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myself in a box for a long time.”
The closer Silvia got to being finishing her GED, the more she got scared. Teachers took her aside, asked her why she failed tests even though she had mastered the lessons. They called her at home to make sure she was OK.

“The love they showed me there – it made me realize I wasn’t going through this by myself,” Silvia said.

Through therapy, Silvia realized she had internalized the harsh words family members had said to her during her years of drug abuse. “I retained some of those things and believed I wasn’t capable,” she said.

But it turns out she’s very capable. Silvia received her GED certificate last year and went on to Portland Community College, where she promptly made the Dean’s List – meaning her grades averaged at least 3.5, out of a possible 4.

She’s thinking about going on to Portland State University once she completes her classes at PCC to get a degree in social work. Silvia wants to pass on the help she received in these last four years of recovery.

Progress, not perfection

Current graduate Timothy Pool also plans on giving back.

One of the speakers at the June 6 ceremony, Pool said being back in school felt to him like having a second chance in life. “I’d never completed nothing – ever,” Pool said to center staff at the graduation event.

Pool, 37, said that he started using drugs during his senior year in high school. He dropped out of school and “chose drugs and crime,” spending years in and out of jail.

He got clean in 1998 and fixed up his life, but a car wreck in 2004 put him in a nine-day coma. He left the hospital and became addicted to the painkiller oxycodone. Last year he checked himself into a treatment center. After his initial treatment, a counselor at Impact NW, where Pool received transition services, suggested he get his GED.

After finishing his classes at Londer last winter, he’s now on the President’s List at PCC – at least a 3.75 grade average – and plans to go to PSU to get a master’s in social science. He wants to work with young families who are struggling.

In his speech at the graduation ceremony,

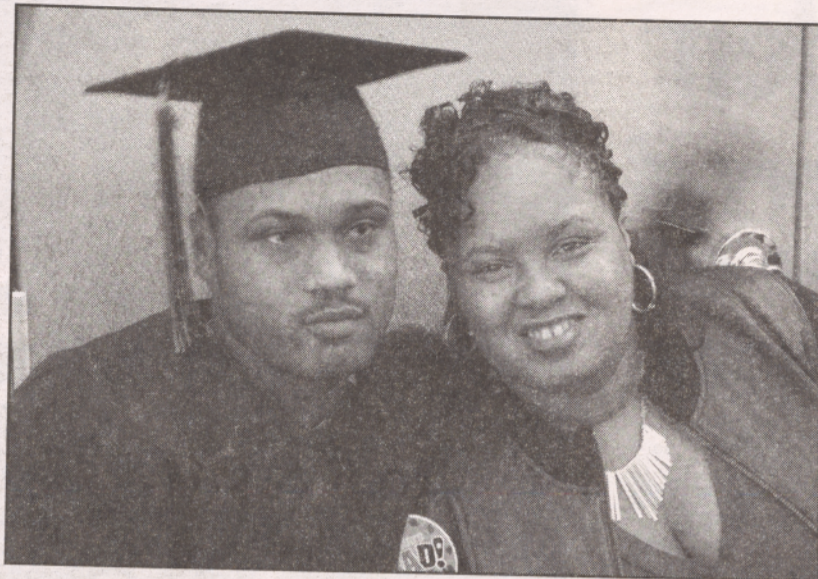


PHOTO BY JACQUES VON LUNEN
Myldred Sylvia was the keynote speaker at the Londer Learning Center graduation this month. She is an alumna of the center, having graduated last year. Her son, Marcus, graduated from the same program this month.

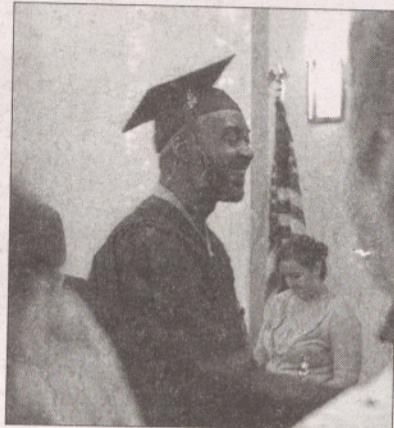


PHOTO BY JACQUES VON LUNEN
Guillermo Hernandez was one of 125 adult students to receive his GED certificate from Londer Learning Center this month.

Pool gave out some advice to his classmates and those in the audience looking to change their lives. He recommended they surround themselves with people who live the way they’d like to live. He suggested getting over one’s ego and choosing “progress, not perfection.” And not to give up on miracles.

“Even a deadbeat drug addict like me can get a GED and go on to college,” Pool told

the crowd, grinning broadly. “You’re unstoppable.”

The first day

Pool finished his classes at Londer fairly quickly, in just four months. Silvia took more than two years.

