



Walsh: A cap, a gown and a kiss

Rebecca Walsh
The Salt Lake Tribune

Updated: 05/27/2009 07:06:32 PM MDT

Striding across the stage in his kelly-green cap and gown, he tried for stoic.

A handshake. That would be professional. Businesslike. Not too emotional.

As thousands of teen-agers stride over stages across the state, rite of passage right on schedule, a relatively small, quiet graduation ceremony went by almost unnoticed last week: Alliance House and Horizonte handed out diplomas to seven high school graduates.

Normally, that wouldn't be anything special, except when you consider the graduates. Each one struggles with mental illnesses ranging from depression to bipolar disorder. And each one dropped out of high school --- some, 12 months ago, others 38 years before children and husbands and caregiving and death.

"Every adult-education graduate in the state has a story to tell," says Horizonte Principal James Anderson. "They are true graduates. They've worked hard and overcome much more than those who graduate in the traditional way."

No graduate is more nontraditional than Lonnie Jackson. She left high school in 9th grade, got pregnant, raised two kids, ran a restaurant in South Lake Tahoe, catered weddings out the back door, took care of her ailing common-law husband as leukemia ravaged his body. When he died two years ago, she looked around and wondered what to do with the rest of her life. She was 53.

"There are no letters behind my name," she says. "I have a lot of life experience. But you don't get a lot of

kudos for being a good mom and keeping a clean house."

She decided to remake her life with high school math and English. And, after dropping out in 11th grade to work, her 35-year-old son joined her.

"I decided to go back and finish what I started," Dameon Jackson says.

Three decades after they grappled with his misdiagnosis as hyperactive, with the teacher who duct-taped him to a chair, with weekends of worksheets he inexplicably dumped in the trash on Monday morning, mother and son sat down at the kitchen table together and did homework. Again.

Lonnie Jackson says she wants a "career, not a job."

After trashing his back cutting firewood, removing asbestos and working in restaurants, Dameon Jackson wants to work in a nursing home or assisted living center. Finally on the correct medication for bipolar disorder, he's ready to start vocational rehabilitation.

Alliance House Education Coordinator Phyllis Sharples remembers the moment he stormed into the clubhouse, outraged at what he had learned about American government -- we're not strictly following the Constitution.

"It would be easy to say, 'What's a high school diploma?'," says Sharples. "To the untrained eye, these moments may seem trivial or ordinary."

But for Alliance House's graduates -- more than 90 over the past 16 years -- they are markers of a life less ordinary.

So Dameon Jackson shook his mother's hand. Then he leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

walsh@sltrib.com

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