



BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

ADULT LEARNERS PROSPER ON NEW PATHS

By Symone C. Skrzycki



Gloria Turner lights up a room at The Excel Center, a tuition-free high school for adults.

Her dress is bright and colorful. Her smile is self-assured. With folded hands – and a unique effervescence – she recalls her inspiring journey.

“In 2012, I’d hit a really rough patch in my life where I was faced with homelessness. My car was up for repo and I was a single mother. In order for me to jumpstart my life, I needed child care.”

The Excel Center, owned and operated by Goodwill of Central & Southern Indiana, provides adults with an opportunity to attain an Indiana Core 40 high school diploma while earning college credits and a variety of industry-recognized certifications. Examples include patient access, customer service, logistics readiness and pharmacy technician.

It offers a free drop-in center for child care, transportation assistance and a program for expectant mothers.

At first, Turner’s aspirations were solely related to “child care for survival.” An orientation session, however, set her on a different course.

“I will never forget the few words that changed my life. The director at the time said, ‘Hey, are you ready for this?’”

When her career coach told her to anticipate graduating in two-and-a-half years (work commitments limited her to part-time student status), it wasn’t soon enough for Turner. The ambitious third-generation high school dropout graduated in just over seven months.

Today, she’s a life coach at an Excel Center in Indianapolis.

“This experience touches everyone. The students here – even the ones I work with on a daily basis – you can see how eager they are to make changes in their lives,” she declares. “It’s not always easy to climb that mountain when you have a backpack full of stones. But they do it every day and they’re an inspiration even to me.”

Inspiring stories like Turner’s continue to unfold.

About The Excel Center:

- Started in 2010 (in Indianapolis)
- Graduates: More than 3,000
- Industry-recognized certifications earned: 4,000-plus
- Graduates with postsecondary credits: 97%

Embracing diversity

The Excel Center West is housed in an old church in Indianapolis. A security guard checks in visitors. A determined student, carrying a baby in a car seat, politely moves through a group of people in the hall.

The Excel Center operates on five, eight-week terms.

“We’re in the last week of the term,” whispers director Katie Morgan as she passes classrooms. “They start their tests tomorrow. Today is the review day.”

The Excel Center is operated by the not-for-profit Goodwill Education Initiatives. Currently, there are 12 locations throughout central and southern Indiana. One will open in Muncie later this year. In addition, The Excel Center serves students in northern Indiana (Hammond and South Bend) and has expansion locations in Tennessee, Texas, Arkansas and Washington, D.C.

Flags adorn a wall at The Excel Center West, representing the 26-plus languages spoken there.

“Collaboration’s big with our students for multiple reasons,” Morgan comments. “At our location, in particular, we’re very diverse. People are from all over the world. All sorts of different backgrounds.



Nearly half of The Excel Center students are parents. An on-site drop-in center removes a common barrier: the cost of child care.

