

Our Heroes

The following are brief biographies of individuals who have gone back to school, improved their work skills and established themselves as role models to promote Literacy and Lifelong Learning in a Triad-area Communications Campaign.



Our Heroes in the “Give Yourself A Chance” Initiative are real people, but they are not ordinary people. In the process of gaining an education, they faced difficult obstacles. Some floundered. Some fell. They picked themselves up, repeatedly. They are fighters. And they all found the strength to carry on toward the goal of improving their education in order to enjoy a better life. Experience is the best teacher. The experiences of **Our Heroes** qualify them as positive role models. Their stories will inspire others who come to realize the importance of pursuing lifelong education.

Choose a Hero			
Devon Jones	Shari Stancil	Meagan Dillon	Mae Stephenson
Almeria Gammon	Bessie Sydnor	Tina Barnes	Kaelyn Williams
Christopher Cook	Jeffrey Hamilton	Kathy Goodlet	

Devon Jones

“I just heard a voice saying, ‘Go back to school’

Devon Jones works at the High Point campus of Guilford Technical Community College. It was there that she received her GED in the spring of 2007. Her job now is to help other students in the Basic Skills Program and she loves it. She keeps in touch with the students, giving them encouragement and making sure they’re doing well. She’s perfect for the job because she knows the importance of a friendly pat on the back along with encouraging words.

Devon’s story is similar to many others who have dropped out of high school. She struggled. She worked in low paying jobs and after losing one of those jobs she cried and asked herself what she was going to do. “I just heard a voice saying, ‘Go back to school,’” she says. She had serious doubts. It had been years since she dropped out, but that voice kept telling her to go back to school. So finally she went to GTCC and took some tests and passed everything except math. “Math was the toughest,” she says. “It was so challenging, but I just told myself I’m going to have to learn patience and start feeling better about myself and my abilities.” Devon claims it was the Serenity Prayer commonly attributed to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr that helped her to make it through.

God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And wisdom to know the difference;

Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace.

“I used to have a hard time accepting ‘no’. I was so impatient. If I wanted something I wanted it right then. So it was frustrating when math was so hard for me. But the GTCC staff helped so much to encourage me. Sometimes someone would see me and stop and ask if I was having trouble and they’d give me words of encouragement. I got so much help that I just kept working at it. Eventually I realized that I was where I should be,” Devon says.

Devon was chosen to talk at her GED graduation ceremony. She was nervous. But when she got up to speak, she looked out at the audience and it suddenly struck her. They were all just like her. They had all struggled. Devon talked about her own troubles, which had started in childhood and led to some bad decisions. But as Devon says, “We all make mistakes in life. You can’t erase them but you can clean things up and make those bad decisions irrelevant.” Devon says by the end of her talk she was floating because she could feel the other students understood her. They knew all about those struggles because they’d had gone through them too.

Devon says bad decisions often cause people to stop their progress, “People beat themselves up too much and it keeps them from moving forward to where they should be. I spent years beating myself up. Now I think I’m alright. In my life, alright is good enough. I’m doing what I have the ability to do. I know I’m smart enough. I’m a good mother to my two children. I’m a good person and I have something to give the world. And that’s what I’m doing.”

At a young age, Devon has found the secret to happiness...and success.

Shari Stancil
“School is hard, but I’m up to the challenge.”

“Good things are happening to me now.” That’s the way 23-year-old Shari Stancil describes her present life. A high school dropout, she had her ups and downs in the real world before deciding to go to community college to get her GED. Now she has a grade point average of 3.75 with four A’s and one B after completing her first semester in the Paralegal Technology Program at the High Point campus of Guilford Tech Community College. In fact her academic performance has been so good she has high hopes of becoming a lawyer one day.

Shari dropped out of school in the ninth grade and had a daughter who’s now six years old and in kindergarten. Shari says her daughter is her inspiration for success. “Every time I get an ‘A’ she’s so excited. She asks me everyday how I did in school. She’s my biggest supporter.”

