



Graduate Profiles 2013

“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 five graduates embody Academy of Hope’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 Academy of Hope is all about.



Doing it All for Her Kids

Veronica Salamanca



A high-school drop at the age of 17, today Veronica Salamanca has her GED in hand and is working hard to create a career in the health care field and to be a loving mother and strong role model for her two sons.

Veronica was born in DC in 1983 and has spent most of her life here. Although her parents, both from El Salvador, separated when she was five, they remained very present in the lives of herself and her younger brother and sister. English was the language spoken in the home, and soccer was the major pastime and source of accomplishment and fun. “Soccer was a big thing in our family. I went to games with my father and was on a team. I was good at it!” Now she can see the love of the game running further through the family – from her father, to herself, and now to her 11-year old son.

“they care a lot about their students which is why I keep coming back”.

“Our parents were always on top of us, to see that we were doing well in school.” Though for a time her mother worked three jobs, she still managed to encourage Veronica’s studies. So did her father, whom she describes as “one of the best fathers.” At the age of 13 she went to live in El Salvador with her mother and siblings. School was different (she had to wear a school uniform) and tough (“upside down division, and lots and lots of note taking”). Plus, of course, all the class instruction was done in Spanish!

On her return to the US a year later, Veronica says she was an average student. With continued support from her parents, things were going fine until she became pregnant in 11th grade and left school. Though she tried to go back, she needed to work and could not find reliable baby-sitting care for her young son. Eventually she enrolled him in day care but decided it was important to continue to help her mother with the bills. Her mother encouraged her to go back and get her GED, but at that point Veronica says: "I didn't listen. I was so busy, and preferred working. Though I did want to get my GED, I didn't want it desperately at that time."

While working in the customer service department of a contractor for Metro Access, Veronica met the father of her second son (now three). He was born premature at 25 weeks, and spent the first three months of his life in the hospital. When he finally came home in January 2009, he had to remain on a heart monitor. Although her employer was willing to wait for her to return to work, Veronica and her partner decided that she should stay home for a year to ensure that their son got the care that he needed.

A year later she and the baby's father separated, and Veronica found it difficult to find a job. As a condition of her participation in the TANF program (which provides cash assistance through the DC government), Veronica enrolled in job training for office assistants through the PATHS program. It was there that "I began my journey back to school." Through that program, she was referred to the Academy of Hope for her GED. She first came to AoH in June 2010. When given the good results on her assessment test, Veronica says: "I couldn't believe it!" While at AoH she concentrated on writing and math and – again to her great surprise and delight – she passed on her first try at the GED, in December 2010. However, her achievement was bitter/sweet, as her father died in a car crash two days before the GED exam. Veronica says that her father was her "inspiration" and she believes that "he had something to do with my passing the test. It was so hard not to tell him that I passed."

There is a lot that Veronica appreciates and admires about AoH. "I like how they teach, that they take so much pride in helping students, and that they push us to succeed." She also notes: "You notice that they care a lot about their students – which is why I keep coming back!"

Since January 2011 Veronica has continued at AoH with college prep, focusing on essay writing in particular. She believes that this really helped her to do well on the Acuplacer test, which she took to enter the phlebotomy program at The Graduate School. Veronica started there in September 2011 and expects to get her certification in May 2012. She is now devoting eight hours a week to this night school course, and continuing with college prep at AoH and is working on computer skills and her job search at PATHS. Her longer-term goal is to have a career in nursing, and she hopes that the phlebotomy course will help to "get my foot in the door."

For now Veronica is living with her mother, who is working days and studying for her own GED at night. Her kids are watched both by her mom and her grandmother. "The schedule is a little bit difficult, but I'm working on it!"

Veronica says: "All my work is for my kids. I don't want them to wait as long as I did to get an education. " Veronica is pleased when her older son asks: "Oh Mom, you go to college, what's it like?" Her priority for now is "just being a Mommy, giving my babies a good example, giving them as much as I can." Given Veronica's love, hard work, dedication and commitment, her boys are getting a lot.

If You Believe, You Can Achieve It!

