

College program a 'gateway' for young people's aspirations

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It was only the culmination of a six-week program, but for Khalilah Bruzual it was a very big deal.

Sitting in the Student Centre of Centennial College's Progress Campus on Thursday, Aug. 11, wearing a black graduation gown was a new experience for the 33-year-old.

"Today's the first time I've ever put on a graduation gown," said Bruzual.

For a high school drop out who received her GED through night school, sitting in a college building preparing to receive a certificate was something special for Bruzual.

"For me it's still kind of big," she said.

Bruzual was one of almost 80 Scarborough youth who participated in the college's HYPE - Helping Youth Pursue Education - program at no cost to them.

The youth, aged 19 to 29 (with some exceptions), were primarily from Malvern, Kingston-Galloway and Scarborough Village. They had the chance to participate in six career-oriented courses - human development, food services, information technology, office administration, business and entrepreneurship, and esthetics.

Bruzual received her certificate in business and entrepreneurship. Though she's been working for a while and has had a lot of experience in her life, she said she learned a lot from the program.

"There's things about the business world that I didn't know," Bruzual said.

She plans to head back to college full-time in the fall to complete her child and youth worker diploma - something she started many years ago, but was never able to finish because life always got in the way.

"When June comes next year I want to make sure I'm wearing my gown," she said.

Kefim Legall believes she will achieve her goal. He believes in all his fellow program participants.

"I believe everyone here today is going to do great things," he said in his valedictorian address.

The 29-year-old information technology program participant was selected by his fellow students to speak on behalf of the class at the graduation ceremony. He was nervous and excited as he'd never done anything like that before. But, he's been trying a lot of new things lately.

This was Legall's first post-secondary experience and he hadn't finished high school either.

"I've always known college or university was a ticket to a better life. It's something that's been an issue for me in the last couple of years," he said. "It took a lot of courage for me."

He's always had an interest in computers so he decided to go back to school for IT.



College program a 'gateway' for young people's aspirations. Food services graduate Krystyne Gunnis-Myers gets a kiss from her son Jasiah Myers, 2, during the Centennial College HYPE (Helping Youth Pursue Education) program graduation ceremony Thursday. *Staff photo/DAN PEARCE*

The HYPE program helped him to transition from working to school and with his newfound confidence he'll be starting at Centennial full time in January.

This was the eighth year for the program, which is rooted in the City of Toronto's Community Safety Plan and designed to bring engaging programming to youth living in under-serviced neighbourhoods. For many of the participants this is the first positive school experience they've had in years.

The program uses mentors, in addition to the instructors, to make the experience as rewarding as possible.

Scherry George is one of those mentors. When she heard about the program, the college employee really wanted to act as a mentor.

"I thought there was something I could contribute," she said. "I had a soft spot for these kids from the beginning."

When George first moved to Scarborough she lived in Orton Park and Malvern so she feels she can connect to the youth and they can see her as a role model.

She said the program makes the youth feel welcome on a college campus and it gives them the sense that they can be whatever they want.

Legall agreed.

"It's a gateway to whatever aspirations and desires we have in our hearts," he said.

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