



Graduate Profiles

“The Academy of Hope will be a school in which the main subject for everyone, teachers and students alike, is not reading, writing or math, but hope.”

The following stories of eight graduates embody AoH’s fundamental commitment to planting and nourishing a sense of hope. The lives of each of these individuals reflect resilience, hard work, courage and commitment to overcome adversity – and are all driven, first and foremost, by hope for a better future. We thank these graduates for sharing their personal stories, both orally and in writing. Their personal achievements are what AoH is all about.

“The More I Learn, the More it Helps”

Michael Cola



Overcoming obstacles has been a way of life for 59 year-old DC native Michael Cola. Though to meet him today you wouldn't know it, as what you see is a man who is well dressed, personable and articulate – and a man who is pursuing an Associates Degree in social work at UDC. The road to this point in his life, however, has not been smooth.

Michael's parents separated and left him with an aunt when he was still a young boy. As the seventh child in his aunt's household, Michael grew up without anyone to show him right from wrong. Though he had dreams of becoming a professional baseball player, he started using drugs and alcohol and, by 10th grade, found himself locked up and out of school.

But he managed to overcome this early setback and, by his twenties, Michael had become a successful plumber. In his thirties he was running a plumbing business with four employees and four trucks. He also had a wife and two children, and was off drugs and alcohol. Unfortunately, this happy period came to an end when he started using again and ended up losing all that he had built – his family, his business, his health and his self-respect.

After failing in several detox programs and fighting sickness and near-blindness from cataracts, Michael had been living on the street for many years when a friend put him in touch with Christ House. There he received the medical care and emotional support that allowed him gradually to regain his health, his sobriety and his dignity. As a result, he was able to reunite with his family, including four granddaughters, who he says are now “the joy of my life”. While they have provided support to him, he says he can now return that support by encouraging them to get a good education.

With the role models of several brothers at the Kairos Program (which is associated with Christ House and is where he now lives), Michael decided to take his own advice to his granddaughters and enrolled in AoH. His intention was to complete his high school education in order to re-start his business, the failure of which was due, in part, to the difficulties of keeping proper accounts and managing his taxes.

But starting at AoH with just a ninth grade education was an enormous challenge and Michael says that at the beginning “everything about the program was hard”. And yet, although he could barely read when he entered the EDP course, with time Michael came to love reading and excel at essay writing. He says that “all – not some – of the teachers at AoH were great”. He also found that EDP “fitted him perfectly”, including the special tutors who helped him with math. And though he had not intended at the start to go on to college, once he graduated from EDP, passed the college preparation courses at AoH, and found financial aid, he realized that “maybe I could do this”.

Thus in September 2009 Michael entered UDC as a business administration major. He has now switched from full time course work to three courses per semester, which he finds fits him “just right”. As a member of the Kairos community, he also devotes his time to “mandatory volunteering”, serving as secretary of his AA group, and attending regular meetings with a counselor. Beyond all of this, Michael serves as a deacon in the New Covenant Church, and adds his remarkable voice and energy to the Men of Promise choir there, as well as to the Kairos Singers.

*“I’m like a flower I
just continue to
grow and learn...”*

Michael has recently made one other change in his academic program, shifting his major from business administration to social work. “I love helping people”, he explains. His specific areas of professional interest are seniors and the homeless. Michael says he gets great wisdom from seniors and loves talking to them. And having once been homeless himself, this population is also “near and dear” to him.

As the current academic year comes to a close, Michael plans to take summer classes at AoH and – in particular – to keep building his math skills with whatever classes that are on offer. Although he is strong in English (due to the foundation he received at AoH) and loves his political science studies, math remains a challenge – but one that Michael continues to meet. With his undying excitement about learning and education, Michael says, “I’m like a flower – I just continue to grow and learn. And the more I learn, the more it helps.”

As he pursues his college degree and works toward a productive future, Michael is now able to tell his granddaughters, “If Granddaddy can do it, you can do it too!”



Five Languages and a GED

Marie-Christine Diop Homan

In her short life Marie-Christine Diop Homan has cleared many hurdles, both personal and academic. Passing the GED is the most recent.