Dorothy Reese



Mother of nine adult children. Together with the same man for 58 years. Life-long learner. Creative artist. Small business-woman. And an Academy of Hope graduate at the age of 74. For Dorothy Reese, it's been a life of challenge, loss, hard work and remarkable accomplish-

ment. And there is more to come!

Born in 1937 in the mountains of eastern Ohio, Dorothy Reese's childhood was characterized by family upheaval, abandonment, daydreams and love. When her mother left the family, Dorothy – age five – was separated from her sister and sent to live with her grandmother in North Carolina. She never saw her father again. Though she thrived in North Carolina in the warmth of her grandmother's love, she always "dreamed" of reuniting with her mother, who had moved to DC.

At age ten her daydreams came true – she joined her mother and began attending Cleveland Elementary School at 8th Street, NW. Dorothy recalls staying out late playing with her friends, watching men come through the streets to turn on the streetlights in the evenings, and "saving up 50 Sugar Daddy wrappers to get one big Sugar Daddy for free." Her mother worked as a waitress at a downtown restaurant, making little in salary but getting good tips. Despite dropping out of school, "she had common sense and was smart." Hiding her own illiteracy, she believed in education and encouraged Dorothy to stay in school.

Unfortunately, in 1952 at the age of 15, Dorothy became pregnant, "lookin for love in all the wrong places, too dumb to know better". In those days it was not possible to return to school – people made her feel ashamed, saying she was not a good influence on the other students. So she got a job on working days in a hotel on Connecticut Avenue while her mother took care of the baby. At night Dorothy took over the care of her child while her mother went to work.

At age 16 she met Ronald, the man with whom she has spent the rest of her life. He, too, was 16 and working at a deli. "He appeared out of nowhere. We listened to the jukebox and fell in love at first sight. We just couldn't get enough of each other." Sometimes they'd stay out so late that Dorothy would return home to find the door locked – she and Ronald would then sit out in the hallway all night, waiting until Dorothy would be let back into the apartment. They had their first child a few years later. Though Dorothy wanted to return to school at night, the demands of two babies and a job took precedence. Over the next several years, Dorothy and Ronald had three more children and finally got married. Though Dorothy had been ready from the start, Ronald wanted to be certain that "it would be forever". She was thrilled, and went along with Ronald's insistence that she continue to stay at home to take care of the family. Though she wanted to work, Dorothy loved the attention she got from Ronald when she was pregnant, so she kept having more babies. But by 1979 – living in a two-bedroom house in SE with nine children – Dorothy decided it was time to have her tubes tied.

During the 1980s, freed from the risk of unwanted pregnancy, Dorothy says she "had a different feeling, I felt freer. I always had energy. I loved to work, and wanted to get my diploma. Whenever there was a little course, I took it." This included studying computers, secretarial skills and counseling. "But I needed my diploma to get the right salary. I knew it would give me more options and choices."

Meanwhile, trying to provide for his family, “Ronald nearly worked himself to death. There was a lot of stress and he almost died from a bleeding ulcer.” Dorothy says that the multiple transfusions he received to save his life changed his personality and that from then on “things started going kinda crazy.” On top of all this, in 1990, their fifth child, 24 year-old Fard, was killed.

At that point Dorothy says, “I wanted to act crazy, started drinking and gettin’ down with it all.” This was a very tough time for her and the family. But in 1994 she went into rehab for alcohol addiction at the Samaritan Inn and began to “restart my life. I was determined to get my GED.” Through the Samaritan Inn she began a nursing assistant program, eventually working at night and taking classes at Academy of Hope during the day. However, soon she dropped out: “Math kept kickin’ me.” She also decided that nursing was not what she thought it would be. Her depression and Ronald’s changed personality led them to divorce. However, even then they “never completely broke away from each other.”

Dorothy began work as “Inn Keeper” at the Samaritan Inn, a job that she enjoyed. After a time she started seeing Ronald again. They got back together in 1997, though waited until 2009 to remarry. She also started up again at AoH, “but I still wasn’t gettin’ it.” She spent the next 13 years going to school to get her Child Development Credential (CDA), and “going from day care job to day care job”.

