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Howard Winchester-Bey, 54, in silhouette and inset, will complete his high school education with a graduation ceremony today. With this event, the businessman also keeps a promise he made to his dying mother some 40 years ago.

Second chances

At the South Baltimore Learning Center today, 30 students will receive GED and high school diplomas

By Erica L. Green
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When Howard Winchester-Bey was 14, he promised his dying mother he would graduate from high school. Today, he will fulfill the pledge he made nearly 40 years ago.

Now 54, Winchester-Bey will be among 30 students who will complete their basic education, albeit late or by nontraditional means, through the South Baltimore Learning Center, a nonprofit organization that is celebrating 20 years of offering second chances.

The organization has given more than 1,000 Baltimore residents the chance to earn their General Educational Development certificates and high school diplomas in the past two decades.

Winchester-Bey, who will be among the speakers at the ceremony today at the University Specialty Hospital, says his mother "can rest in peace now that she knows I did that big part of her requests."

Winchester-Bey started the program in 2008, turning to the learning center with a seventh-grade education after he put his youngest daughter through college. After taking GED classes, he went on to earn his certificate in a little more than a year.

The Baltimore-bred businessman has run a painting business and a thrift store since the 1990s, building them with street smarts and lessons in self-sufficiency he learned from his parents. Now, he says, he's a "business-minded" man.

He has raised four children, two of whom have pursued bachelor's and master's degrees. They made better choices than he did when he was young, he said, when he decided to hang with the wrong

crowd, a decision that carried jail time.

But Winchester-Bey said he wanted a degree so that when he continues his volunteer work talking to prisoners at local jails, he can speak with conviction about the value of education.

He's also thinking about more education. He wants to go to business college.

Being among those with the same goal helped quell any anxiety about getting a GED at his age. "Who is to say I should have done anything at any particular time?" Winchester-Bey said. "It doesn't matter if you come first or last, you're still in the line."

These are the success stories that have

the streets and from other schools.

"There's a huge need in the city," Socha said. "And I hope we can continue to do what we need to do here."

Recent dropout Ashley Forsythe, 20, left North County High School in Anne Arundel County her senior year because she "just got so frustrated with school, and I just felt like I wasn't getting the attention that I really needed," she said.

Forsythe, who now has a career in information technology, was driven by more than just the diploma itself. "I wanted something that I could participate in," Forsythe said. "That means almost more to me than my diploma, to be able to walk across the stage. I think I'm just going to be overcome with emotion."

Gregory Lewis, 43, moved to Baltimore a little more than three years ago to kick his 25-year drug habit. In October, Lewis found out he had passed his GED test. It was the same day he celebrated being clean of drugs for three years. "It's something I've been waiting 25 years to do, and I can't believe it," Lewis said. "I finally feel like I did something I was supposed to do."

Now, Lewis works as a part-time manager for the Baltimore Community Resources Center's drug rehabilitation program. He has also referred two students to the Learning Center and passed along his textbooks.

Lewis' story shows how the organization supplies Baltimore residents with more than a piece of paper, the center's supporters say.

"We're trying to help with their education," Socha said, "but also with their life."

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Ashley Forsythe, a Learning Center graduate

kept the organization running, despite fiscal problems. The learning center, with a budget made up of 50 percent private funding, has experienced large cuts in its city and state funding. A \$150,000 hit from all of its funding sources last year forced it to cut nine of its classes.

But Sonia Socha, executive director, said that today's graduating class reinforces why she has stayed for 18 years. "It just makes all the work worth it, because it's a culmination of a lot of hard work," Socha said.

She said the urgency of the organization is evident when looking at those who have come through her doors "crying for help." Students come to the center from