One thing you might not know about this quiet young woman is that English is her fifth language! Marie-Christine grew up in a small Senegalese village with her parents, five sisters and three brothers. The language they spoke at home was Serere, although the instruction she received at the village primary school was in Wolof and French. Fortunately the local teacher in the three-room school could resort to Serere when necessary, which helped Marie-Christine to make her way through this challenging early primary school period, picking up two new languages along the way.

At home she was a happy child, growing up in the warmth of her large family. But at age 9 her parents sent Marie-Christine to live with her newly-married older sister and brother-in-law in a town far to the south. Both of them had left school by grade four, so Marie-Christine was on her own academically, with no one to encourage and support her in her studies. In the south her schooling was offered completely in French. During that time she also acquired fluency in Pulaar, the language of the southern part of Senegal, which she needed for everyday interaction. She completed lycée (which covers curriculum a year or so beyond American high school), but did not pass her “baccalaureate” examination so she was not eligible to enter university.

Life during her ten years in the south was difficult, and Marie-Christine longed to go back to her family back in the village. So on finishing lycée, she returned, to finally get to know the parents and siblings she had left as a young girl. In a nearby town she studied for a two-year professional secretarial diploma with

the financial support of her eldest brother. He hoped that by financing the education of both Marie-Christine and her younger sister that they would acquire a higher education and eventually be able to take care of the family. Sadly, her brother died just as Marie-Christine was completing her course.

With her secretarial diploma, Marie-Christine went to work in the town for several years at a few different companies and a cyber café. It was at there that she met a very nice American Peace Corps volunteer who helped her with her fifth language, English. Three years later, they married in Senegal in a traditional ceremony and then came to the US, where they married again in November 2008.

Although Marie-Christine had studied English in high school and worked on it further at the cyber café, she also took classes once she arrived in the US and continues to get help from her husband whenever she needs it. Her husband also encouraged her to study for her GED, which he saw as a way for her to go beyond her secretarial diploma and, eventually, to find work as a medical secretary. “He knew I had the potential to succeed”, she says.

So Marie-Christine enrolled in a pre-GED course at Montgomery College and it was her math teacher there who suggested that she study for her GED at AoH. She enrolled at AoH in the summer of 2010 and passed her GED exam in May 2011. She now plans to study further to qualify as a medical technician or medical secretary.

Since coming to AoH, Marie-Christine says her English has improved further and that she has “learned a lot”. AoH, she believes, is part of a number of “positive changes” in her life, including how to be a responsible person and how to focus on her goal. Having the opportunity for continued studies and getting a GED is “a big move” for her. “Now I have a chance to go to college and to get a good job.” She very much liked the program, the staff and the teachers, whom she says she will never forget. Marie-Christine looks forward to telling her family in Senegal and – later – her children about how her AoH experience helped change her life for the better.

GED at 63

Linda Brown



The one thing Linda Brown will not tolerate is boredom. This 64-year-old Washington native has spent her life working and learning and, as she says, “fighting boredom very, very well.” She is full of exuberance and warmth, with bright eyes and a ready smile.

As a girl, she was a natural athlete who played tennis, biked, and loved the trampoline. In high school Linda was a member of the

Junior Naturalist Society, set up by the US Department of the Interior, through which she remembers walking every bit of Rock Creek Park.

Coming from a working class family – her father was a Teamster trucker with a college education – Linda attended a good public high school and had plans to attend college. However, she became pregnant in her senior year and so dropped out of school before getting her diploma. In order to support herself and her son, she began working at the age of 19. The dream of pursuing her education had to be postponed.

Over the years Linda worked on and off for the Federal Government and in private industry. She says she was “an excellent worker” who was always ready to go to night school to learn new skills. First she learned how to type, later she took computer classes where she learned how to set up databases. At the same time, she describes herself as “a terrible employee”, often leaving jobs within a year, taking off the winter months to be home with her son.

Shortly after she retired in the winter of 2010 at age 62, Linda learned that the Academy of Hope had established an office in

In order to support herself and her son, she began working at the age of 19.

her apartment building in SE. Seeing the posters for GED and computer classes, Linda decided it was time to get back to her education and so enrolled at AoH.

