

DOWAGIAC DAILY NEWS

Getting Ahead graduates 9

Published 3:27am Thursday, October 21, 2010

Getting Ahead Club is the rigorous 15-week curriculum used in association with Bridges Out of Poverty.

In Cass County the first class of nine “co-investigators” spent 45 hours with nine “allies” analyzing poverty at individual and community levels.

Participants learned about hidden rules of poverty, conducted a community resource analysis and created individual plans for moving themselves and their families out.

Their efforts were celebrated Wednesday night with a graduation party at Southwestern Michigan College attended by Dowagiac’s state Rep. Sharon Tyler, R-Niles.

Participant Kim Brown, who read the poem “Still I Rise,” appreciated the analysis she applied to her life.

Even though she and her sister had been working on starting their own business for several years, she realized she had been coming up with excuses about why things didn’t happen.

Liz Springsteen reports changing the way she talks to her children when trying to discipline them. She has been motivated to communicate with political leaders. And she feels the bonds created between the women in the class is highly empowering.

Nancie Diaz, who has lived in Cass County for 10 years, said she had “no idea about all these resources.”

“I feel I can do anything now,” Diaz said, “which I never had before.”

Diaz bolstered her self-esteem by surrounding herself with positive people and now wants to attend culinary school in Benton Harbor.

Hope Bundy said, “Bridges Out of Poverty gave me the strength to proceed with school, getting my diploma and getting a job. Thanks for being a support group for me.”

Members of the first Getting Ahead graduation ceremony also included Lisa Buck, Caressa Burwell, Deborah Hackworth, Liz Springsteen and Brandi Whitmore.

Keynote speaker Bonnie Bazata, executive director of St. Joseph County, Ind., Bridges Out of Poverty (SJCBOOP), said, “Cassopolis is my hometown, where I grew up. It’s a dream come true to be part of something that’s going to be making a difference in my own home community. You have a dedicated team of professionals and more than a year in the making. All facilitators went to two daylong trainings and put their hearts and souls into that.”

Bazata also recognized the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians and the Pokagon Fund for “bringing tremendous resources to be able to support and sustain the effort, both in St. Joseph County and in Cass County. We are on tribal land, so it’s a wonderful connection to the history of our county.”

To the graduates, Bazata said, “You’ve not only graduated from a soul-searching, difficult, wonderful process where you’ve taken risks, built relationships and gained new tools and strategies for creating your future stories, you join over 250 graduates in St. Joseph County who’ve gone through the same process you have.

“Seventy of those graduates are at our community college, IVY Tech, creating future stories for themselves. We know there are fantastic things in front of you. Others have gone on to find jobs. They’re learning skills in financial management class and building social capital and networks every day.

“You’ve also joined with hundreds and hundreds of other graduates from across the country,” Bazata said.

“There are 30 to 40 communities using Bridges and Getting Ahead to address poverty in their communities — Syracuse, N.Y.; Columbus, Ohio; Indianapolis; Boulder, Colo.; and even Canada, (the United Kingdom) and Slovakia, where materials have been translated into Slovak.

“You join a growing community of people who are taking charge of their lives. Getting ahead is just the first step. Now you have the tools and the resources to chart a new place in your life where you can move from survive to thrive, where you can hatch your dreams and watch them grow with the help of all the people in this room and throughout the community. We know it takes a whole community to address poverty — not just one person or a group of people. Not just one agency or a group of agencies. It’s going to take business, government, neighbors and our families and friends to address poverty. We won’t just move a few people out of poverty, but we’ll build a stronger, smarter and more sustainable community. We need to make a mutual commitment in this room and in our community countywide to stop managing poverty and to start ending poverty. These graduates have taken the first step. Are the rest of you ready to join them? Take a vow, right here, right now, that together we are going to end poverty. Together, we’re going to make a difference and we’ll start with the lives of these nine courageous women. I promise you that someday we’ll look back and say, ‘Remember when we got all of this started?’ ”

Bridges Out of Poverty is coordinated by the Cass County Human Services Coordinating Council and Ruth Andrews with technical assistance from SJCBOB.

Training was underwritten by Tri-County Head Start.

Cass County Council on Aging, represented by Dona Billey Weiler and Adrienne Glover, was instrumental in facilitating three-hour sessions at Cass District Library.

In addition to facilitator Nancy Murton of Head Start, Cathy Lenoir and Amber Lerner co-facilitated on loan from SJCBOB.

They are mentors, having graduated from the program previously.

Amber and Cathy also accumulated COA volunteer hours.

Each participant received a starfish bracelet emblematic of the story about the seeming futility of someone walking along endless miles of seashore, returning each beached creature to the ocean before it dies.

“I made a difference to that one,” the apocryphal female figure replies.

“Yesterday we spent luxurious amounts of time saying goodbye to each other,” Billey Weiler said, “and talking about what’s coming next. We’re not saying goodbye, we’re saying ‘see you later.’ Ruth has made arrangements with the library to get together every second Tuesday so we’ll be able to be together with our ladies forever.”

Glover, on behalf of the Minority Coalition, commented, “We feel this is an endeavor that should not end. We learned about 11 resources in our Getting Ahead Club,” of which finances and budgeting is just one component.

“We’ve been together for 15 weeks,” Billey Weiler said, “and have gotten to know each other. Hope was the first one to walk through the door. I went back to my job shaking my head the whole way back thinking I was not ready for this. I didn’t think I could do this. But it was very humbling, very emotional and very insightful — just a wonderful experience for all of us.



“They are different. I’m talking to you, their supporters and families, and they’re not who they were 15 weeks ago. You heard them testify to that. They’re making changes in their personal lives with the strength of their convictions. Now we’ve let them loose back into the whole rest of the world that wasn’t with us in the library. The rest of the world doesn’t know the wonderful

things that happened in that room. They go back into the world trying to find their own strength and keeping their action plan, their vision and their future story, surrounded by all of you. I strongly encourage you to see them with new eyes. Encourage them, lift them up and stand behind them and alongside them and support them in all the ways you can. They’ll need all the help they can get. It will take all of us as a community. Bear witness to the change in their lives. When you bear witness, you say, ‘What happens to you matters to me.’ ”

The inaugural Cass County Getting Ahead graduation ceremony Wednesday night at Southwestern Michigan College awarded certificates for the 15-week "investigation" to Kimberly Brown, Lisa Buck, Hope Bundy, Caressa Burwell, Nancie Diaz, Deborah Hackworth, Veronica Hetler, Liz Springsteen and Brandi Whitemore. Caressa had to leave before the photograph. (The Daily News/John Eby)