

SMOC students conquer through road to earn diplomas

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By Henry Schwan

The stories at Friday's SMOC graduation said it all - earning a diploma hasn't been easy.



SMOC graduate Cenia Otero, second from left, celebrates with her family Friday in Framingham. [Daily News Staff photo/Henry Schwan]

FRAMINGHAM – Cenia Otero never expected it to happen, but it did.

Surrounded by her large family, including her 4-year-old son Kyle Hayes, Otero posed for a group photo, holding her hard-earned diploma.

Otero, 26, received her high school equivalency degree Friday during a “Celebration of Learning Ceremony” at South Middlesex Opportunity Council in downtown Framingham.

Otero, and she laid out all the details in her graduation speech.

Her father died from a brain tumor when she was 4. When Otero was 9, her mother became ill. She eventually started drinking alcohol and had a son while in an abusive relationship. Then she decided she needed to do more for herself and her child.

With no home or job, she walked into SMOC last year, enrolled in courses, and realized, “I can do this.”

It wasn't an easy road for

Today, Otero's life includes a full-time job at the MetroWest Regional Transit Authority. In the fall, she will take a course at Mass Bay Community College in medical interpreting.

"It's all moving forward from here," Otero said.

Seven graduates, including Otero, earned a GED at Friday's ceremony. The program is run in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance.

Thanks to the late Joan Brack, hundreds of SMOC students have earned a GED. Brack was a special education teacher in Natick, and she started SMOC's adult education classes in 1992. Since 2001, the organization's Adult Learning Center has helped 194 students earn GEDs.

"Joan would have been proud of every one of you," Joan Brack's husband, Bob, told Friday's graduates.

The center also awards ESL (English as a Second Language) diplomas, and 10 students were honored at the ceremony.

One was Maria Ines Briceno, who emigrated from Venezuela nearly two years ago. English was a challenge for Briceno, especially during job interviews. But she pushed herself to learn the language, and today she not only has a merchandising job at Wegmans, she also helps her son, Andres Chan, with his schoolwork.



High School equivalency test graduates at the SMOC Joan Brack Adult Learning Center Celebration of Learning Ceremony Friday afternoon from left: Nicole Cheney, of Marlborough, Jennifer Aguilar, of Clinton, Cenia Otero, of Framingham, and teacher/coordinator Mary Lou Horn. [Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Art Illman]



SMOC Executive Director James Cuddy and Framingham Mayor Yvonne Spicer at the SMOC Joan Brack Adult Learning Center Celebration of Learning Ceremony Friday afternoon. [Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Art Illman]

"(My mom's) great," said Andres, who enters fifth grade this fall. "She helps me with my writing."

Several speakers praised graduates for persevering under difficult circumstances.

"You're the best of what this country is all about," SMOC Executive Director James Cuddy said.

"You have demonstrated the highest level of courage," added Jeffrey McCue, commissioner of the Department of Transitional Assistance. "You're well on your way to improving yourself and your families. I salute you on that."

Moments after Otero received her diploma, her son ran up and handed her a bag of gifts. Otero was mobbed by family members after the ceremony, and she hadn't had time to see what was in the bag.



SMOC graduate Maria Ines Briceno celebrates Friday with her son, Andres Chan. [Daily News Staff photo/Henry Schwan]

What she did get was love and praise from family members.

"She's overcome a lot," Otero's brother, Pedro Nunez said. "It's unbelievable what she's doing."

"She never gives up, no matter what she goes through," her proud mother, Magaly Garcia, said.

Standing on the other side of the room, Briceno celebrated her accomplishment with her son.

In her graduation speech, Briceno said her dream when she immigrated to the U.S. was to go to Disney World.

She's going there with her family in September.

"I'm going to give Mickey Mouse a hug," Briceno said.

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