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A success story: She carries book bags, like her children

By VALERIE RUSS
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Like so many others in Philadelphia, city worker Tempie Chester started down the path to college — but didn't get very far.

Yet.

An equipment operator in the Department of Public Property, Chester, 36, drives trucks and forklifts for the city. She also transports barricades and helps set up stages for festivals along the Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

But Chester, an Army veteran as well as a wife and a mother of three, still longs for a college degree in construction management.

"I'm looking to advance myself," she said, adding that she'd also appreciate the higher pay that comes with a job promotion.

A few years back, while working to complete a two-year construction management certificate program at the Municipal Services Building, Chester also began taking a couple of courses at Community College of Philadelphia.

Her children loved it, especially the younger ones — who saw Mommy taking a book bag out the door, just like they did.

They were so proud when "I'd tell them they had to stay late at day care because Mommy was going to school that night," Chester recalled.

But life can get in the way of even the best intentions.

Chester, a Feltonville resident, said she completed the city's certificate program in May 2005. The following fall, she bought a computer with the intention of taking Community College classes.

"But I missed the deadline for the financial aid programs," she said. Although she'd signed up for classes, she didn't have the money to pay her tuition.

"It put me off track."

With her classes on hold, Chester said she spent a lot of time at night playing games on her new computer.

Her daughter, Takara, then 7, "saw me playing games and said, 'Mommy, I thought you were going back to school.'"

"I felt kind of bad," Chester said. "She's looking at me, and I knew what she meant."

Chester said she felt as if she had been "preaching to them about the importance of going to college," but here she was, goofing around on a computer instead of using it to advance her own education.

Then, a few weeks ago, Chester said she saw a notice at work announcing that there was going to be a "Returning to Learning" Education and College Fair co-sponsored by her union, AFSCME District Council 33, and Graduate! Philadelphia.

"Get a diploma!" the notice said. "Is college for you? Getting a degree puts you on a path to greater earning potential and greater job fulfillment. Come hear from the colleges that want you."

Chester saw the flier and knew: "This is what I need."

She was one of 250 to 300 people who showed up at the DC 33 union hall on Walnut Street near 30th on March 4 for a three-hour workshop.

Ann Cohen, president of Local 1637, which represents the civilian employees of the police and fire departments, the District Attorney's Office and the Philadelphia Parking Authority, among other agencies, said the city employee unions have long worked to help their members get training and education to improve themselves.

She said that she and Pete Matthews, president of DC 33, were pleased at the turnout — on what was to have been a rainy night, and the same night that local supporters of presidential candidates Sens. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton held parties to hear the results of the primaries in Texas and Ohio.

Cohen said that for years Henry Nicholas' 1199C Hospital Workers union has brought basic writing and computer classes to the DC 33 union hall.


Now, Cohen said, the city unions are excited about a new partnership with Graduate! Philadelphia to help support their members who want to get college degrees.

"It gives people the skills they need to compete in promotional exams, earn more money and more job satisfaction.

"Most people don't like to be stymied and stuck in the same jobs." *

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