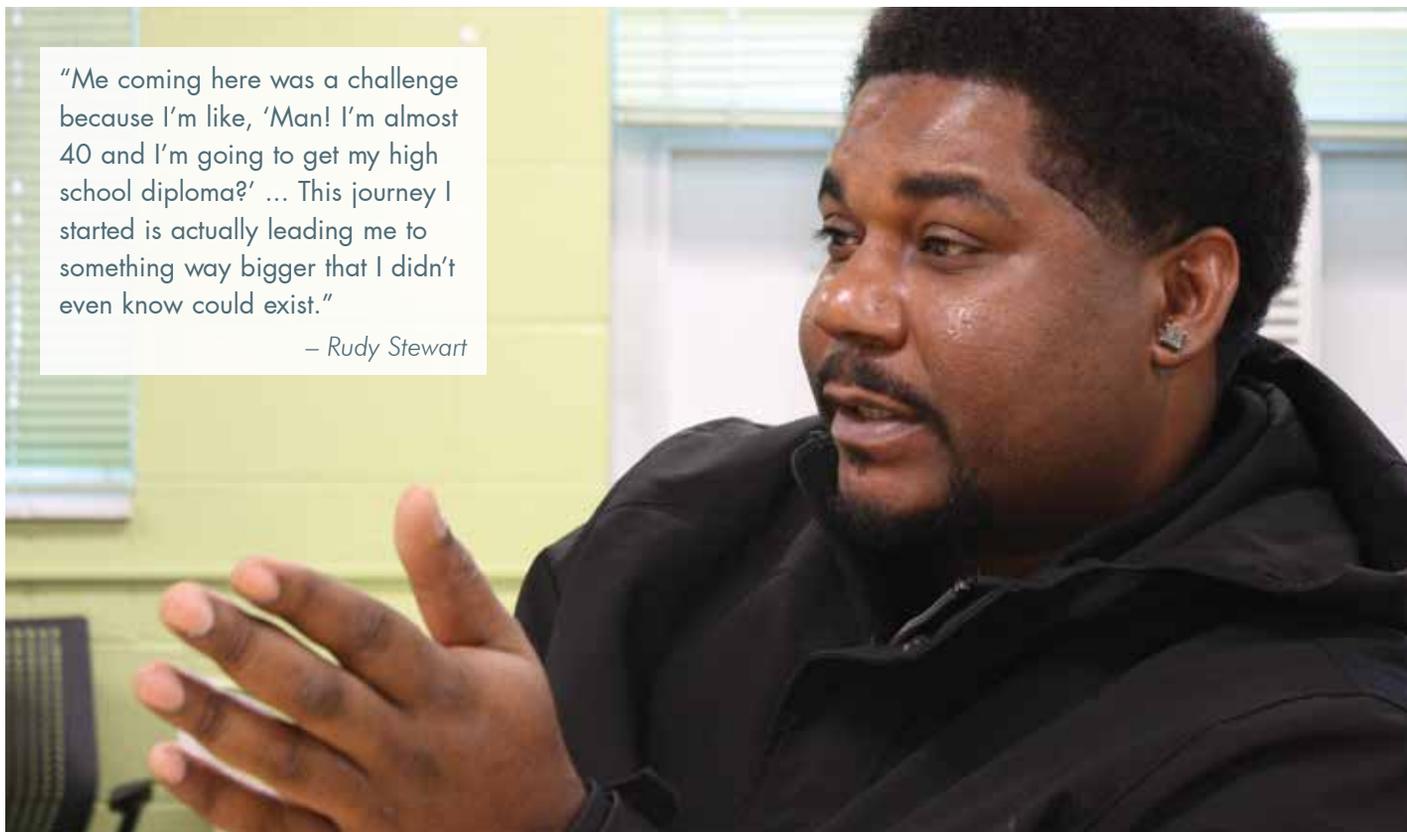


Staff members partner with students on academic, professional and personal challenges. Almost 40% of the school’s graduates pursue postsecondary education.



“Me coming here was a challenge because I’m like, ‘Man! I’m almost 40 and I’m going to get my high school diploma?’ ... This journey I started is actually leading me to something way bigger that I didn’t even know could exist.”

– Rudy Stewart



We value that diversity and that ability to come together and work through issues and topics to gain a better world view too.

“That’s been one piece. We’ve also realized how important it is for students to have those soft skills. That ability to work and collaborate in class is something they’re going to have to do in the workforce.”

A senior seminar further prepares students for employment.

“Once they’ve done their certification, passed their tests and earned – hopefully – all of their credits, they’ll work with Talent Source (provides employers with qualified, work-ready candidates),” Morgan explains. “Another thing we have is called Goodwill Guides. That helps students as they graduate to hone their resumé and mock interview skills. They do cover letters. They do all sorts of personality assessments.”

Building relationships

College and career readiness coaches help map out a graduation plan. In addition, students are assigned a life coach.

“They make sure they’re academically lined up for success and their classes,” Kent Kramer, Goodwill president and CEO, asserts via phone. “They check on their transcripts when they come in and make sure they link them to the classes they need. But many of these folks still have some of the barriers that resulted in their dropping out for the first time – or a second time – of traditional high school.

“Whether it’s homelessness or domestic issues at home, a lot of people – it could be 10 years later – they still have those same barriers in their life. That life coach is trained and is passionate about helping our students knock those barriers down and work through those barriers.”

Betsy Delgado, vice president of mission and education, emphasizes the importance of developing initiatives.