In 2007 “I got back into full swing with AoH because I needed a diploma for my work”. When her efforts to get a GED didn’t work out, AoH staff suggested she try the EDP course, which she found much better suited to her strengths. “I decided I would stay until I got it and that I wasn’t going to drop out.” Dorothy worked at the YMCA day care center during the day and attended evening classes at AoH. “It was a pain when the car broke down and I had to take the bus.” But she kept at it. In November 2011 Dorothy Reese graduated from AoH – at the age of 74!

Of her long history at AoH, Dorothy has this to say: “All the teachers have been real nice, they encouraged me, they never forgot me. They did so much for me when they were at the church – gave me a little refrigerator, old computers and a computer course. When I kept missing the GED passing mark by two or three points, they suggested EDP. It took me six months to get it. Passing was an achievement. The answers made sense. I knew I’d get it that time – and I got all the answers right!” She gives special thanks to her math tutor and to AoH staff for sticking with her till the end.

Now, with her EDP in hand, Dorothy is moving into a new phase of her life. As Ronald had to stop working a year ago due to illness, she decided to supplement her YMCA income by making and selling custom-made pillows for children and avid sports fans. At the suggestion of AoH staff, Dorothy connected with a small enterprise development program called *Women Mean Business*, which is providing her with valuable guidance in how to get her business up and running. She hopes “it will take me places.”

Thus far she has sold her pillows at the YMCA, a number of churches, and at AoH. Armed with all the necessary legal documents, she plans to start selling at Eastern Market, which would allow her to make more money. But she says clearly: “it’s about much more than money – it’s about making people happy by producing pillows they love.” Thinking of next steps, Dorothy would like to “go into fabrics and decorating, designing not just pillows but sheets, blankets and other household accessories”.

“God is not done with me. He gave me this passion and I have to do something with it. I could go to college to get an AA. I have so many ideas in my head! My motto is: If you believe it, you can achieve it.”

Keep your eye on Dorothy Reese, she is indeed going places.

“Anything Worthwhile Doesn’t Come Easy”

Shewan Beyene

Like many young people growing up in Ethiopia, one of the poorest countries in the world, Shewan Beyene had to struggle for the basics. But with the encouragement and example of his hard-working mother, his love of science and music, support from Academy of Hope – and a lot of effort on his part – today he finds himself happily employed and a Doctor of Pharmacy.



Shewan was born in Addis, Ababa, the fourth child in a family of five. His mother, who raised the children on her own, worked full-time as a seamstress and went to night school to complete her secondary (high school) education. She also supported the family by baking pastries when she returned home from school. Despite all these efforts, Shewan recalls, “it was not easy to come by clothes and school supplies.” He says, “We had to be creative and do anything as a means to support ourselves.” So in addition to selling his mother’s pastries in the neighborhood, he also helped around the International Lutheran Church that his family attended, selling spiritual tapes and magazines on commission.

The local elementary and secondary schools that Shewan attended were typical – overcrowded and poorly lit – making learning difficult. In addition, although he began his early studies in his native language of Amharic, by the time he entered secondary school he was expected to study almost exclusively in English.

Despite these challenges, Shewan says: “I loved school, studied a lot, and was very focused, always wanting to do the best – and I did! I really loved sciences, especially biology and chemistry.” To this day **he credits his mother for passing on her own commitment to education – “I got it from her,” he says.**

He also has happy memories of playing soccer, singing in the church choir, and learning to play guitar and piano. In fact, it was his music that helped launch him into the next phase of his life.

On finishing secondary school, Shewan did not pass the university entrance examination as he had hoped, so decided to train as a health assistant in a hospital. Though he thought he would enjoy this work, once he started in the field he realized it was not for him. So he made a shift, and for the next several years he taught music and English, working as a private tutor in Addis. He found teaching rewarding and even today he hears words of appreciation from some of his former students.

During this period Shewan also devoted a lot of time to singing in a gospel choir. Through the choir he became friends with a Swedish missionary, who arranged for him to come to a small town in the north of Sweden to study music for a year.

