

## Mott Haven program specializes in second chances for women

By Kathy Conkwright

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Two weeks before her high school graduation in 1973, Harlem native Yvonne Chestnut was told she was one credit short and could not graduate with her classmates.

When she learned she would have to wait until the fall and attend school full-time to receive her diploma, Chestnut gave up. She never returned to school, and turned her back on formal education.

Thirty-eight years later Chestnut finally got the chance to wear a cap and gown, thanks to an innovative Mott Haven program called Grace Outreach. Chestnut was one of 138 women who walked proudly down the gym aisle in June, while *Pomp and Circumstance* played on the boom box in the background. The graduates had earned their GEDs for the 2010-2011 school year.



Photo by Leo Sorel. Grace Outreach's class of 2012 celebrated graduation in June.

"You're never too old for a new beginning," said the 56-year-old during her valedictorian speech at the program's graduation ceremony.

Grace Outreach opened in 2004 as a humble Brook Ave storefront where two nuns helped girls with their homework. The program was about to close when a board member from Manhattan non-profit the Grace Institute, which helps underserved women prepare for the workforce, got that organization to commit funding to keep it open. The program graduated 22 women in its first year.

This year, 120 women graduated from an applicant pool of over 600.

"Getting your GED is not the end, but just the beginning," says the program's director Andrew Rubinson. "Ninety percent of the women who come to us have a plan." They know what they want to do and we just provide the momentum to keep them going to the next step."

The mission of helping low-income women become financially independent is made up of three components: a GED program, college preparatory classes, and career preparation.

There are many reasons women do not finish high school, Rubinson explained, ranging from economic hardship to teenage pregnancy to bad schools. "It's our goal to help women of all ages and incomes defy the obstacles and reach the aspirations they've had since they were young girls."

"GO is unlike any other GED program I know of," says Math teacher Zeki Blanding, better known to her students as Ms. Zeki. She says Grace places students at different levels based on their most recent GED scores or practice tests. With three full-time certified teachers and seven tutors who graduated from the program, Grace tailors each student's

course of study to her specific needs.

Most GED programs require students to attend classes that cover all subjects all day, says Blanding, whereas Grace Outreach's more strategic approach allows them to focus solely on the subject they're struggling with before advancing to the next level when they're ready.

Standing over six feet tall in a brightly colored summer dress and glowing smile, Blanding displays an exuberance and enthusiasm that are contagious.

"In my classroom I have a confident mirror, which I call the 'I can mirror,'" she said. "I refuse to let students be negative."

Last year's valedictorian Derrian Robinson, who is also the school's lead tutor, says Grace works because of the program's passion, commitment and structure. Robinson says students find a connection with the tutors because they know exactly what it's like to be in their shoes. "It's like a family here," she says, adding, "we all empathize with each other and pride ourselves on the double support system" of teacher and tutor."

Many women decide to enroll after seeing a friend or family member succeed.

Yvonne Chestnut, who will start her first semester in Hospital Administration at Lehman College, says she wants to run a hospital one day and has plenty of experience to reach her goal. Starting as a volunteer candy striper as a teen, Chestnut worked her way up the ladder and now works as an administrative assistant at a large Manhattan hospital.

"In my job there were so many opportunities for advancement but I could never take advantage of them," because she lacked the education credentials," she said. Afraid her colleagues' perception of her would change if they found out she never graduated from high school, she kept her status a secret. "I didn't want them to see me differently," she said.

"I am living testament that good things do come to those who wait," Chestnut told the crowd at the graduation, and ended by encouraging the other graduates to stand up to life's challenges.

"Don't be afraid and don't give up," she beseeched them while receiving a standing ovation.

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