

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Philly's Adult Learners Earning Their Way To Better Lives

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July 3, 2017

For a long time, Sharif Cook-Riley thought he would become a statistic: He was a young black man with a criminal record and no high school diploma. But this week, he earned a piece of paper that has already served as a bridge to a better life.

Hector Ceballos left Mexico without finishing high school, in search of more opportunities in America. The equivalency credential he collected on Wednesday will allow him to pursue a future in the music world – something he has dreamed of for as long as he can remember.

The two men are among the 100-plus Philadelphians who earned the right to graduate this week in a ceremony honoring adult learners who successfully obtained Commonwealth Secondary School Diplomas – high school equivalency degrees, essentially.

In a city where nearly one in five adults lacks a high school degree and nearly half struggle to read, the achievement is meaningful on both a small and a large scale. Adults who earn their equivalency degrees increase their earning potential dramatically, by thousands a year.



Hector Ceballos (center, crouching) and other graduates in a citywide high-school equivalency graduation ceremony.



Sharif Cook-Riley, 21, recently earned his high school equivalency and has a good-paying internship in IT.

Cook-Riley, 21, was born in Camden and moved around often, spending time in Atlanta, and Jacksonville, Fla. His father spent time in prison; his mother worked two jobs to make ends meet; and Cook-Riley “basically kind of raised myself.”

He stopped going to school when his son was born, in 2013. A steady stream of trouble followed.

“I was breaking into people’s houses, stealing cars,” he said. “I was fighting a lot. I didn’t respect anybody. It was me against the world.”

His friends started going to jail, and so did Cook-Riley. When his best friend went to prison for a serious crime, that was his wake-up call. If Cook-Riley hadn’t been in jail himself, he said, he surely would have been with his friend and facing a long prison stay as well.

So Cook-Riley made a decision: He would start over, moving to Philadelphia, where his grandmother offered a deal – a year to get a job or return to school. He chose the latter, eyes on providing for his son, who now lives with him.

“I won’t open my hands,” Cook-Riley said. “I won’t ask anybody for money. I turned things around. I apologize to people, and I don’t try to get in fights. I can’t get in trouble anymore.”

Through the Community Learning Center, a 30-year-old adult literacy nonprofit, Cook-Riley took placement tests and, in four months, zoomed through a program that takes many people a year or more to complete. Now, he's working in the technology industry, learning to code and other skills, in a paid internship program. On the horizon is steady work in an in-demand field.

"I want to raise my salary; I want to make sure my son can live so much better than I did," said Cook-Riley.

Finishing his equivalency was a high point.

"I always wanted to be a part of something like that," he said of the graduation ceremony. "Especially given the statistics as a black man."

Ceballos, who is also 21, took a different path. He was born in Mexico; he cannot remember a time when he did not play the piano. Eventually, he began studying at the National Conservatory of Music in Mexico City. Academic studies fell by the wayside as he became more serious about concerts and rehearsals.

When he was 18, Ceballos and his father moved to the United States. There were more opportunities for Ceballos here, he figured. He moved to Philadelphia to study piano with a teacher here, but knew that to advance to the places he dreams of – conservatories such as Juilliard, the Curtis Institute of Music, Oberlin – he first needed to earn his diploma.



Hector Ceballos, a classically trained pianist, left Mexico to pursue his dreams, but he never earned a diploma. He recently graduated with a high school equivalency degree.



Hector Ceballos adjusts his cap before a citywide GED graduation ceremony.

He, too, found Community Learning Center, where for months, he spent nine hours a week in classes, tackling math, social studies, and English for the first time since he was 17.

"It was difficult – the knowledge was not fresh, and I had to organize my time with rehearsal and studying," said Ceballos. "But my teachers were so supportive."

A friend sat in the audience as Ceballos, who devotes most of his time to preparing for conservatory auditions, accepted his certificate on Wednesday. His father and sisters, in California, and his mother, in Mexico, could not be there, but they're cheering from afar, he said.

"They are very proud," he said.

And while Ceballos' and Cook-Riley's stories are unique, they matter in a larger context, too, said Diane Inverso, executive director of Philadelphia's Office of Adult Education.

"As a city that has high levels of poverty, it is something to be able to get more individuals on the track to finding a career so they are successful," Inverso said. "It impacts our economy. It impacts our families, as well. Each of these stories moves the city forward in a positive way."