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## Dropouts no more

SBLC celebrates 20 years with class

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In Baltimore, a third of high school students don't graduate. They are digging themselves a hole that can take a lifetime to get out of—if they ever do.

The tradition for many in working-class Baltimore was to drop out of school at 16 and go to work in a factory to help support the family.

That was then. Now the factories are shuttered and stable jobs for people with less than a high

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school education are very rare indeed.

South Baltimore Learning Center is chipping away at the dropout statistic. Adult education is a lot of work, particularly for the students, who often juggle jobs and children along with their classes. And since the jobs that dropouts can find are low-paid, they often work two or more jobs to make ends meet.

It is a long, hard process, and it's remarkable that so many manage to juggle the classes, kids and job. But they do.

Take a good look at the photo. That's the June, 2010 graduating class, 29 men and women. The ones in the front row are cradling the result of a great deal of their sweat and effort—a Maryland High School Diploma.

### The June, 2010 graduating class of the South Baltimore Learning Center celebrated at the Tremont Grand. (Photo courtesy SBLC)

It opens a lot of doors. It can be a ticket to higher pay and a steadier job. It can be a ticket out of the daily tedium and discouragement of poverty.

On Tuesday, Dec. 14, 27 more people will receive their diplomas and certificates and go looking for better jobs and lives. Eighteen of them are receiving high school diplomas, and nine passed the General Equivalency (GED) exam. The speaker, in recognition of their achievement and SBLC's 20th anniversary, is Lieutenant Governor Anthony Brown.

"I came to Baltimore for a new way of life," says Gregory Lewis, 43. "I was fighting drug addiction and came to Baltimore for rehab."

Lewis grew up in the Washington, D.C. suburbs and is in his fourth year of sobriety. He started GED classes while living in a transitional house in a drug rehab program.

He finished the drug treatment program in 18 months, and is now a part-time house manager for the Baltimore Community Resource Center, a private drug rehab program in Charles Village.

He studied two and a half years at South Baltimore Learning Center and passed the GED exam in September.

Next step? College. He wants to study to be a drug addiction counselor, to help others crawl out of the same situation he was in.

"I never imagined I would go on to college," he says. "I never imagined I would be living in Baltimore either. I go back and forth—I'm not too far from home."

He stays away from the old temptations, though. "I don't miss the lifestyle I lived when I was there. I definitely don't miss that."

South Baltimore Learning Center graduates 70 or more students a year in

two classes—December and June.

"GED standards are national," says William Reinhard, a spokesman for the Maryland State Department of Education. "Maryland's program is more difficult than many other states. Our students tend to do better on the High School Assessment Test when they go on to college or community college. We can track that."

David Mitchell dropped out of high school in the 10th grade. "We got evicted from our home and were going place to place. I couldn't find a school to go to so I dropped out."

He studied at SBLC for six months and scored extraordinarily well on the GED exam. He got his Maryland High School Diploma in June.

"Basically, before getting my GED I was stagnating for a while," he says. "My dad found the program at SBLC. There are really good people there, and they help you out a lot."

At the moment he is looking for financial aid for college. He wants to go to Anne Arundel Community College to study culinary arts. Eventually he wants to be a chef.

One facet of getting a Maryland High School Diploma in a system like SBLC's is that there is no alumni association. That doesn't mean that alumni aren't welcome.

Sonia Socha, executive director at SBLC, says all of the program's past graduates are welcome at the 20th anniversary graduation on Tuesday.

"We are looking for alumni. We would dearly love it if people would get in touch," she says.

SBLC is contacting all the graduates it knows of for the anniversary. There are 500 to 600 that it knows of. It would be fun to have an all-classes reunion, perhaps at the 20th Anniversary Gala.



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