

Center helps adults get back to school

By VALERIE RUSS
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Yin Lee, 48, lost her job at a window company in Northeast Philadelphia in a layoff.

Marjorie Grimes earned a college degree nearly 30 years ago. But Grimes, 50, voluntarily left the workforce to look after her son and care for her own aging mother — and now she worries she's not ready for today's computer-based jobs.

Both of them want to get back to college.

And a storefront College Access Center, conveniently located next to a dollar store in the Gallery mall at 9th and Market streets, is ready to help.

The center is one brick-and-mortar result of a renewed push to get Philadelphians to complete their college degrees. As Lee, Grimes and about 8 other adults visited on that recent, brisk March afternoon, they were greeted by huge colorful posters of smiling people — African-American, white, Latino and Asian — all wearing college caps and gowns.

Large text on the posters offered encouragement:

"You can graduate! We can help."

"Think you don't have time for college? Think again!"

"Finishing college is only the beginning. Those with a college degree can earn \$1 million more over their lifetimes."

It's a message that Philadelphians seem ready to hear.

Hadass Sheffer, executive director of the organization that runs the center, Graduate! Philadelphia, said she's been floored at the numbers of people seeking help since the renovated office — jointly run with Philadelphia Education Fund — opened in January.

Sheffer said officials had assumed that the first people to be ready to come back to school would be women in their 30s to mid-40s.

"But it's everyone, people of all ages and both genders," who have been coming through the doors or calling for an appointment, she said.

In the first two weeks since the center's official grand opening on Feb. 5, there were more than 200 people who either visited the center or called for more information. A number of people began coming by in January, when there were still boxes all over the place.

A little more than a month later, by March 11, some 600 people had been in contact with Graduate! Philadelphia — either in person, online or via other locations, such as college fairs or workshops at area colleges and union offices.

"We knew there was a need, and this proves there is, and people are responding," Sheffer said.

Many of those people are like Yin Lee and believe they need more education to find a job. But some are like Grimes, knowing that even in their 50s and 60s they can start another career.

"People are not retiring, and it becomes really important to think about [that next step]," Sheffer said.

"People want to retool. Maybe they did physical work in their first career. Now, they want to do something completely different."

And some are finally ready to address the reasons they may have left college in the first place.

Research shows that students drop out of college often for one or more of three reasons: the demands of a college workload, the cost of college or a need to work more to support themselves or their family.

"It's harder for adults who are working and have other responsibilities," said Sheffer.

PEF, one of Graduate! Philadelphia's partners, has operated several college access centers around the city, including one at the Gallery, for 18 years.

But its programs are geared for middle school and high school age students. This center has help for both younger school-age students — and for adults.

Most colleges and universities schedule their application and financial-aid procedures around the life of a "traditional" college student: the 17- or 18-year-old recent high school graduate who "doesn't have to work, doesn't have bills to pay, and doesn't have a family," said Sheffer.

But this center encourages busy adults to meet deadlines for financial aid applications — and assists them with getting transcripts from colleges they may have attended 10, 15 or 20 years ago.

There are workshops planned on stress management, balancing work, school and child-care issues and for improving computer and study skills.

The center also has a group of nine partnering colleges that also staff the center, helping adults figure out what programs or schools might be best for them.

Meanwhile, people around the country are noticing. Greater Louisville Inc., the Louisville, Ky., metro area's Chamber of Commerce, following Philadelphia's example, has formed its own "Partnership for Education" program similar to Philly's model.

It's rarely hard for the College Access Center to sell adults on the need for a college education. But for anyone who's having doubts, the center staff hands out play-money — a faux \$1 million dollar bill.

In addition to including the center's Web site, the bills carry an important message printed on them: that a college graduate earns over \$1 million more over a lifetime than people without college degrees, said Kimberly Stephens, Graduate! Philadelphia's director of higher-education partnerships.

"I think it's great," said Renata Henderson, who was among those 10 or so visiting the center with Lee and Grimes.

The adults are students in a program that's jointly run by the state's Career Link program and the District 1199C Hospital and Health Care Workers union's Training and Upgrading Fund. Henderson is one of their teachers.

She said the public focus on the need to help adults go back to college is sorely needed.

And Henderson was pleased that Mayor Nutter addressed the issue in his inaugural address.

"When you have people of influence saying this is important, then more people will pay attention and join on board." *

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