That decision turned out to be a good one. Linda says that AoH gave her what she “wanted and needed”. The classes made her life better, provided the chance to have interesting conversations with others and kept her busy. She gives AoH high marks for the quality of the instructors (whom she refers to as ‘beautiful ladies’), the materials and equipment. She particularly appreciated the personalized study website, which allowed her to work from home. Between her earlier educational foundation and all that she gained from AoH, Linda passed her GED exam in just four months.

Linda states that having her GED has set her up to go to college. While continuing to work part-time as a home health aide, she plans to take a remedial math course at AoH. And she is also taking advantage of the guidance AoH provides to obtain financial aid to pursue further education and has started studying for the SAT. Her hope is that this profile will encourage others to come to AoH.

The dream of pursuing her education had to be postponed.



Don't Tell Her She Can't Do It

Cheryl Budd

Cheryl Budd is the embodiment of persistence and courage, overcoming others' unkind and discouraging views of her due to physical disability. After years of being told that she was useless and that her life chances were limited, she has shown the world that she can do whatever she sets out to do.



Born in DC, Cheryl grew up in Laytonsville, MD and spent most of her 63 years in that area. Her life challenges started on day one, as she was born with multiple disabilities. Abandoned at birth by her parents, she was raised by foster parents. She spent her first thirteen years enduring numerous surgeries on her right arm, which was stuck to her chest, and on four deformed fingers. Beyond the physical pain of those surgeries, Cheryl also endured the emotional pain of being the only child in her school with a learning disability and of merciless teasing by her schoolmates. To protect herself from the name-calling and the inhospitable learning environment at school, she missed many days of class and thus received only a very partial early education. Sadly, the hurt she felt from the cruel words of her fellow students continued when she married, as her former husband called her names and repeated the negative messages she'd heard all her life: "you cannot do anything, you will never be anything."

However, sixteen years later, as a divorced mother of three, Cheryl began a journey that has proven, step by step, that her husband could not have been more wrong. Although initially internalizing a lifetime of negative messages, Cheryl knew that she needed to get a job and improve the wellbeing of her family.

Her first major step was to join a support group for persons with disabilities, which she says helped her to "overcome con-

cerns and negative thoughts about my disability and to realize my hidden abilities”. Through the support group Cheryl slowly gained self-confidence, accepted her disability, and “learned to talk about it to anyone without feeling embarrassed.” With a stronger foundation, she got a job and worked for six years. But she says that her “big break” came when her children (all high school graduates) were grown and she lost her job. It was at that point that she signed up for “life experience activities through LEAP (Leveraging Educational Assistance Partnership) to upgrade my skills and learn new ones”. Cheryl reports that after LEAP her “whole life changed for the better.” Through their referral, in 1994 she began working for the DC Center for Independent Living, where she continues to work to this day. “Having the experience as someone with a disability from birth, I am able to work comfortably with persons with disabilities.”

“AoH isn’t here to play. If you come for your GED or EDP, you will get it...”

With all that progress under her belt, in 2005 Cheryl decided it was time to finish high school and so enrolled in evening classes at the Lab School of Washington, which offered a GED program for persons with disabilities. However, she quickly found that her earlier formal schooling had not given her much preparation to move forward, as her initial test scores placed her at 5th grade level. But Cheryl was determined to succeed and just did what had to be done to work her way up. She was a conscientious student, arriving on time every evening after having finished her day at the office. Though she managed over time to bring most of her scores up to 12th grade level, she found that there was still a problem with reading. So, on advice from her teacher, she began reading newspapers and magazines and, in 2007, tested at 12th grade level in reading as well. Still, she was not able to pass the GED.

Fortunately, one of her Lab School teachers suggested that Cheryl come to AoH to work on an EDP, which the Lab School did not offer. Her initial assessment showed that that

her reading was good but that she needed more work on math. But just as she was embarking on this program, in the autumn of 2009, Cheryl's 41-year old son became seriously ill and died suddenly of complications from diabetes. "When that happened, I just did not want to do anything but die with him. But as the days went on, I felt better and knew that I had to get my diploma for myself and for him."