“I have a big appreciation for what they do. It was an amazing gift for me.”

Though in retrospect he appreciates the life lessons that he learned there, at the time the long, cold, dark winter months were quite a shock!

After returning home to Ethiopia a year later, he and his musical group were invited to perform at a religious youth conference in Atlanta, Georgia and since that time Shewan has lived in the U.S.

After a period in Atlanta, Shewan (along with his friends from the musical group) moved to Washington, D.C., where there is a large Ethiopian community. It was at this time that, through a chance conversation, Shewan learned about Academy of Hope. Although he hadn’t planned to get a GED, he says, **“I had a lot of time, I was new to the place, and I figured I’d better spend time doing something meaningful**

.” Despite the fact that he possessed a secondary school diploma from Ethiopia, he decided to come to AoH to strengthen his English and learn about computers, figuring that “anything more will help”. And although he entered with low writing skills, in just four months time – with the support of Marja Hilfiker – Shewan passed the GED exam with high marks.

Around this time, he and his musical group (who were also then enrolled at AoH) performed to help raise funds for Academy of Hope.

About AoH, Shewan says: “It is an amazing place. Especially coming from Ethiopia, coming in contact with **people who touch your life, each in their own way – they inspire you to be the best you can be. It’s like a family you have never known. You just feel connected. They have your best interest at heart and just want to help you. It’s not difficult to thrive in that environment.**”

Noting that many of those who helped him at AoH were volunteers, Shewan admires their efforts “to give back” and considers this “another way of living, being able to get past yourself and make someone else’s life better and significant. It’s a selfless life and, in the end, very meaningful.” He credits **AoH staff** for “their support and encouragement, and **believing in what I could achieve.**” Not surprisingly, he says, **“I have a big appreciation for what they do. It was an amazing gift for me.”**

On obtaining his GED, Shewan entered the University of the District of Columbia for pre-pharmacy studies. Though he had some financial aid, he still needed to work full time while he continued his full time studies, in order to take care of himself, buy books and maintain a good grade average, and also send money home to his family in Ethiopia. Throughout this period he rose at 6:00 am, was at UDC by 7:00, studied and attended classes until 3:00 pm, and then took public transport to get to his job in a hotel from 4:00 pm until 12:30 am. He’d return home by 2:00 am and then start again the next morning. While this was grueling, it was the only way. As he says, **“Anything worthwhile doesn’t come easy.”**

Regarding his studies, Shewan believes that **“everything happens for a reason and without the GED, I wouldn’t be where I am now.”** Not only did his GED make it possible to enter UDC. But once he was there, “having a GED saved me a lot of time because I didn’t have to take basic level classes.”

After four years of study, in May 2011, Shewan graduated Magna Cum Laude from his professional doctoral degree program. Marja Hilfiker and her husband were proud to have been present for this momentous occasion in Shewan’s life, as well as in the life of Academy of Hope!

In July 2011 Shewan passed his pharmacy licensing examination. And in August of that year, he was recruited by the Medical Center Health System in Odessa, Texas, which he describes as a booming oil industry town with a vibrant economy. Although he was skeptical at first, after going out to see the hospital and meet the staff, he says, “It was an easy decision.”

Shewan started working as a Staff Pharmacist in September 2011. He says, “Although it is flat and hot and dry, the people are warm and friendly. I’m happy with my job, like what I do, and am grateful to work in a hospital setting, which will help later if I decide to relocate.”

As for his family in Ethiopia, whom he calls and writes to regularly, he says, “they are happy, proud of my accomplishments, and excited for me”.

And so is everyone at AoH.

Our sincere congratulations, Shewan, and best wishes for your continued success!

“I Believe I Can Fly”

Debbie Rhinehardt

Despite years of abuse and illness, Debbie Rhinehardt has stood up to it all and come through. She has obtained her EDP, her BA and – soon – she will have her MA. She has raised two independent sons and established a long-standing marriage to a wonderful man. Debbie is a tower of strength and an inspiration to us all.



Debbie and Wendell have been a great support to each other throughout this journey.

