard too. I feel like I owe her that."

While at Grace Outreach, Robinson took part in the center's college prep program. Although students normally enroll in the program after passing the GED test, Robinson took on both challenges at once.

She started night classes at Lehman College in January. Her mother is now in her second college semester.

"I always smile when she's talking about her courses. It's brought us closer," Robinson said.

Like Robinson, most of the women who come to the program have goals. They want to be nurses, police officers or social workers. And they want to go to college, said Carol Williams, who runs the college prep program at Grace Outreach.

"We're like a support system for them, and the one point we try to get across is that the GED is just one milestone," Williams said. "We tell them, now go and pursue bigger things."

Robinson is doing just that. She's taking four classes at Lehman this semester. She's thinking of studying nutrition, or maybe education. Next semester, she wants to get more involved in campus life, and maybe learn to play an instrument.

And she still tutors at Grace Outreach five mornings a week, doing her best to lead by example.

"I feel fulfilled knowing that I'm helping," Robinson said. "A lot of times, girls will tell me, 'I heard your voice in my head during my test.' It shows me something good's being done here."

Age is no barrier. The youngest girls to climb those stairs are 18. In January, a 61-year-old woman came in to take the program's placement test.

On a recent Friday morning at the center, a teacher was going over subject-verb agreement with nine students. A few of the students were having trouble understanding, and quickly got frustrated.

From the back of the classroom, Darrien Robinson called out encouragement and helped the students who got stuck.

“A lot of times, when students first come in here, they have a mental block,” said Robinson, 25. “They tend to accept defeat.”

Robinson knows exactly how those students feel. Although she completed high school in her native Jamaica, she was a C-average student. She enrolled at Grace Outreach last September.

“I needed to find confidence. I was used to just being a mediocre student, and I was worried I would still have that attitude,” Robinson said. “I lacked focus.”

Now, Robinson is one of six tutors at Grace Outreach. All the tutors are graduates of the program. Hiring former graduates to help teach current students is one key to the program’s success, said Zeki Blanding, one of the three state-certified teachers on staff.

“I call this place GED utopia,” said Blanding. “Most GED programs are just one class with 20 students at all different levels. They’re virtually impossible to teach.”

At Grace Outreach, students are divided into four groups, based on ability. The highest level, called “Just Points Away,” is for women who need a refresher before they take the test. Then there’s the A group, students who need about three months of class to get ready for the GED. Students in the B group take from three to six months, and those in the C need at least six months, and sometimes more.

Most classes are held during the day, five days a week, but for those who work full time, there are classes at night. Students can come for help in all subjects, or just for help in specific portions of the five-part test. Teachers meet every week to discuss each student’s progress in the program.

“It’s individualized learning,” Blanding said. “A lot of students will tell us, this is the first time I feel like my teachers actually taught me.”

A version of this story appeared in the April 2010 issue of the Mott Haven Herald

Contact Emily Lavin at emily.lavin@journalism.cuny.edu

0 0

Tags: [Education](#), [Emily Lavin](#), [GED](#), [Grace Outreach](#), [Mott Haven](#)