

For North Jersey dropouts, there's another way to get a high school diploma

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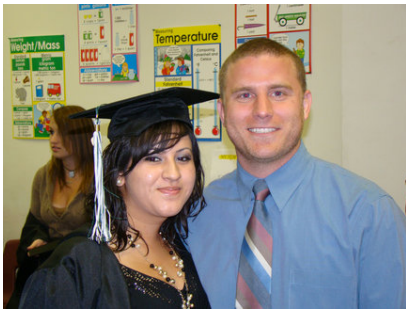


Photo courtesy of NewBridge Services

Wuendy Fiallos and math teacher Jay LaPaglia at the NewBridge Services ceremony

PEQUANNOCK — Wuendy Fiallos, 18, faced a difficult choice last fall: Drop out of high school and work, or watch her unemployed father struggle to support the family. She chose to drop out of Randolph High School.

My dad didn't agree with it," said Fiallos, of Wharton. "He didn't want that."

It didn't take long for her to receive a state-issued diploma, however. Fiallos received it last week after she participated in a nonprofit program designed to help those who never finished high school.

She was one of 46 people who graduated from NewBridge Services' 70001 Jobs Plus program Wednesday night at the Boonton Elks Lodge. The graduates came from all over northwest New Jersey, program officials said.

The program, now in its 26th year, serves residents from Morris, Sussex and Warren counties who are between the ages of 16 and 21. The program gives them a chance to earn high school diplomas and focus on long-term career goals.

"This program represents one of our key efforts in helping young people find balance in their lives," NewBridge Executive Director Robert Parker said. NewBridge, in Pequannock, is a nonprofit provider of behavioral health and educational services.

For Fiallos, the program offered hope for her bleak situation. She left school after her father, a Honduras native who speaks little English, had been unemployed for eight months. He was receiving unemployment benefits, but it wasn't enough to support the family of two. Fiallos's mother, who was not married to her father, lives in North Carolina. There was some talk about moving back to Honduras, but Fiallos was hesitant to leave her home. Instead, she concentrated on her retail job at the Rockaway Townsquare Mall, trying to raise whatever she could to make ends meet.

"I was just really focused on helping my dad," Fiallos said.

Fiallos joined the 70001 program last October, and completed it in two-and-a-half months, according to NewBridge. Fiallos said she went to a classroom each morning but did the work at her own pace. Instructors were available if she needed help, she said.

Fiallos is familiar with challenges. Not long after she immigrated to the country, she was held back in the first grade because of an inability to speak English, she said.

She was determined to learn the language, she said, and became fluent by speaking it whenever she was out in public.

Now things for Fiallos and her father are getting better. Her father has found a new job, and she plans to attend the County College of Morris this fall to study early childhood education. After that, she said, she hopes to become a teacher.

"I always enjoyed 'playing teacher,'" she said. "It feels great to help others and inspire them."