Born in Washington, DC in 1956, Debbie grew up in a large, multi-generational family. But from the age of five, she was abused by a close relative and was threatened to keep silent about what he was doing to her. Debbie recalls that she quickly became “a problem child” and, by age nine, she was (wrongly) picked up for stealing. Debbie was so frightened by her mother’s violent reaction at the police station that she started staying with an aunt on weekends. “I was mostly running”, she says. Then, when she was 12, Debbie was raped and, again, threatened if she did not keep quiet. This time the abuser was a cousin’s husband.

By 8th grade she was “hooking school” and hanging out with friends, drinking beer and listening to music. At 14 Debbie became pregnant, and her angry parents sent her to live with an aunt in NY. But she didn’t stay long, as she was again abused, this time by her aunt’s husband. Debbie fled to live with her grandmother, who finally offered a safe and loving home. “If it weren’t for her, I would probably have ended up homeless and on drugs.”

With the birth of her first son, Paul, in 1970, Debbie started night school at Garnett-Patterson Junior High School and worked from 6am – 3pm at a Hot Shoppe Junior. Her plan was to graduate from Cardozo High School. However, each evening as she left school, the man who had raped her when she was 12 was waiting for her. She dropped out in the 11th grade.

Debbie continued at her job, and during the summer worked at a DC recreation center, where she met her first husband. He was older, bought her clothes and gave her money for the baby; soon she moved in with him. They married when she became pregnant with her second son, but the marriage ended three years later when her husband became abusive and she realized that he was dealing drugs.

Still, he had seen potential in her, and Debbie proved him right. She got a job through OIC and started a full-time one-year educational program.

“If it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t have a high school diploma today.”

She studied English and typing, and prepared for the federal Civil Service Exam. Debbie eventually passed the exam as a GS 4, but was only able to get a job as a GS 3 due to the fact that she had no office experience. Over the coming years she worked at a number of federal government agencies, as well as at Safeway Bakery and Giant Pharmacy. She held increasingly responsible positions, moving from data entry to high-level administration.

At 21 Debbie went out one evening with a friend and had the great good fortune to meet Wendell Rhinehardt, an officer at the DC Department of Corrections. He would become the love of her life, the man who helped her get through many rough times, and has always been there for her when she needed him. Still, it would take 13 years before they got together for good.

During this period, Debbie's ex-husband took her children away to South Carolina and she became depressed. It took five years to get them back. But in 1992, after years of watching out for her wellbeing, Wendell proposed to Debbie – "twenty years ago", they proudly point out.

Unfortunately, around the same time, while working at Kohl's Department Store, Debbie developed pain in her legs. It was diagnosed as fibromyalgia and meant that she had to quit her job. Out of work, Debbie decided it was finally time to get her high school diploma. Though her initial attempts were not successful, she finally found the Academy of Hope.

When Debbie first called the Academy of Hope in the late 1990s she says she felt "at home" from the start. However, her illness soon worsened, to the point where she was ready to quit the program. But Marja Hilfiker gave her a call and asked when she was planning to return to school, and that changed everything for Debbie. "If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have a high school diploma today." Her return was a bit bumpy, due to illness, but in 2003 Debbie completed her EDP -- and in 2004 Wendell began tutoring math at AoH! About Academy of Hope, Debbie says, that she "kind of clung on. When I walked in that door, they were like family. They gave me advice, told me "you just have to work it!" It is a wonderful, marvelous place. I could have graduated earlier, but they made me so comfortable I didn't want to leave. But I set a goal to graduate, and finally it was just time for me to move on."

Still, even as she has gone forward in her life, Debbie keeps a copy of the poem (and song) that was printed on the back of her AoH graduation program, called "I Believe I Can Fly". It remains a source of inspiration for her to this day. With her high school diploma, Debbie enrolled at Trinity Washington University in Spring 2004. She did well, but as her illness progressed she could no longer manage to climb the stairs at the University and found herself in a wheel chair.

But Debbie did not give up. As she approached her graduation in 2012, with a 3.1 GPA, she decided that she would walk to the stage to receive her diploma. Slowly, through daily walks with her dog, Debbie built up her strength. And when she walked up to that stage on graduation day, she received not only her diploma but a standing ovation from the crowd.