So over the next year Cheryl rededicated herself to the challenge of completing each of the five EDP tasks, with constant support and encouragement of AoH staff. When she started, Cheryl says that there were mistakes in all her tasks, but that AoH staff helped her to correct them all and gave her guidance on how to study. Beyond this, they "really encouraged me" and consistently let her know that she could do it. She also appreciated the expressions written on the AoH board each day, which made her feel good about herself. And whenever she had a question about her work, she would just ask any teacher she could find and says, "they were never too busy, they would always sit down with me and be glad to help." While she found everyone "kind and considerate", she also recognized that "AoH isn't here to play. If you come for your GED or EDP, you will get it. These people are here to

"These people are here to teach you and to help you move on."

teach you and to help you move on." Cheryl says that they "gave me self-esteem. I know that I can talk to people with degrees and not feel ashamed of myself. They really encouraged me."

On June 4, 2010, Cheryl graduated with her EDP Diploma. Her family thinks it is "wonderful" and her daughters, in particular, "are tickled pink". They remembered how she pushed them to get their own high school diplomas years ago and told her "now it is your turn."

Now in her 17th year as an employee at the Center for Independent Living, Cheryl recalls that it was not easy working there without a high school diploma. Today, with her EDP, she is happy, having worked her way up to the level of Inde-

pendent Living Specialist, making referrals for a wide range of services for people with all types of disabilities. In addition to liking the substance of her work, she feels appreciated by both the Center's Director and the consumers whom she supports.

Looking toward the future, this grandmother of three thinks that she would like to work with children, possibly as a foster grandmother. As Cheryl says, "I know how they feel." She will surely be a success at that work – or anything else she sets her mind to – as she has been at so much else in her remarkable life.



Making Progress Makes You Want to Keep Going

Andrew North



Nineteen-year old Andrew North came to AoH in early 2010, too young to take his GED but more than ready to do whatever was necessary to pass it when the time came. Four months later he celebrated his 18th birthday and passed his GED exam. Since then he has focused on his educational goals and is continuing to make great progress in his life.

Andrew, his sister and three brothers lived with their mother in the District until Andrew was 12, and then moved to Maryland. He has fond childhood memories of helping out at the dental surgery office where his mother worked, filing records and doing all sorts of administrative tasks. He also greatly enjoyed his high school community service experience working with children at a day care center. Academically things were going along well enough until, early in his senior year, his high school informed him that he needed two additional credits to graduate, and that he would need to make them up either during the summer or in night school. Either way, he would have to pay to get those last two credits. Without the money to cover the cost of graduating, Andrew dropped out of school in the autumn of 2008 at age 16.

At the suggestion of his Aunt, Andrew quickly enrolled in Strive for Success program and moved back to the District to live with his father. From late 2008 until summer 2009, he studied and took the GED practice exams, and worked at AoH through the DC Summer Youth Program, filing student records on the computer. He also worked that autumn at Six Flags Over America as a cashier.

However, Andrew was still too young to take the GED, which

meant that he could go no further in the Strive for Success program. Fortunately, people there recommended that he come to Academy of Hope to continue his studies until he was old enough to take the GED exam.

Andrew arrived back at AoH in early 2010, this time as a student. He focused on English and math, the areas the practice GED had indicated could benefit from more work. And when he'd completed these classes – still just 17 years old – he enrolled in Pathways to get ready for college. Andrew remembers 'dissecting' articles in those classes, and learning a lot. Finally, in April 2010, he turned 18, took the GED exam, and passed. His proud family attended his AoH graduation ceremony.

Without the money to cover the cost of graduating, Andrew dropped out of school in the autumn of 2008 at age 16.

Andrew has a longstanding interest in health care that began during his grandmother's long illness and hospitalization. He helped care for her at home and even in the hospital, where he assisted the nurses to feed and move her. Given this interest, AoH staff recommended him to the US Department of Agriculture Graduate School's Phlebotomy Technician Certificate program. The essay Andrew wrote won him a scholarship and he began the program in September 2010. He did his practicum at Providence Hospital and found the clinical experience "just wonderful". Though it was "a lot of work, it worked out great". He particularly enjoyed "working with the team and the patients". This work seems to be a good fit for Andrew, who says that he "loves helping people."

