

New Castle mom earns diploma through adult literacy program aided by BC3

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Katlin Phillippi is among nearly two dozen students to earn a high school equivalency diploma through adult literacy programs held in Butler, Lawrence and Mercer counties during a Butler County Community College fiscal year that recently ended. Phillippi is shown Wednesday, June 23, 2021, with her husband, Trevor, and daughters Sophey, front, and Delilah at their home in New Castle. Phillippi, who attended Lincoln High School in Ellwood City and the Lawrence County Career and Technical Center in New Castle, earned a high school equivalency diploma through Adult Literacy Lawrence County, with whom BC3 partners.

(New Castle, PA) Katlin Phillippi earned A's and B's and C's at Lincoln High School in Ellwood City and in the health assistant program at the Lawrence County Career and Technical Center in New Castle, then dropped out in her sophomore year.

She was the mother of 2-year-old daughter and her boyfriend, Trevor, the father of Sophey, had just been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Trevor was temporarily confined to a wheelchair and could no longer work at his job at a Lawrence County warehouse.

“I felt like I had to drop out,” Phillippi said. “I felt like it was my responsibility to carry some of the burden of bringing in an income.”

All the while, when working in Lawrence County as a crew member in a fast-food restaurant and later as a home health care attendant, “I felt like I had failed,” Phillippi said. “Kind of trapped. I didn’t want to quit school. I liked school. My income alone wasn’t enough to carry a household. So I knew I needed to do something about that.”

Butler County Community College partners with Adult Literacy Lawrence County in New Castle.

That’s where Phillippi found herself seeking a high school equivalency diploma at age 25 and one month after she and her now-husband, Trevor, purchased a home in New Castle.

“Pick up where I left off and finish”

“My husband had been mentioning it to me, that I should pick up where I left off and finish,” Phillippi said. “When I dropped out, I was young. I wasn’t really thinking that far ahead. I wasn’t thinking about what job opportunities I would be able to have as I got older or buying a house.”

BC3 was awarded a four-year grant from the state Department of Education and administers funding for free adult literacy programs in Butler, Lawrence and Mercer counties. Adult Literacy Lawrence County’s eight graduates in 2021 bring to 41 the number who have received high school equivalency diplomas in the past three years.

Adult Literacy Lawrence County helped Phillippi to prepare for General Education Development examinations that measure proficiency in language arts, which includes reading and writing; and in mathematics, science and social studies.

After Phillippi began her studies in September 2020, she felt as if she wasn’t learning quickly enough, that she wasn’t keeping up with others, and that she felt “nervous a couple of times.”

Gillian Maule is executive director of Adult Literacy Lawrence County.

“Oftentimes when students start out they are very anxious,” Maule said. “Given that they did not go through the same rite of passage, the expected one, which is you graduate from high school, they are already coming in with baggage right there. But when they come in, they see they actually can do this. And for some of them, it’s a pretty quick activity. Basically they just need to brush up.”

“I feel really optimistic and excited”

Phillippi passed language arts first. Then social studies. Then, on the same day, science and mathematics – and received at a graduation party hosted by her mother, Theresa Mullin, of Ellwood City, an orange mortarboard and orange tassel – “Orange,” Phillippi said, “is my favorite color.”

She joined the nearly two dozen students in programs in three counties to earn a high school equivalency diploma during a BC3 fiscal year that recently ended.

“My teacher was amazing,” Phillippi said of Adult Literacy Lawrence County instructor Pam Bailey. “She was very patient and very thorough and attentive. When she found things that we were stuck on, she would go through them with us problem by problem, word for word, and answer all the questions. She would give us tips on how to figure things out if we weren’t sure.”

Early motivations students discuss when seeking a high school equivalency diploma center on getting a better job or keeping a job, said Barb Gade, grant director of BC3’s adult literacy program.

“But once they get to that third test, or that fourth test, they start looking at careers or other possibilities. They start looking at going to BC3, or to a trade school. It’s amazing seeing their horizons open up before them as they progress through earning their high school equivalency diploma.”

Phillippi plans to first pursue a career as a licensed practical nurse.

“I feel really optimistic and excited and see what is next for me,” she said. “I am sure there are going to be so many opportunities and choices.”

Approximately 500 students have earned high school equivalency diplomas through BC3’s adult literacy program in her 12 years, Gade said. The program began in 1986.

Nearly 3,100 students in Pennsylvania earned a commonwealth secondary school diploma between July 1, 2020 and June 30, according to Mary Kay Peters, high school equivalency administrator, Bureau of Postsecondary and Adult Education with the state Department of Education.

Full-time workers age 25 and older without a high school diploma in 2020 earned nearly \$8,500 less in a year than those with a high school diploma but without college credits, according to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics.

About 9.2 percent of Lawrence County residents ages 25 and older did not hold a high school diploma between 2015 and 2019, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

“This can change their life greatly”

The oldest student to earn a high school equivalency degree at Adult Literacy Lawrence County during BC3's 2020-2021 fiscal year was 38, Maule said. Six of the eight were age 25 or older, Maule said.

"This can change their life greatly," Maule said. "It opens doors for them to go on to secondary education or training. They can be able to secure employment and not only be paid more, but have more opportunities for advancement. They are going to be able to secure a family sustaining wage. This has a very positive impact on their sense of self."

Thirty-seven students in Lawrence County were among the nearly 11,700 in grades 7-12 who dropped out of Pennsylvania public schools, cyber schools or career and technical centers in the 2019-2020 academic year, according to the most recent state Department of Education information.

A dropout is a student who, for any reason other than death, leaves school before graduation without transferring to another school or institution, according to the state Department of Education. Among reasons provided by students who dropped out are academic or behavioral problems, disliking school, wanting to work or childcare.

"They might have just hit a really tough patch," Gade said.

The United Way of Lawrence County, the Wimodausis Club and Rotary Club No. 89 of New Castle also fund Adult Literacy Lawrence County.

Adult Literacy Lawrence County offers a hybrid program of classes Monday through Thursday, combining remote instruction via Zoom with in-person classes held at the Lawrence County Learning Center.