A turbulent home life meant that Shari was forced to accept unusual responsibilities at an early age. “I was taking care of my brothers and sisters at home and it was just so hard,” says Shari. She dropped out of school at age 15, had a baby at 16, and then went to work. She was a store manager when only 17 but Shari found that she couldn’t get the jobs she really wanted without a

high school diploma. When she suddenly lost her job she also had to find a new home and that's when she decided to go back to school to get her GED.

All through public school Shari had been a good student. In the eighth grade she had been in the National Honor Society. And when she went back to school she got her GED in only three weeks. According to Shari, "I picked it up very quickly and then I wrote an essay and was offered a scholarship to enroll in the Paralegal Technology Program at GTCC." And now, Shari says the good news keeps pouring in, "I just got a letter in the mail today saying I made the dean's list in my first semester. I'm very excited about that." After finishing at GTCC she wants to transfer to a four-year university and pursue a BA degree in Political Science or Criminal Justice and then she wants to go to law school.

Shari has big dreams. "First I plan to keep doing well in school. I'm also looking for a part time job while in school. I want to be the best I can be. I'd love to work in law. That would mean several more years of studying. School is hard, but I'm up to the challenge."

She sums up her life story with some sage advice for anyone who dropped out of school. "Getting your GED is so important. A lot of people think it's not as good as a high school diploma but that GED opens doors and then you can further your education. I tell people not to dwell on the struggle. That's not going to get you anywhere. You just have to keep pushing ahead." Shari says what's past is past and it's the rest of her life that's important now.

Meagan Dillon
"You have to want it."

Meagan Dillon is ambitious. She has a burning desire to succeed. She knows that a good education is necessary in order to get a good job, and step-by-step she's achieving her goals. At a young age, Meagan is an instructor at Davidson County Community College, helping others to reach their goals.

With the title of Assessment Specialist in the Get REAL program at DCCC, she assists students in the college application process and tutors students working to obtain their GED or high school diploma. She earned her high school diploma through the same program. While helping others, she's also enrolled as a student at DCCC. And she's nearing one of her goals, to earn an associate's degree in science. Meagan plans to advance to a four-year college where she'll study to become a Psychiatric Nurse and possibly pursue a master's degree.

Regarding work, she says she enjoys tutoring one-to-one. As a child, she wanted to be a teacher and she always knew she was going to college. It was expected in her family and she's been a good student. Meagan says, "I have goals and I pursue them. I've been a caretaker in my family and I enjoy helping people, so the teaching job is perfect for me and being a Psychiatric Nurse will help me to follow the path I've chosen."

Meagan says we should promise ourselves to get a good education and then keep at it. In her words, “You have to want it. Wanting it is the key. Many people just settle for something. Some are in college and don’t really have a goal and then they drop out because the burn isn’t there, but you have to make up your mind that you can do it and keep going even when the going gets tough.”

Meagan encourages students to stay focused on the reason they’re in school. “Just lighting a fire under people is so important,” she says. When asked what’s the secret in motivating everyone to work hard to ensure success in school she says, “I wish I knew the answer to that dilemma. Sometimes we just need to push people, to help them see what they can have by getting their college degree.”

She wishes everyone would attend a GED graduation ceremony at a community college. In her words, “It’s a very emotional celebration. I cry every time!” Meagan says a good education is needed now more than ever, “I’ve been inspired recently by seeing so many adults who’ve lost their jobs in Davidson County and they’re going back to school to get a GED. It’s like they’re starting all over in life. But better to do that than not to get an education. Many of the students are the first in their families to go to college. It’s all about making a goal and then sticking to it. That’s how you make good things happen. You have to want it, and don’t let up until you’ve crossed that finish line.”

Mae Stephenson

“I’ve always been competitive and I don’t plan to stop now.”

Story from Ed Williams ACC Public Information Officer- 336-506-4178

Mae Stephenson at 76 is graduating with a 3.8 grade point average. Not bad for someone who last went to school in the early 1950s.

After 41 years in the textile industry operating a sewing machine, Mae found herself out of work when WestPoint Stevens closed and sent the work overseas.

“I planned on dying at my machine. I was scared and disappointed,” said Mae. “We were close. We spent more of our time with our co-workers than with our families.”