As of today, he has graduated from the USDA Graduate School program and will soon take the state certification exam. He has also been offered a paid summer internship at Providence Hospital, where he will gain more practical experience. His next steps include obtaining a scholarship to complete an MLT (Medical Lab Technician) course at the USDA Graduate School and working to save some money so that he

can eventually enroll in either medical or nursing school.

Looking back at AoH, Andrew says he valued the fact that “the staff was proactive – not just with me, but with all the students. Once you had finished one thing, they already had something else for you to learn. They constantly worked with you to be sure that you understood what they were teaching. Beyond the GED, they talked with you about what you want to do in the future.”

“...Once you had finished one thing, they already had something else for you to learn.”

He says the teaching was “phenomenal” and that he was supported by many AoH staff who helped him “with everything”. He especially appreciated the fact that AoH worked with him on his weak area of math, so that when he re-took the GED practice exam his scores were higher. This showed him that he “was making progress, and that makes you want to keep going.” Andrew has not stopped moving forward since then, continuing to put in place the “building blocks” that are consolidating the foundation of his future.



Failure was Not an Option

Thomure Queen

For 22 year-old Thomure Queen, passing her IC3 exam was a tremendous personal success. While it was not easy for her to get to that point, she is certain that this recent accomplishment has positioned her for a better future.



Thomure's childhood was tough, lacking in adult guidance and characterized by behavioral problems that led her to move from one school to another. Her early and mid-teenage years were especially turbulent, ending with her dropping out well before she had a high school diploma. By age 17 she also left the home she'd known with her mother and began fending entirely for herself on the streets.

Nonetheless, it was her mother who suggested AoH to her, which led Thomure to enroll in the GED course at age 18. At first she just went to classes two or three times a week, as her earlier education experiences had not prepared her to take her studies seriously and attend classes regularly. But knowing that a GED could help her "obtain a better life to accomplish something", she worked hard enough to earn her GED.

Although she wanted to go further, Thomure's initial attempts to continue her post-GED education fell short. She first enrolled in Sanzs College, at the suggestion of her mother, to get a credential as a medical technician. But Thomure didn't have her heart in it, and so left quickly. She also enrolled in the Community College of the District of Columbia, but eventually withdrew from there as well.

However, things began to change for the better when Thomure saw an online AoH announcement for IC3 registration. Finally, this was something that she wanted to do: "I chose it, it was

no one else's idea. I didn't even know what I was getting into, I just took a chance." She goes on to say, "I gotta be me, but I gotta be smart and know how to do me – use my noggin." The course was demanding, and Thomure had to "humble and structure" herself to get through. She also knew that she could not succeed in life if she kept quitting, and that this time she "didn't need to quit." Despite the "stress, tears, and frustration", she studied hard, stood on her own, and succeeded.

Thomure says that AoH is the best school she has ever attended. She sincerely appreciates the "love, time, and patience" that teachers and staff have shown her. Even when she attended class just a few days a week while studying for her GED, she recalls how they worked with her and helped her get through. She credits her IC3 teacher and, during the rough times of the IC3 course, Thomure especially appreciated the emotional support offered by AoH staff.

By age 17 she also left the home she'd known with her mother and began fending entirely for herself on the streets.

Thomure is certain that there is something better out there in her future. She is now planning to take the Armed Forces Vocational Aptitude Battery as the first step in the process of enlisting in the US Navy.



A Blueprint for Success in Life

Jason Brown

To look at Jason Brown's face is to know that he is a happy man. But this has not always been the case. He has had his share of life challenges, and is more than glad to give AoH credit for helping him to overcome many of them.



A 28-year old DC native, Jason grew up as an only child, with the love and support of his mother and grandmother. He started out as an excellent student, but the environment in SE was tough and by 8th grade he had begun to have serious behavior problems in school. He was “put out of schools all over the District and Maryland” more times than he can remember, including a special school for kids with behavior problems and a military academy. Although his grandmother tried to protect him by getting him into school over the District line, Jason kept returning to SE and to the drugs, violence and theft that characterized his neighborhood. Despite his grandmother's efforts, her teachings “went out the window” when he was confronted with the everyday life on the streets. Looking back, Jason says: “I wasn't being true to who I was supposed to be.”