Today Debbie is studying online for a master's degree in counseling through Grand Canyon University. Her son Paul is married with three children, and doing computer work. Her son Rocky is engaged, has a master's degree, and teaches music in the DC school system. When asked about Debbie, her devoted husband Wendell says, "She is phenomenal, resilient. After all her medical problems, she still hangs in there. She never gave up, she makes me proud." Debbie makes the entire AoH community proud as well!

“I thought I couldn’t learn, and here I am!”

Rafael Salamanca

This is the story of a fighter and a survivor, a remarkable man working every single day to make progress and provide a better life for his family. The most recent of his many life accomplishments is completing his NEDP course in September 2012.



Rafael Salamanca was born in 1973 in La Union, El Salvador. Despite the political tension and violence of the country at that time, his memories of his childhood are warm and happy. While his father was away much of the time, commuting many hours each day to work in the fish business in San Miguel, Rafael was taken under the wing of his grandfather. From the age of five until he started school at seven, Rafael spent his time on his grandfather’s farm, helping to feed the animals, ride horses, and just “hang out” with the grandfather he adored and who adored him. Recalling this important relationship, Rafael says of his grandfather, “he was something special for me.”

Rafael recalls that his first year in school was easy, but that things were more difficult in second grade, and so he was held back. By the time he was 11 the civil war in his country was raging, and young boys such as himself and his four brothers were at risk of being forced into military service, either by the government or the insurgents. When his eldest brother was abducted by the military, the family managed to get him out through the help of an uncle who was a high-ranking military officer.

That experience led Rafael’s parents in 1984 to flee to the US to protect their family. For a price, “cayotes” led the Salamancas and about 100 others to cross through Central America and finally to the US.

Rafael remembers being hidden in the back of a truck behind a wall of sacks of ice and pumpkins as they crossed from Mexico into the US, and then spending ten hours in Houston without anything to eat or drink. After a journey of two weeks they finally arrived in Washington, DC, where they were met by other family members.

Once settled in the US, both Rafael’s father and mother worked “day and night at menial jobs”. But the family settled in, and Rafael did well in elementary and junior high school. Though he didn’t speak English when he arrived, he mastered his new language and delivered a speech at his elementary school graduation, eliciting applause and a standing ovation from the audience! He continued doing well throughout junior high school, even receiving a couple of certificates when he graduated. His accomplishments made his parents proud.

Things changed dramatically in 1990, however, when Rafael’s mother was diagnosed with cancer. Two years later, she returned to El Salvador and Rafael never saw her again. Dealing with this enormous loss during his senior year in high school, Rafael dropped out. He had lost his desire to obtain his diploma and knew that he needed to work to help his father support the family. He started as a dishwasher in an Italian restaurant and gradually worked his way up, first as a bus boy and then as a waiter and bar tender, learning new skills along the way. In 1994, Rafael received his “green card” and so became a legal resident in the United States. This allowed him to start returning to visit family in El Salvador from time to time, and to meet and finally marry his wife,

Laura. As she was a college graduate with a good job in the government, Laura stayed in El Salvador while Rafael continued working in DC, with both of them making trips back and forth to keep the family close. They have two daughters. It was during one of Laura's DC visits in 2003 that Rafael confronted yet-another life-changing event – he was assaulted on the street one night on his way home from his job. Having been robbed of his money and his car, he was left unconscious in the street.

“I lost track of time, I lost track of everything.”

After a day of worrying that he hadn't returned home, and three more days searching everywhere, Laura finally found Rafael in George Washington Hospital, badly beaten and suffering from severe brain damage. He remained in a coma for 21 days.

Rafael spent two months in the hospital and another three in the National Rehabilitation Hospital receiving cognitive and physical therapy. At the end of his stay he had a severe short-term memory problem and was told that he would never walk again. Indeed, when the nurse came into his room on his last day at NRH with a wheel chair, Rafael's memory was so bad that he did not remember that he was not able to walk. He says, “I lost track of time, I lost track of everything”.

