



Although Timothy Pool received his GED certificate from the Londer Learning Center this month, he already has attended college courses for the past few months. Pool, who described himself as a former "deadbeat drug addict," made the President's List at Portland Community College in his first term.

PHOTO BY JACQUES VON LUNEN

# More than a GED

*Graduates of Londer Learning Center master learning and life*

BY JACQUES VON LUNEN  
STAFF WRITER

Thousands of fresh-faced high school graduates filed through the Veterans Memorial Coliseum this month, happy to transition out of their teenage years.

But the small group of students who threw their caps in the air inside the Multnomah Building in Southeast Portland on June 6 celebrated the closure of something much more somber.

Most of these graduates, members of the Londer Learning Center, have overcome drug addiction, prison, homelessness and similar hardships.

The GED certificates they received on June 6 proved much more than their mastery of high-school level math and writing — they signaled self-esteem, restored family ties and perseverance.

## One of a kind

The Londer Learning Center is the only adult education program in Oregon that caters exclusively to adults who've recently been released from prison or drug treatment facilities.

The center operates in a county building on Southwest Fifth Avenue in downtown Portland, where it helps about 800 students per year move toward a high school equivalency diploma, said Carole Scholl, a community justice manager who leads the center.

Students have to be referred to the center by a probation officer, parole officer,

drug treatment program or judge, Scholl said. One exception: last year, the center participated in a nationwide push to graduate more GED students before new tests were rolled out in January. As part of this effort, students without referrals from law enforcement or drug counselors were admitted for special weekend classes taught by volunteers.

(These students were also in the June 6 ceremony, which is why not everyone shown in these photos can be assumed to have a criminal record or drug-abuse history.)

Classes at the center are small, never more than 15 people. And every one of its 11 employees knows that it's a "huge deal for these people to make the leap back to school," Scholl said.

The students' ages range from 18 to 60. And most of them are in a transitional phase of their lives, battling addiction, housing issues and unemployment.

Recognizing these special difficulties in their students' lives is the focus of the center staff. If a student's attendance falls off, for example, teachers call to see what prompted the change. They provide stress toys — squeeze balls that restore calmness — in class for students who last dealt with algebra two decades ago.

"We want to be that positive place where they can see success," Scholl said.

Success, completion and achievement can be scary concepts.

## Gerbil on a wheel

Nobody understands the fear of success

better than the keynote speaker of the June 6 ceremony — Londer alumna Myldred Silvia.

Silvia dropped out of high school as a sophomore in 1984. She was using drugs and "wanted to get fast money and do anything to cheat the system," Silvia said, a week before the graduation ceremony.

By 1988, she was sick of using, but her beloved grandmother's death caused a mental breakdown. "I really got into my addiction after that," Silvia said. She didn't successfully enter treatment again until 2010.

Silvia finally got clean and enrolled at Londer. She reconnected with her family and turned into a role model for her children.

But her struggle wasn't over yet. Thought patterns formed over decades didn't just vanish overnight. "I found out I was scared of success," Silvia said.

She realized she'd gotten comfortable with failure and limitations.

"I was like a gerbil in a cage," Silvia said. "I could jump on the wheel or get off my wheel — but I was still in the cage. I kept

**"I was like a gerbil in a cage," Silvia said. "I could jump on the wheel or get off my wheel — but I was still in the cage. I kept myself in a box for a long time."**

LONDER ALUMNA MYLDRED SILVIA

## Challenges ahead for GED schools

BY JACQUES VON LUNEN  
STAFF WRITER

The Londer Learning Center is facing new dual challenges to its mission of educating adults transitioning out of prison or drug treatment — from the loss of federal money and a new testing standard.

It is unclear yet exactly how these changes will affect the program. But they likely will lead to loss of services to certain students and to lower graduation rates among those who remain.

After Myldred Silvia graduated from the GED program last year, she got a call from her oldest son. He wanted to follow her example and get his diploma, too.

But when Silvia called the center, where teachers had shown her so much love and compassion during her own schooling, she was turned away.

Her son wasn't on parole and didn't need treatment for addiction. That meant he didn't meet the center's requirements for entry.

But two weeks later, Londer staff called her back with good news: her son would be able to attend weekend classes taught by volunteers at Londer, and the center would coordinate with other adult education programs around town to fill his weekdays with learning, too.

His admittance to the center wasn't based on the desperate plea of a mother — it was the result of a nationwide effort to graduate as many adults as possible before the introduction of tougher GED exams in January.

GED tests hadn't changed since 2002 — until this January, when the company rolled out new exams based on the Common Core standards that are the new norm in the public schools of 45 states and Washington, D.C.

GED is a brand name. The tests are created by GED Testing Service, a for-profit corporation jointly owned by textbook publisher Pearson and the American Council on Education.

But just like the Common Core standards, which are hotly debated in school districts around the country and which some states are threatening to discard after dismal test results, the new GED standards aren't universally loved.

Two competitors issuing high school equivalency diplomas have emerged, in part because education departments weren't happy with the new GED standards. Several states started offering these new exams instead of, or sometimes alongside, the GED test. Oregon offers only the new, beefed-up GED exam.

The new GED exam's most visible change is that it is only offered in a computer-based version.

No more paper. It's meant to foster much-needed computer literacy in adult students, the company has said.

But some advocates question the wisdom of mandating computer tests for people who may not have a PC at home.

The other changes are more complicated and arguably much tougher than the fact that students need mouse clicks to give their answers.

The reading curriculum, for example, includes more nonfiction material. Students are asked to analyze what they read more deeply and sum up their

See GEDs, page 7

See CHALLENGES, page 7