At age 18 Jason was indicted for robbery and assault and incarcerated. Remarkably, he sees that experience as the start of a positive change in himself. “Jail showed me the life I didn't want to live”. He was also lucky to be “mentored” by some of the other inmates about the importance of education and work. He thus considers his incarceration “a true life lesson”, and a lesson that was reinforced when his first son was born. That motivated him further to change his ways, realizing that “there gotta be a better way.” So Jason began thinking for himself and looking for alternatives to life on the streets and in jail. But even during his “quest to do better”, Jason still got “caught up with certain people”, to the point that in 2006 he

got into an argument that ended in a shooting incident. Jason underwent extensive surgery and spent six weeks in the hospital. It took many months more before he recovered fully.

Despite the obstacles, Jason persevered, trying several different GED programs before finally coming to AoH. He says that the other programs were “just paperwork and the test”. They didn’t provide the “special help” he needed.

At AoH Jason thought initially that he would stay just a few weeks, as his earlier test scores had been very high. But he says that at AoH “they take you by the hand, and when they see potential, they pull out your strengths – they don’t kick you out the door.” So he stayed for tutoring, for extra Saturday sessions to build his confidence, and for personal help. Though he knew that he wanted to change, he says that “AoH really brought it out of me and built that confidence in me. I was proud to come to AoH classes every night, to know that I was getting what I needed.” He greatly appreciated the way in which AoH monitored his progress in “baby steps”, which helped him believe that “I can do this!” He says that AoH forced him “to live my life to its potential”, and that what AoH offers is simply “a blueprint for success in life”.

“...they take you by the hand, and when they see potential, they pull out your strengths – they don’t kick you out the door.”

Today Jason truly values his role as a father and explains that, here, too, AoH played an important role. The fatherhood classes he participated in underlined the importance of communicating with his children, spending time with them, and being involved in their schoolwork. “It’s not about buying their love.” He wants his two children (now 8 and 3) to learn to “work hard and to take care of what they have.” And he uses his AoH experience to help his children, showing them that “school is not all play” and that “it can be done”. He says, “I know the path I don’t want them to be on,” so he works every day “to instill positive messages, set an example, and build a foundation” for them to stand on.

So two weeks at AoH turned into a year and by the time Jason took his GED, his self-confidence was solid and he passed with “flying colors”. He considered this “a real life accomplishment”. While boosting his own morale, his success also had a positive effect on his older son, who started doing better in school after seeing his father succeed.

With his GED in hand, in March 2010 Jason went to Strive DC for a ten-week training course in energy auditing, after which he volunteered for DC Greenworks, where he was eventually offered a part-time job. Currently, he is working for the Capitol Hill Club. Though a childhood friend recommended him for the job, Jason says that, “everyday I prove my worth”. He is glad to work hard as long as he is happy in the job and, fortunately, he says with a smile, “I just love my job”. His plan is to work his way up and turn this job into a career.

Jason says “I’m happy, on my way, doing good things.” His personal goals at this point are to “give a good foundation to the kids and achieve stability in my family life and my career.” Thinking to the future, he has just joined the Congressional Credit Union, so that he can start saving for his sons’ college education. For now, he is also committed to helping his grandmother to live “stress-free, with peace and joy.”

*“these doors
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open forever”.*

Since graduation Jason has spoken to prospective AoH students and to the AoH board, as he considers AoH to be “a true blessing” in his own life. He now has the confidence to speak to large crowds and feels that he “can do anything”. As for AoH, Jason says, “they care for everyone who comes through their doors”. And so, in return, he wants to come back to support the program. “If I can help someone else get to the next level in their life, I’m willing. If just one other person can get the confidence and success that I’ve had, that would be a great thing.” He sincerely “wants others to receive the blessing that AoH bestowed” upon him and concludes by stating: “these doors need to be open forever”.



Broadening His Horizons, Changing the Way He Thinks

Kenny Tolliver



Kenneth (Kenny) Tolliver, 57, is a motivated man with a set of goals, and is working through the Academy of Hope to achieve them.