It all depends on how much students remember from their previous schooling and how much work they can put in now. The first step at Londer – and any other GED-prep program – is a placement test. It can be an intimidating exam after decades away from school.

“That first day, it was scary,” Silvia said. “They handed me a piece of paper with some math problems and I thought, ‘Oh, my god!’”

But she was excited, too, about the new beginning. And she discovered a love for writing during her classes, even though it had always been a struggle for her before.

Pool realized he’d never properly learned how to read. He had never finished a book until he read the Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous books during his treatment last year.

The newfound skill changed his life. “A lot of these things I failed in high school that were intimidating now made sense,” Pool

said. “Now I comprehend what I’m reading.”
“Most students come in at a pretty low reading level,” said Scholl, the center’s manager. “High-level readers may only take one month to get their GED.”

About one-third of all prospective students arrive at Londer with an eighth-grade skill level in the main subjects, Scholl said. The others test below that level.

About half of the students who are at an eighth-grade level initially graduate in the same year they start classes. The rest take a little longer.

The center offers classes at just about any pace, to accommodate the various needs among its population. A lot of students come in for intense classes four days a week. But it’s possible to go less frequently, too.

Nobody denies that it’s hard at first to go back to school.

“My first three months, I had a headache,” Silvia said. “I think it was brain cells trying to reawaken.”

Proud parents

The successes of these GED graduates affect more than one generation. The conference room at the Multnomah building was filled with students in cap and gown holding infants, grandmothers wiping away tears and fathers sitting tall next to sons.

Markos Ellis’ father had traveled up from Texas to watch his son receive not only a GED certificate but a special award for being among the top three students in his class. Ellis had been referred to the center by his probation officer.

Another student’s voice cracked as she talked about how much her grandmother had wanted to see her graduate. “Now she’s gone,” the woman said quietly. “But it’s very important that the kids are here to see this.”

Studies have shown that children of high school dropouts are less likely to finish school, Scholl said. Anecdotally, it seems that the opposite is true also.

A week after Silvia graduated from the Londer Center, her oldest son, Marcus, called her and asked how he could get his GED. He sat next to his mother on June 6, wearing cap and gown, after taking advantage of last year’s weekend offerings at Londer.

“I’m so proud of my baby,” Silvia said.

CHALLENGES, from page 3

analysis in their own words, with little multiple-choice options left in the reading section.

There is more algebra and math beyond basic algebra. And throughout, the test asks more critical thinking of its takers. It will prepare students better for college and the workplace, its creators say.

The manager of the Londer Learning Center agrees, to a point.

“The GED needed to change,” Carole Scholl said. “It needed to catch up.”

But with the changes comes the need for more classroom time. Adults who dropped out in eighth grade decades ago now are faced with more complex lessons and test questions. The numbers won’t be in until next year, but Scholl estimates that her students will now take two to three times longer to finish their GED.

The catch? There’s no extra money for adult learning centers to go with the extra work. Students won’t rotate through as

quickly, which means slots won’t open up as often. But expanding the program isn’t an option, financially.

“I think we’ll have fewer grads,” Scholl said. “Changing the GED was a really big deal, yet not enough people thought about how it will impact people who need extra support.”

The center also will be affected by a cut in federal money to state health departments. Until now, the center took in not just parolees, its original clients (the center is part of Multnomah County’s Department of Community Justice), but also adults recovering from drug addiction.

These adults in, or just out of, treatment were referred to the center by the Portland nonprofit, Impact NW. Those

extra students, however, did not drain the center’s budget, because each student directed a little bit of federal money to the center.

In 2010, The Oregon Health Authority received a federal grant called Access to Recovery. The \$3.3 million grant has allowed the state agency to increase services for people recovering from addiction in seven Oregon counties, including Multnomah County.

Part of that grant paid for sending adults in recovery back to school – at Londer. And that grant is running out in September, shutting down these extra services in Oregon, said Denise Yale, services coordinator for Access to Recovery.

“Changing the GED was a really big deal, yet not enough people thought about how it will impact people who need extra support.”

— CAROLE SCHOLL
MANAGER, LONDER LEARNING CENTER

The agency applied for the next round of the grant, but has not heard back, which doesn’t bode well for success. Only five agencies nationwide will receive money this round, Yale said. Last time 30 did.

Losing the federal grant will cut funding for about 10 percent of the Londer Learning Center’s students, Scholl said.

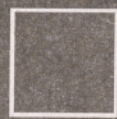
Center staff is working on a proposal to allow nonprofits to pay a small fee to sign up students, Scholl said.

“That federal money has allowed us to serve a population in need of special support,” she said. “We’re trying to figure out other solutions (to continue to serve) people in recovery.”

If you are looking to get your GED, and are not on probation or in drug/alcohol treatment, a good place to start is PCC. You can find out more about its low-cost GED program by calling 971-722-6255 or going to www.pcc.edu/prepare/basic.



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