A graduate of Graham High School, Mae went to work at the former Erwin Mills in 1963. Over the years she worked in various textile plants in Hillsborough, Durham, and Burlington. Then came the day in 2005 when WestPoint Stevens closed. Mae said, “I refused to believe it would really close. It broke my heart.”

Since WestPoint Stevens was NAFTA-approved, employees received benefits and funds to go to college if they desired. Mae decided that was the route she would take. “When I told one of my co-workers I was going to enroll at Alamance Community College, she said, ‘You’re too old to go to school.’ That did it. It made me more determined to succeed.”

Over four years, Mae took classes that included core subjects like algebra, a subject she never took during Eisenhower-era high school. “That was hard at first for me,” she said. “Very hard. I took my math book with me wherever I went. But this semester I’ve been helping younger classmates with their math.”

Mae persevered through the detail-oriented courses in Medical Office Administration. She was sidelined last fall after she broke two bones in her neck. But she returned in spring 2009, completing her final two courses to earn her associate’s degree.

Did Mae ever consider retirement after losing her job? “No. I can’t be idle and just sit on my backyard deck. I wanted to stay active and learn something new.”

While attending ACC, Mae often stayed on campus from 7:30 a.m. until after 7 p.m., doing most of her studying at the college. She was also determined to make good grades.

That she did, landing on the President’s List at least three times and finishing this summer with a 3.8 grade point average. “Just being ‘good’ is not good enough for me,” she said. “I’ve always been competitive. And I don’t plan to stop now.”

Almeria Gammon

“No matter what life throws at you, you will make it if you work hard.”

Story from Edward Williams, Alamance CC Public Information Officer- 336-506-4178

Almeria Gammon never imagined she would be walking across a stage to receive a college degree. But that’s what she’ll do July 17th when handed her associate degree in Culinary Technology.

A Caswell County native, Almeria dropped out of high school and spent 40 years working at various textile manufacturers, primarily as a weaver. She was employed at Culp, Inc. for nine years when it closed in 2006.

Feeling lost, she enrolled at Alamance Community College. She had earned her GED in the 1990s, but this was Almeria’s first real taste of a college campus. She participated in ACC’s Career Transitions class, which gives the unemployed 100 free hours of instruction in keyboarding and computers, prior to enrolling as a fulltime student.

“Losing your job is like a grieving process,” she said. “It’s like having a rug pulled out from under you and nowhere to go. Career Transitions was wonderful. It helped get me ready to take college classes.”

Almeria, 59, began at ACC in 2006, just three days after her husband came home after having 5-way bypass surgery. “I was a basket case. But the teachers at ACC were so understanding and

helpful. Doris Schomberg, one of my culinary instructors, told me she would help me achieve what I needed.”

During her three years at ACC, Almeria became a work study student for Schomberg, appeared on the Dean’s List, and reinvented herself in a new career.

Her co-op class placed her in the kitchen at Twin Lakes Community Center, a facility for senior adults in Alamance County. Almeria fit in so well she has been hired. She is now a member of the Dietary Managers Association, and this fall will become certified.

“No matter what life throws at you, you will make it if you work hard,” she said.

Bessie Sydnor
“It’s Never Too Late to Try”

It took a lot of nerve for Bessie Sydnor to go to college. It had been nearly 35 years since she graduated from high school. She says, “I was computer illiterate and wasn’t sure I could succeed.” But she wanted more out of life and was convinced that a career in health care was just the right ticket. She applied and was accepted at the Yanceyville campus of Piedmont Community College, and at age 53 she found herself back in the classroom.

On her first test she made a 100! And from then on she just kept surprising herself...and maybe her teachers and classmates. But she soon discovered they were all on her side. “Every time I got a good grade I yelled, screamed, jumped up and down. I got very excited,” she says. Her younger classmates, who called her Mrs. Sydnor, were as happy as she was and her teachers kept telling her, “You can do it.”

She says it wasn’t easy taking care of housework, cooking for her husband and helping with four grandchildren, but she attended all her classes, often read three chapters at night and studied hard. When it was all over, and the last grade was posted, she had an average of 97...an “A”!