Growing up in the District mainly with his mother, two younger brothers, and five young nieces, Kenny's early focus was on CYO football, baseball and basketball. When it came time for high school, he passed the entrance exam for the prestigious De Matha parochial high school. His mother managed to pay his fees during his freshman year, and he earned a scholarship for his sophomore year.

At the age of 14, Kenny was appointed "youth representative" for his Ward. He attended City Council Meetings, marched to the Capital and the District Building, and participated in sit ins to advocate for more funds for the community. He also wrote funding proposals to various philanthropic foundations to secure financing for classes for young people and the elderly.

Through these activities Kenny was given a guitar by one of the program counselors and learned to play. Within a year he and his friends were "giggin" and by 17 they were playing "big gigs", such as opening for Count Basey at Howard University's Crampton Hall.

During this period, however, Kenny says that that he felt like a "social misfit" at school, and lacked encouragement of his education at home. So when he was 15 he dropped out of school.

For many years Kenny kept up with his music, often working full-time as a road musician, at other times playing at night

while working at full-time jobs during the day. Over time he has worked as an orderly and then orderly dispatcher at Washington Hospital Center, as a window glazer and construction worker, and as maintenance man and then maintenance supervisor at the Washington Times. He later had a range of driving jobs, none of which he really liked. The last of these was with Metro Access, but he he lost that job in December 2010.

It was at that point, searching for work, that Kenny realized that he would not be able to get a new – and better – job without a GED. Though he had started at AoH four years earlier, he was working at that time and his job “took precedence over my studies”. Since returning to AoH in early January 2011, however, he has focused squarely on getting an education. His initial plan was to obtain his GED within six months, but he passed the exam (with flying colors) after just five months. Despite his high scores, he still wants to “get a few more things under my belt”, with the immediate goal of improving his math and writing.

Reflecting on these five months at AoH, Kenny found Bridge Reading “so important”, catching his imagination and motivating him to learn and try to go beyond the GED. Kenny particularly appreciated the opportunity the class provides students to discuss some of the issues they see everyday in the community, and to gain a better understanding of how things are related. Whether it is gentrification, or the relationship between race and politics, shedding light on these and other current issues is a key part of Kenny’s AoH educational experience. The bridge course in particular has “opened my eyes to possibilities”.

While at AoH, Kenny was given the opportunity to draw on his long-standing public speaking and advocacy skills. In Spring 2011 he was part of a group that testified before the DC City Council, advocating for support for AoH and other adult learning programs in the city. He told the Council members how AoH has broadened his horizons, how it is necessary to have a GED in order to get a job, and how places like AoH “are essential to help people”. He has also spoken to counselors at

Christ House about how AoH has changed his life. Most recently, at the AoH “Ball and Bee” on June 3, Kenny told the guests how the Bridge Reading class “makes you look at your self, at your goals, the future, how you were spending your time.” He explained that when he “looked around and found I was ahead in all my classes, I stopped thinking about music and lyrics and dreamed of having my grandchildren see me walk across the stage to graduate.” Now having passed his GED, he says “they are all happy for Grandpa.”

Kenny says that he has found AoH to be “inspirational”. When he entered in January his only goal was to obtain a GED and a commercial driving license. But AoH “let me know that I don’t have to drive, don’t have to do what I don’t want to do. I’m grateful to AoH for changing the way I think.” He says he wants “to feel comfortable in a college atmosphere and to be able to talk and write on a more sophisticated level”, and that AoH is helping him to gain the skills he needs. Regarding enrolling in college, he says “I want not just to be there, but to be about it, to complete a two-year course in two years and a four-year course in four years.” As he feels that his “biological clock is ticking” he wants to “go in with guns blazing”.

With his GED in hand and his new way of thinking, Kenny enrolled in a six-week health care course at UDC, specializing in respiratory therapy. He currently has a federal grant, but hopes to obtain a scholarship for further study. He plans to start at a two-year community college in Spring 2012, with the longer-term goal of getting a degree in either social work or urban development. While he recognizes that it will be a challenge to get a job, Kenny says “now I’m into learning, grinding and studying, and don’t want to lose momentum.”





Academy of Hope's mission is to provide high quality adult basic education in a manner that changes lives and improves our community.

We would like to thank Jan Leno for volunteering her time and skills towards putting these stories together.

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