

Framingham: Students celebrated for success in language, adult education programs



Sangbana Wagbe, left, Bonnilea Correia and George Stangle, right, share a laugh as they turn their tassels during ceremonies to mark student achievements held at SMOC, South Middlesex Opportunity Council, on Friday afternoon. Daily News and Wicked Local Photo/Kathleen Culler.

By Jim Haddadin, Daily News Staff

Posted Jun. 17, 2016 at 7:01 PM

FRAMINGHAM — For Sangbana Wegbe, the path to college began with the English classes he received at the South Middlesex Opportunity Council.

Wegbe, a native of Togo, said his English was too poor to enroll in classes at Framingham High School when he first relocated to the town.

“I felt so bad,” Wegbe said Friday, recalling the day he received the results of his placement test. “I almost cried. I couldn’t literally look at my dad’s face. I thought that my school experience was over.”

Wegbe's mother encouraged him to sign up for ESL classes at SMOC, a decision that not only helped him to gain proficiency in English, but also set him on the path to earning his high school equivalency certificate.

Teachers at SMOC helped Wegbe, who grew up speaking French, connect his existing knowledge with the English curriculum, preparing him to pass the state's HiSET exam earlier this year.

Wegbe will go on to attend Massachusetts Bay Community College, where he plans to study accounting. He hopes to later pursue a bachelor's degree.

"I feel confident in speaking and writing English," Wegbe said, "and today, I'm so proud to tell everyone that I'm ready to start my student life — the life I've been waiting for."

Friends, family members and teachers gathered at SMOC's Joan Brack Adult Learning Center Friday to celebrate the successes of Wegbe and other students who have enrolled in SMOC's educational programs.

The 'Celebration of Learning' ceremony recognized students who have either completed a full year in the ESL program or passed the HiSET exam, a more rigorous test that recently replaced the GED. Organizers also honored some students who have worked diligently to meet their educational and language proficiency goals.

SMOC Executive Director Jim Cuddy said the recognition ceremony demonstrates the town's commitment to being an inclusive community that strives to help newcomers to Framingham.

"The way that you do that is by one person at a time," he said.

Harkening to the political challenges facing the country, U.S. Rep. Katherine Clark, one of the day's guest speakers, said she was heartened by the dedication of SMOC's students, who are working to integrate into American society.

"This is American values," Clark said. "We are a country of immigrants. We are a country that believes education is the great equalizer, and that opportunity has to be open to everyone — to every child, to every adult, no matter how much money they have in their bank account, no matter what their zip code is. That's the promise we make as Americans."

Cheryl Tully Stoll, chairwoman of the Board of Selectmen, called on the students to use their language skills to help shape their communities.

"Don't let the climate that's out there right now, the political climate and the haters and the naysayers, ever get you down and make you think that you can't be your best, and you can't reach your potential," Tully Stoll said, "because you can, and you've been given something very powerful through this program ... and that is the foundation to have a stronger voice in this country and in your communities, and that voice needs to be heard."

Among those who were recognized Tuesday were Isidro Santos and Jessica Cruz, who recently completed basic English classes and will move on to an intermediate program; and Adrienne Pierre, Melina Montero, Magdalena Guaman and Renata Bowler, who completed a year-long ESL program.

SMOC also recognized Wegbe and fellow students Bonnielee Correia and David Muwanga for passing the high school equivalency test. They also offered special recognition to Victoria Zani for her persistence and dedication to the adult education program.

Jim Haddadin can be reached at 617-863-7144 or jhaddadin@wickedlocal.com. Follow him on Twitter: @JimHaddadin.



Magdalena Guaman, who is from the Republic of Ecuador, studies the certificate she earned in the English as a Second Language program during ceremonies to mark student achievements held at SMOC, South Middlesex Opportunity Council, on Friday afternoon. Daily News and Wicked Local Photo/Kathleen Culler.



U.S. Rep. Katherine Clark delivers remarks during ceremonies to mark student achievements held at SMOC, South Middlesex Opportunity Council, on Friday afternoon. Daily News and Wicked Local Photo/Kathleen Culler.



Sangbana Wagbe thanks his mother for her support and encouragement as he delivers remarks during ceremonies to mark student achievements held at SMOC, South Middlesex Opportunity Council, on Friday afternoon. Daily News and Wicked Local Photo/Kathleen Culler.



Massachusetts state Rep. Carolyn Dykema delivers remarks during ceremonies to mark student achievements held at SMOC, South Middlesex Opportunity Council, on Friday afternoon. Daily News and Wicked Local Photo/Kathleen Culler.