

December Newsletter 2013

Turning Hope Into Opportunity

By: Dick Bulkowski

One of the things I enjoy most about this time of year is that it is filled with many expressions of hope. Whether it is volunteers serving a turkey dinner at the homeless shelter; folks buying Christmas gifts for children they do not know; or the anonymous donation to assist a struggling family with their heating costs. These moments and acts touch that unquenchable human longing for hope.

On Tuesday mornings I have the responsibility of providing an orientation to young adults who find their way to Steepletown in the pursuit of completing their GED. On average there are about four new faces a week or just over 200 young adults during the year. By the time we ring in the New Year it looks as if there will be nearly 60 youth who will have completed their GED at Steepletown and many others who will have made significant progress. This is encouraging news, especially for these young adults who now can enter college or other post-secondary training, and/or attain better jobs.

It is my opinion however that there are still far too many who do not complete their GED. It's not that they are without hope, for that is what got them to walk through Steepletown's doors in the first place. Unfortunately the barriers and challenges that surround their lives are difficult to escape. We can quickly blame the youth, and there is no doubt they are ultimately responsible for their own lives and decisions. Yet many of these youth have been so broken and discouraged that they doubt whether life will ever be better, which is why they often say they "don't care" when asked about their present circumstances. But deep down they do care, and so does the staff at Steepletown; it's our commitment and passion.

The people who work at Steepletown are amazing and will settle for nothing less than excellence. One of the Youth Advocates, Emilio Zamarripa, recently gave the keynote address at the Young Non-Profit Professionals 5th Annual Leadership Awards Ceremony. At this event he said: "Hope is such an important word, an important concept when working in this arena. Hope may be damaged, broken, shattered. But one thing I've learned is that there is no such thing as being completely hopeless."

I have been doing some research recently on the status of this cohort of young adults, ages 18-24. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation report released last year, the employment statistics for these young adults is the worst it has been since WW II. Steepletown is embarking on an exciting initiative starting in January called New Options:GR. If truth be known, this initiative has been in the planning process for the past year. However, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has made a recent commitment to fund further research and development of this initiative, which has the potential of changing the landscape on how these young adults connect with sustainable employment on their path to economic security.

Completing the GED

I believe we would all agree that a young person without a high school diploma is going to have a much more difficult time finding decent employment. The sobering truth though is that this impacts all of us. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (10/2010), the lost lifetime earnings for the class of dropouts in Kent County in 2010 is close to \$600 million. That economic impact truly effects all of us, and the social consequences are equally severe.

Recent GRPS graduation data has shown that less than 50% of the incoming freshmen are graduating after four years. It is not surprising that the 2011 U.S. Census update estimates close to 2,000 youth in Grand Rapids, ages 18-24, have not completed high school. One option for these youth is the completion of the GED (General Educational Development) Test. For the past few years Steepletown has emerged as a leader in Kent County in assisting these young adults in the development of their knowledge and academic skills in order to pass the GED Test.

The GED test was first launched in 1942, as a boost to the veterans whose education was interrupted when the U.S. joined World War II. The test allowed thousands of service members to get a credential they could use to go on to college. Since then, its reach has grown dramatically. By 1958, there were more civilians taking the test than veterans. Thanks to government incentives, the test has become a ticket to some federal jobs programs, college grants, and, for prisoners, a chance to get out of jail a little sooner. It also has given many undocumented immigrants a better shot at staying in the U.S.

The GED test has been revised several times over the years, but in 2014 it will undergo a complete overhaul. Now it's being aligned with more rigorous college and career readiness standards and will be far more difficult. To pass the new GED test, students will need some background knowledge, not just the ability to understand the passage in front of them. There will be more emphasis on critical thinking, more questions on science, and more writing. In addition, the scoring will change to identify whether the students who pass are just "high-school equivalent" or are at a new higher standard of "college- and career-ready."

The higher standards on the GED test will be paired with another change—starting next year, students will take the GED test on computers. Students will need to know keyboarding skills such as 'drag and drop,' scrolling, and clicking on multiple choice questions.

Steepletown has been anticipating these changes and will be ready to instruct and coach those young adults who have dropped out of school in the completion of their GED. Steepletown is fortunate to have a full-time teacher who is largely funded through a grant from the United Way. The GED lab is open Monday-Thursdays, from 9:00a.m.-noon, and 4:00-6:00p.m. Critical to the success of these youth are volunteer tutors and mentors!

Mentoring at Steepletown

By: Jermale Eddie

I have been mentoring a young man for over a year now. We have the same birthday, we both experienced the loss of a mother and we both know that God has put us together! I know that many of us watch the news or read the paper about the community that we live in and it seems that nothing good is happening. I wanted to let you know of a young, 19 year-old African American who is trying his best to not be "just another statistic." His name is Brooklynn.

