

Higher Achievement: Nearly 200 adults celebrate high school diplomas.

By Julia O'Donoghue
The Connection

It was not until her third try that Herndon resident Nidiah Walker passed the general education development test (GED) and received her high school equivalency certificate.

"The first thing I did was I took my test results to my boss and I got a raise. And it was a big raise too," said Walker, the student selected from Fairfax County's GED program to speak at the adult education graduation Aug. 7.

Not too many months before, Walker had considered a high school diploma out of reach. She was discouraged after failing the GED exam the first time and stopped attending test preparation classes. "I felt like my life was a dead end," said Walker.

Then one day, the 26-year-old was reading through e-mails. Her coworkers were sending out announcements of raises and promotions. Walker decided she wanted more than the status quo.

She had always been grateful to her boss for hiring her without a high school diploma, but her boss had always encouraged her to finish school too.

Walker returned to her GED preparation class and attended every session — only to fail the test again. Walker promised herself she wouldn't give up this time.

"I failed the test again but I didn't stop there," said Walker, who was juggling full-time work and parenting on top of her night time classes.

On the third try, when she was certain she was ready, Walker passed the exam — which consists of five tests over several hours — with flying colors.

Last week, standing at a podium before 200 of her peers, Walker acknowledged that what set the adult graduates apart from others was perseverance.

"We all know there are people out there who started like we did and got discouraged like we did too. But we kept trying until we succeeded," she said.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION is considered a milestone at any age but the moment seems to be cherished more when the adult graduates, ranging from age 18 to over 70 this year, walked across the stage of the Annandale High School auditorium last week.

Family and friends packed the sweltering hall on one of the hottest days of the summer to see their loved ones in a cap and gown. A couple hundred had to settle for overflow seating in nearby classrooms during the ceremony.

As adults, no one was there to try to push these students through school. They were only there because they wanted to be accountable to themselves, said several Fairfax County officials involved in adult education.

"Our students are here because they want to be. They are adults and many of them work full time or have families. They are very motivated to finish," said Carolyn Marsh, who teaches psychology at Woodson Adult High School.

The motivation to return to class and complete high school is more akin to finishing graduate school than secondary school, according to Fairfax County Public Schools superintendent Jack Dale.

"Each one of you came back and completed your work. That speaks to your conviction to get a diploma. You are more prepared for graduate school than most people with bachelor degrees," Dale told the graduates during the ceremony.

FAIRFAX COUNTY offers three options for finishing high school — the GED exam, Woodson Adult High School and the external diploma program. Though only a couple hundred students walked during the

official graduation ceremony, the county graduated 802 adults from the three programs this year.

The GED exam remains the most popular option for finishing high school, with 2,000 people enrolled in Fairfax County's GED classes and 1,320 people sitting for the test this year, according to Jane Cruz, the administrator for Fairfax County's adult high school completion programs.

Cruz said there may be a public misperception that the GED is easy but only 632 out of the 1320 people who took the test in Fairfax County passed this year. Some estimates conclude that about 40 percent of students who graduate from the nation's traditional high schools could not pass the test, she said.

Younger people who were enrolled in traditional day high schools tend to be attracted to the GED exam rather than Woodson Adult High School or the external diploma program, said Cruz.

WOODSON Adult High School offers the same courses and same diploma as a traditional high school. More than 50 years old, the school enrolls approximately 1,500 students with about a 65 to 70 percent of the adults speaking English as a second language.

Typically, Woodson pupils are between 19 and 25 years old. They are allowed to take between one and five classes per semester and pay between \$54 and \$540 for six months of classes based on their household income.

"Most of our students only pay \$54," said Cruz.

Like many Woodson Adult High School students, the school's graduation speaker last week, Angel Rodriguez, transitioned into the adult education program after taking English language classes.

When Rodriguez arrived from El Salvador in 2002, he only knew five words of English -- hi, hello, bye, with and no. Rodriguez decided to take English classes when a miscommunication almost lost him his first job in Fairfax County.

"My boss told me to mop that floor. I didn't know what he said so I told him 'no.' He asked me again and I said 'no' again," said Rodriguez in his speech last week.

After completing some English courses, Rodriguez enrolled at Woodson in February 2003.

Some come into Woodson Adult High School with credits — either from their home country or a day school in the United States — but Rodriguez had none.

In spite of a large family, Rodriguez attended classes four nights per week for four years. He woke up for work at 6 a.m. in the morning and did not arrive home until 10:30 p.m. after class most nights. He became a model student, passing all his Virginia Standard of Learning exams on the first try.

As a graduate of Woodson, Rodriguez plans to volunteer as a math tutor for other people hoping to finish high school, he said.

"I want to urge all of you who haven't graduated, don't give up," he said.

OLDER STUDENTS seeking to finish high school tend to be attracted to external diploma program, which enrolls 338 students, said Cruz. Students must complete a series of five task booklets that test for 65 competencies to earn the equivalent of a high school diploma through the program. They meet one-on-one with an assessor each week but are able to do the work at home, said Cruz.

Before starting the external diploma program, students are evaluated and must have the literacy of at least a ninth grade student. If they struggle with material during the program, they can meet with a tutor one-on-one, enroll in a class or join a larger study group and stay on track, said Cruz.

The external diploma program also allows students to leave their studies for large chunks of time without being penalized, she said.

The flexibility of the external diploma program was exactly what Katerin Tamara needed to finish high school, the graduate said while speaking at the Adult Education graduation.

Tamara had tried to finish high school a few times since dropping out when she was 17 years old, but had a difficult time fitting classes into her work schedule. Six months into one adult high school completion program, she had a disruption in her housing situation and at work and had to stop going to class, she said.

Without the external diploma program, Tamara said she might have never finished high school. She now has plans to join the U.S. Army Reserves and attend Northern Virginia Community College to work toward a degree in structural engineering.

"This night is evidence to me and my peers that we can do more than anyone thinks possible," she said.