“We hire for empathy,” she stresses. “We hire for people who are tough and understand, ‘I can love you enough to be tough on you and want you to get beyond your circumstances. Education is your key.’”

Rudy Stewart, who was slated to graduate in February (and turn 40), has a humorous take on his return to school.

“Me coming here was a challenge because I’m like, ‘Man! I’m almost 40 and I’m going to get my high school diploma?’” he exclaims with a chuckle.

“My life coach brought me on with Associated Builders and Contractors. I’m getting my license (to be) an electrician. I’m also doing online (courses) for Vincennes (University) and getting my associate’s degree in science at the same time. This journey I started is actually leading me to something way bigger that I didn’t even know could exist.

“That’s what I love about The Excel Center. Just because you come here for a diploma doesn’t mean that’s all (that awaits you). That’s not what that means. That means it’s just a stepping stone to get from one place to the next.”

Generational impact

Out of sight, out of mind doesn’t apply at The Excel Center.

Success Story: Courtney McCowan

Age: 33

Graduate: The Excel Center Anderson

Profession: Certified nursing assistant, Millers Merry Manor, Middletown

“The teachers at The Excel Center are amazing. Every now and then, I kind of got that feeling of, ‘Oh God. I don’t know what I’m doing and is it a waste of time?’ But they pushed me to (remember) the fact of, ‘This isn’t a waste of time. This is something I know you’re wanting in your life’ – and it was. I continued and kept pushing myself.”

“One thing that’s unique to our model is that we continue to try to figure out what’s happening to folks after they leave,” Delgado imparts. “We survey our graduates often and we’ve discovered that texting is the best way. We get a really high response rate.”

“We say at graduation, ‘You’re going to get texts from us. Please respond, because then we can help the people that are coming behind you.’ Pay it back, right?”

One survey revealed that 73% of graduates (that were parents) reported an increased focus on education in their home. In addition, they expressed their children were doing better with their own education.

“They had more confidence in their education, which is extraordinary because when you look at the (national) data, it says, ‘If you’re a dropout, your child is 50% more likely to drop out.’ We feel like not only are we helping the immediate person in our school, but we’re also helping the family,” Delgado remarks.

In 2017, a study conducted by the Center for Evaluation & Education Policy at Indiana University found that 38% of The Excel Center graduates go on to college.

“What’s most proud for me is that of those 38%, 76% are retaining in college. It’s extraordinary,” a beaming Delgado proclaims. “Six months after they leave us, they’re making – on average – about \$10,000 more than when they (joined The Excel Center)!”

‘Untapped workforce’

Approximately 450,000 working-age Hoosier adults have dropped out of high school.

“That’s our target audience,” Kramer declares. “It’s an opportunity because it truly is an untapped workforce for these jobs that are available. And for the state and for the employers in the state, it’s access to really strong labor.”

Delgado seconds that.

“Employers are excited because they’re getting a well-educated, committed employee. And when you look at the landscape of Indiana and you do the math on how many students are going to graduate

Success Story: Kayla Ignacio Gaspar

Age: 27

Graduate: The Excel Center Kokomo

Profession: Inspector, Tyson Fresh Meats (part of the USDA), Logansport

“I ended up going back to school so I could pursue a career with the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) and be able to make a better life for my kids. It’s great! I don’t have to worry about how I’m going to make my next paycheck or how I’m going to pay all of my bills. I can start letting my kids do sports and stuff.”

“I earn \$8,000 more a year (as a high school graduate versus her position at a previous employer).”

Her advice to prospective Excel Center students: “If I can do it, you can do it! I did it with three kids, working full time, second shift. I stuck to a schedule and kept going. And I finished!”

from high school – and how many middle-skill and above jobs there are going to be – the math doesn’t work out. There aren’t enough students that are going to be graduating from high school to fill the jobs we have. The employers get quite excited about this population because it’s kind of a found workforce.”

Kramer shares a parting thought.

“There’s lots of programs out there in place to help this population, but I think the secret sauce is making sure that you understand the barriers they’re facing – the barriers to success. And you work with them. And you empower them. And you provide them a hand-up – not a handout, but a hand-up towards success.”



All eyes are forward during an algebra class, one of the last hurdles prior to graduation.

RESOURCE: The Excel Center at www.theexcelcenter.org