Now she has certificates as a Certified Nursing Assistant and Family Caregiver... and a computer that she uses regularly.

Bessie Sydnor says she has new confidence. She loves her work. And she tells all her friends and family, “Believe in yourself. If I can do it, you can too. You can work hard and learn new skills. And if you’re out of school, you should go back, no matter how long you’ve been out of the classroom!”

Tina Barnes
“Give Yourself A Chance”

Tina Barnes was only four months away from getting her high school diploma at East Forsyth High School back in 1990...so close, and yet...
Here's her story, in her own words.

“I had my senior picture and had only 4 months to go till I got my diploma but then...I don't know...I just lost my sense of direction. I got involved in a relationship. That relationship eventually failed. It was a mistake. If I had known then what I know now, I'd already be a Registered Nurse.

I always wanted to be a nurse. Since dropping out, I've worked as a nurse's assistant. But I want to finish what I started. I want that degree, to prove to myself and others that I have what it takes to succeed.

Now I'm just one week away from getting my GED. I've worked so hard. I am so determined. I've hung in there but it hasn't been easy. I'm a single parent with children seven and four years old. I work third shift from 11 at night 'till 7 in the morning. I go to my classes on Wednesday and Friday and I study, study, study. I even help another lady with her math, with her integers and stuff. And I enjoy that. It makes me feel good to help somebody else cause I've had help from my teachers and help with taking care of my kids.

I take the math test for my GED next Thursday. After I get my GED then I plan to be in school for another three to four years because I'm going to study at Forsyth Tech to become a Registered Nurse. Eventually I want to be director of nursing.

My advice to others is to please go back. Go back to school if you want a better job, and to help your kids. You will not make it in life without a high school diploma or a GED. I tell people to ask yourself where you want to be in 5 or 10 years. You'll at least give yourself a chance if you get a high school degree or GED.

It's hard but it's worth it. I've tried so hard. I get teary eyed when I think about how I've tried and how determined I am. Living pay-check to pay-check is not good. Sometimes I cry cause I want it so bad, but I don't let my kids see me cry.
I tell my kids we're going to have a better life one day. My oldest child says, 'Mommy, you know you can do it.'

Now, when I get me GED I have a plan. You know that senior picture that I told you about. You get your senior picture right before you get your cap and gown and graduate from high school. I haven't been able to look at my senior picture for all these years. But when I get my GED I'll go through a graduation ceremony. Do you want to come? And I'm going to take a picture of me in my cap and gown. And I'll put that picture right beside my senior picture from high school. Then I'll know. I'll know I did it. I'm on my way!”
P.S. Tina Barnes passed the test!

“When they called to tell me I'm getting my GED, I just started screaming. I was screaming and crying at the same time. And now I'm smiling so much my face is hurting.”

P.P.S. The next day she enrolled in college!

Kaelyn Williams
“I Knew I Needed An Education”

Seventeen-year-old Kaelyn Williams is on her way to college. Most students begin college at age 18 but you might call Kaelyn a bit unconventional. She finished the 9th grade in Florida, then had a baby, moved to North Carolina and after only one more year of study she earned a high school equivalency degree, a GED.

“My daughter, Gracie, inspired me”, she says, “and my mother and other family members gave me the support I needed to make it through”. After finishing the ninth grade, she and her mother started working in her aunt’s restaurant. Kaelyn says transportation was a problem at first since the three had only one car. But she received transportation help from the Stokes County JobLink Office in order to attend classes.

One thing surprised Kaelyn about her GED classes. She says she was not the youngest student. At age 17 she expected all the other students to be older. But she says her fellow students and her teachers were supportive and she made lasting friendships along the way.

Kaelyn says, “I knew I needed an education and then a good career to support my daughter and to buy a house. Now, I’m going to college.”

She has not decided on a career yet, but will begin the usual core classes this coming spring at Forsyth Tech Community College.

But first there’s the issue of graduation. She’s looking forward to wearing her cap and gown and marching across the stage with her fellow classmates later this week. She’ll proudly grasp that diploma in Wait Chapel at Wake Forest University.