When I met Brooklynn, it was obvious that he had lots of pain, trust issues, no direction, no goals and no caring adult in his life. I contacted Steepletown Neighborhood Services late one night after hearing about their tremendous GED program. I simply left a voicemail saying, "My name is Jermale Eddie. I have a degree in Education and a degree in Family Studies. How can I serve?" The next day Dick, the Executive Director, called me in to meet and a week or two later he called to tell me that he had someone for me to meet. Brooklynn seemed mad at the world and anyone in it. However, he also seemed to have a gentle side. It was as if he was looking for someone to love him, care for him and provide accountability for him. So, I introduced him to my friend Jesus right away.

Brooklynn started calling me every day to ask if I was going to church on Sunday. Even though it took a lot for my family and I to get out of the house even earlier to pick Brooklynn up for church, we did it with a smile. When Brooklynn would not be able to make it to church, my son Malachi would ask, "Where is Mr. Brooklynn?"

After having a rough childhood in Flint, of not having his father in his life, coming home to find his mother lifeless on the couch, being shipped to GR with his siblings to live with a verbally abusive sister, being homeless, being behind in school, dropping out, etc... maybe he had a right to be angry with the world. His sister took his social security card and birth certificate, so he could not get a job, go to school or anything. We worked with Degage Ministries and got him a new social security card, birth certificate and state ID.

Anissa would make comments on my "tough love" conversations with Brooklynn, but it seems that they have paid off. Below are just a few updates on this 19 year-old young man:

1. He has been working a pretty good job at Cascade Engineering (with another smaller company) for some time now. In fact, he has been working 10-12 hour days. I know that he has more money in his savings account than I have, that's for sure.
2. He has taken me out to eat several times as a Thank You.
3. He is working with a tutor that I recommended at \$25/hr so that he can pass his Math GED Test (the last one that he has to take).
4. He is going to church on his own every Saturday evening and sometimes coming with me on Sundays too.
5. He met, several times, with a Financial Advisor to discuss Life Insurance, Retirement and Budgeting.
6. On Friday, September 12, 2013, Brooklynn he moved into his own and first ever apartment.
7. He has SEEN God come through to meet some of his needs and desires.

As you can see, this young man is doing well for himself. I had to remind him what he had last year when we met and show him where he is now. He got excited at that point and I did too.

I ask that you would think about mentoring at least one person for as long as is needed by that person. Please do not just say, "I will sign up for a year." Simply pray, "Lord, please bring someone my way to mentor and pour into." He may have already put someone in your life, but you have passed them by. As they say in the church, "Is there one?"

Steepletown's New Pre-school

An article in the GR Press in the spring of 2010 pointed out that 83% of children entering kindergarten in Grand Rapids were assessed as not ready to learn. This prompted Dr. Nkechye Ezech, a professor at Aquinas College in early childhood education, to convene a group of community leaders to strategize on how to respond to this reality. The result was the creation of the Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative (ELNC), a partnership of seven community-based organizations, to address the lack of early childhood educational opportunities in specific core urban neighborhoods of Grand Rapids.

In October Steepletown opened a full-day preschool, located across the street from Steepletown in the Basilica Center. Opening this preschool is strategic, and fits well within the natural evolution of Steepletown's efforts. For the past several years Steepletown has been providing GED preparation for young adults, ages 16-24, who have dropped out of school. The attainment of this academic credential is critical to furthering their career opportunities and ultimately their household economic security. Reliable childcare has been a reoccurring barrier for many of these young adults who are already parents of children, ages 0-5. By providing an all-day preschool, the parents themselves can focus on completing their academic and career goals to move forward in life.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony was held on November 7th, one month after the preschool opened its doors. The children greeted their families and the other guests by singing a welcome song and "Steepletown has many friends". The need for these friends was made evident when the Director handed out apples to all those in attendance to "earn their favor", referring to the tradition of students bringing the teacher an apple at the beginning of a school year for similar reasons. Why? Because to continue this critical work, the support and advocacy of the community are needed. Mike Wawee, Jr., the Chairperson for Steepletown's Board, commented on how the preschool creates a strong partnership with 15 families from the surrounding neighborhood (15 because there are one set of twins) in the early education of their children, giving them the resources they need now to be successful later in life.

Taste the West Side

The annual Taste the West Side event is taking place on March 19, 2014. The event has been moved to the Goei Center over on Butterworth Street to allow Steepletown to accommodate more guests. One of the hallmarks of this event is the amazing food stations hosted by local chefs/caterers. The Taste also includes a silent and live auction, the latter often being very “lively” and fun. The proceeds of the Taste supports the youth development initiatives of Steepletown.

On March 8, 2014, Steepletown will be celebrating its 20th anniversary. This is the date Steepletown was officially incorporated with the State of Michigan as a non-profit, although Steepletown’s story predates this by a couple years. In light of this, at the upcoming Taste the West Side, the Pastors of the three churches that founded Steepletown are going to be honored: Monsignor Leo Rosloniec, Fr. Bernard Hall, and Fr. Dick Host. It was their vision and commitment to the local neighborhoods surrounding St. James Church, St. Mary’s Church, and the Basilica of St. Adalbert that brought about a unique and truly collaborative ministry that has become Steepletown. Please visit the Steepletown website for more information on this event.