Though he was 170 pounds at the time of the assault, he gained 50 pounds in the hospital and rehab center. This made caring for him – getting him out and around in the wheel chair – all the more difficult for Laura, who had decided to stay in DC and care for her husband. Fortunately the children were able to rejoin Laura and Rafael, coming to stay with one of his brothers in Alexandria. For the next five months, Rafael went to NRH daily for therapy. Finally, after a lot of out-patient therapy and determined effort, in 2004 he was able to walk again. Looking back, Rafael says, “I had to learn how to do everything – walk, brush my teeth, feed myself. After all of this, I have learned a lot”.

In addition to struggling to regain basic life skills, between 2005 and 2007 Rafael worked as a teacher's aide in an after-school program for Spanish-speaking children in Edgewood Terrace. It was at that time that he learned about the Academy of Hope, and so in 2007 he came to Academy of Hope to find out about the GED program. However, due to a shooting in the area, he stopped working in the after-school program and did not return to Academy of Hope until 2009. By then his therapist at the Head Injury Rehabilitation Services (HIRS), who worked hard with him to improve his memory, emphasized the importance of a GED if he wanted to get a job. And so, with this strong encouragement, Rafael enrolled at the Academy of Hope in 2009.

Rafael says that at Academy of Hope, “they always treat you with respect, and like family – that's what I liked about it”. With a combination of encouragement from staff and volunteers and his own hard work, after two years he passed the GED practice test. However, when Rafael applied for special accommodation to take the GED exam (due to his brain injury he would need double time to complete the test), he learned that it could take up to six months to get approval from the Test Center.

Having worked so long and hard to get to that point, Rafael decided not to wait, but to start the National External Diploma Program (NEDP). He began in April 2012. Although he thought the NEDP would “be easier, it wasn’t that easy.

There is a lot of memorization.” While working on Book B he actually thought he “wasn’t going to make it”, but he “dedicated a lot of hours, kept going back to keep things in my memory. It’s a lot of work but a lot of learning and it’s worth it.”

*“... it wasn’t easy...
There is a lot of memorization.”*

Having completed all five sections of the course in September 2012, he will graduate from Academy of Hope in January 2013.

At this point Rafael says “a high school diploma is not enough” and that he “would like to do a two-year college degree. If I made it through high school I think I can do more. My memory is better, it takes a lot of practice but I know I can learn.” Because of his great desire to keep learning and return to work, Rafael recently went through a new round of neurological tests to see if he has the potential to go further in his education. Happily, the results show that he has made dramatic progress (going from 30% memory function at the time of the accident to 85% today). More than this, the doctors have told him that if he continues to work hard he can improve to above 90%. This is a major motivation to keep him working toward a better future.

Although Rafael says “I should have done this earlier when my memory was better”, he also states that, “it is never too late.” Reflecting on the assault and its aftermath, he says, “Everything has a meaning. Without it, I would probably still be working in a restaurant. Now I want a higher education. The more I learn, the more I want to learn – it’s great!”

His other motivation is personal. “I have a family and kids, so I can’t give up.” He is now happy to be able to help his 12 and 16-year old daughters with their homework. Their grades are good and that makes him proud. He says, “I’m lucky to have them. Without them I might not have thought of going back to school. They motivated me. I struggled to get out of a wheel chair and now I tell the kids, ‘look at me!’ I’m learning not just for me, but because I want something for my family.”

“I have a family and kids, so I can’t give up.”

In preparation for the next phase of his education, Rafael will continue with classes at AoH, trying to learn as much as possible in order to get credit for UDC courses “and not waste the little money I’ll have for college.” His main areas of interest are math (the subject in which he has done the best, as he really likes solving problems) and working with children. With the support of the career counselor at AoH, he hopes to find work that would combine these two areas.

For now, Rafael would like to find part-time work and remain a part-time student. “If I continue with perseverance, dedication, and enthusiasm, as I did in elementary and junior high school, I will accomplish a very important goal in my education. Academy of Hope has inspired me to believe in myself and believe I can still learn.” He says with a smile, “I will stick around AoH until the beginning of next year – if they allow me!”



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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