Her grandparents are coming up from Florida to witness the happy occasion, along with her mother and daughter. She says she hasn’t planned to reward herself for her hard work but she hears that her mother has a nice surprise for her.

Her final words to others who are considering going back to school to get a GED, “Go for it. Getting a GED feels really great. I’m so glad I was still able to get an education.”

Christopher Cook
From Living on the Streets to College Bound

You might call Christopher Cook a homeless person. He doesn't much like that label. He'd prefer to be known as a college student who happens to have lived on the streets for the past two years.

In November of 2008, at the age of 23, Christopher received a high school diploma. That same night, in front of 260 others who were receiving either an adult high school diploma or a GED, he was also recognized as a scholarship winner to Forsyth Tech Community College.

Christopher's path in life has taken him places many people cannot even imagine. "Stuff sometimes happened that was out of my control", he says. "I left my dad to go live with my mother when I was 13. I was doing ok in school, not great, but ok. In high school I got so close to finishing. But then I dropped out. I only needed one more course to graduate. When I dropped out I just started moving around from place to place. Money was always tight at home. I wasn't real happy with my home situation, so I left. Sometimes I'd stay with someone I knew but a lot of times I just lived on the streets."

What was it like living on the streets?

"I'd get up and try to find something to eat. Sometimes I looked for a job, but I didn't always have one. I stayed outside in freezing cold weather. I'd get up and try to find something to eat. You do what you gotta do to survive. I'm not proud of some things. I was just getting by. Living day to day. I'd feel happy sometimes. Just knowing that I survived another day made me happy. But the loneliness got to me. That was the worst thing. I felt like I was on my own, me against the world. I stayed in homeless shelters sometimes, to warm up and get a good meal. But I had some bad experiences. Sometimes people would take things from me."

So, why did he decide to go back to school and get that diploma?

"I wanted to get it. It's just something I decided to do. I figured I could get it at Forsyth Tech. I actually was able to go online to take the math course that I needed to graduate. I used a computer at the Prosperity Center in Winston Salem or at the central library. I've always been interested in computers. I was pretty good at them in school so I've decided that's what I'll study in college. My goal is to work for a big computer company. Maybe get into programming, and then I might want to own my own company one day. I have a two year scholarship to Forsyth Tech. My plan is to get a two-year associates degree and then go to a four year university for a degree in IT, Information Technology. I'm on the waiting list to get into public housing. And I can use the bus for transportation to school."

What does getting an education now mean to him?

"I want to be something...to accomplish something instead of just being a number, a statistic. And I don't want to be known as that homeless person. I spent a lot of my life just wandering around, not knowing what to do with my life. But now I know. It was good to get that diploma."

Christopher's mother came to the graduation ceremony. They had not seen each other in two years. As time approached for the ceremony to begin, most people were in their seats. Christopher waited patiently, nervously at the door...hoping that his mother wouldn't disappoint him and would be able to come from Guilford County to see him in his blue cap and gown. And

he waited, and waited. Then, just before the ceremony was to begin, she walked in the door. They greeted each other warmly.

“It was emotional. We were happy to see each other. I hope to see her more often now.”

Christopher has a final bit of advice to others who have dropped out of school and may be wandering aimlessly in life...”If you want to get an education you should do it. Go for it. Life won’t get any easier without it. With jobs and the economy being the way they are, you need a good education. Don’t let nothing stop you.”

Jeffrey Hamilton

“I had to climb out of a deep, dark pit.”

Jeffrey Hamilton was a troubled youth. He started going with a bad crowd when he was 12. Jeffrey’s teen years were full of turmoil. He says he was kicked out of school twice and was in the 9th grade three times before he called it quits and dropped out for good. He says his life went from bad to worse, living on the streets as a homeless person, with nowhere to turn for support.

“I was affiliated with gangs. Not an official member. Didn’t go through initiation or anything. But I hung with them. Did the drugs and got into alcohol. I didn’t expect to live past the age of 20,” says Jeffrey. “I didn’t listen to my family. I burned my bridges and I just went down and down into a deep, dark pit, living on the streets, getting into all sorts of trouble. Finally I reached a point where the pain was just too much to bear.”

