

# Event a celebration of those who have earned GEDs and those in pursuit



Matt Wallis / Skagit Valley Herald

**Esther Ramirez (left)** of Mount Vernon receives an award from Gia Gillis at a GED celebration Friday at Skagit Community Action.



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When Brian McFarland decided attending Mount Vernon High School wasn't working for him at 16, he stopped going to school.

## McFarland

He soon got a letter from a Skagit County judge, telling him to resume his education or get ready for a court date.

When he joined a General Educa-

tional Development credential preparation program at Skagit County Community Action Agency, he found his second chance.

People earn the credential by passing tests in math, reading, writing, social studies and science. It opens doors to work and higher education that would otherwise be closed without a high school diploma, said Andrew

Cole, teen GED coordinator for the nonprofit.

McFarland, now 17, earned his GED this fall and plans to study interior design at an institute in Tacoma next year.

"People say it's not as good as a high school diploma, but really it's how you use it," McFarland told a group gathered Friday for Community Action's first GED celebration. "Once you have your GED, everything is open."

The event honored Skagit County teenagers and adults who earned GEDs this year and those still work-

ing toward that goal. Since September, 75 teenagers and 25 adults have used Community Action's program to help prepare for the tests, Cole said.

People with GEDs have some real advantages to celebrate, Cole said. They have college success rates similar to those with a high school diploma, he said. And while they don't earn as much on average as people with a diploma, five years after earning a GED they do make \$1,300 to \$2,000 more per year than people with no credential, he said.

The GED can help re-engage students who have "disappeared" from the school system, Cole said.

But the credential isn't just for those who've recently left school.

Esther Ramirez, 18, said she moved around a lot through her school years and hasn't attended school since the seventh grade. A few months ago, she joined the Community Action program and started studying.

"For a better job, they're asking for a GED," she said. "And I wanted to learn more English."

Jimmy Marks is also in the program. At 70, he's learning to write, he said.

Marks, a musician, said he is a

Gypsy who spent his childhood traveling around the country to towns where his family was often ostracized.

He said he first went to school when he was about 11 years old. The school placed him in a fourth-grade class, Marks said, and he couldn't understand a thing, having never even been to kindergarten. He got in trouble with teachers for being behind, started playing hookey and has bad memories of school, he said.

Marks said he joined the GED preparation program this year when a friend encouraged him to learn to write. He's logged 20 hours so far working with his tutor on writing and reading. It's not easy, Marks said.

"I get so frustrated ... A couple of times, I wanted to quit," he said.

"Then I think, 'Well, why not try?'"

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