He dreamed of getting his GED, going to college and turning his life around, but low self-esteem and addictions held him back. The turnaround began when he enrolled in a substance abuse recovery program at Open Door Ministries, a homeless shelter in High Point. He was told about the Reading Connections literacy program in Greensboro and he enrolled in their six-week Workplace Employment Skills class. At the beginning of the class he was reading at a 7th grade level. Just a month later, he tested at the 10th grade reading level, and his scores were high enough for him to qualify to take the GED exam.

After graduating the Reading Connections’ program, Jeffrey found employment and passed all five GED tests. He’s now enrolled at Guilford Technical Community College studying to be a substance abuse counselor. Jeffrey says the Workplace Essential skills class gave him the confidence and the skills he needed to return to the workforce and to his education. As Jeffrey says, “I learned that if I put my mind to it, I could do anything.”

At the age of 23 Jeffrey goes to school. He has a strong support network to encourage him, and he conducts a Christian music ministry. He says he speaks to groups and tells his audiences that to use drugs is to die. He tells anyone using drugs to get out of that hole and that all things are possible. Jeffrey says some people don’t really understand, but he’s not afraid to say that when he was at his lowest point that’s when he surrendered himself to God and admitted that he needed help. He found the spiritual strength to climb out of that deep, dark pit.

Now the recognition and honors are coming in. In 2008 Jeffrey was awarded the National Honor of Hope Award, presented by President Bush, for turning his life around and pursuing his education.

What's ahead for Jeffrey Hamilton? "My goal", he says, "is to get a degree in human services in 2011 and help people as a drug abuse counselor and then maybe there's more college because I know that a good education leads to a higher level of living. Dreams can come true..."

Kathy Goodlet

"When you get that degree, you just going to want to keep going."

On most days you can find Kathy Goodlet in a public library in Burlington. She spends many hours each week there, often with her 14 year old daughter. If it sounds like Kathy is a bookworm, you're right. But it wasn't always that way. In fact she dropped out of school after the 11th grade. "I felt like I was in a world of my own," says Kathy, "like all the other kids were getting it and I wasn't."

But Kathy has undergone an amazing transformation. In fact she now works at Alamance Community College as a co-instructor in the GED program. So how did she go from being a struggling student and high school dropout to being a bookworm who helps others to get their GED?

Kathy always has had a yearn to learn. In fact, she was so inquisitive that some of her school teachers got irritated and made her feel stupid for asking so many questions. She says after being put in a corner as punishment, she stopped asking questions. And she fell further and further behind, even though she was promoted through school. Finally when she reached the 12th grade, she dropped out. She says she felt like she was wasting her time. Years later, after getting fed up with her underachieving life, she decided to go to Alamance Community College to try to get her adult high school diploma. She didn't have much confidence at first, but Kathy says she was inspired and got the boost she needed from a kind lady who volunteered as a tutor to help students complete their school work. That's when Kathy decided she wanted to do the same thing for others. And the rest is history.

She received her Adult High School Diploma more than 15 years ago. And now she works at the college from 8:30 until 11:30 helping students with their math and other school work. Kathy says many students feel intimidated to do math or to read in front of others but she helps them to overcome their fears and students thank her. Kathy says, "I know exactly what they're going through because I felt the same way too and I tell them about my struggles through school. It makes me feel so good when they overcome their fears and succeed in school."

In recent years Kathy has received her certificate in the Work Keys program and has worked at a charter school. She now works at Together House in Burlington where she helps people to learn how to live independently. She teaches them basic skills such as how to balance a check-book. Helping people has become her mission in life...that and to learn something new everyday.

“I just love to read,” says Kathy, “and that’s why you can usually find me in the library. Someone helped me to come out of my shell many years ago. It was the push I needed. Now I enjoy helping other people. I always tell the students to look at where you are now and I ask them where they want to be in five or ten years. And then I tell them they’re going to need that education. When you get that degree, you’re just going to want to keep going.”