

A LONG WAY UP

Student earns GED after overcoming adversity, now has higher education goals

By Gail Short

Today, Tara Bender has a GED, a certificate that enables her to help others and her sights set on higher education goals, but for many years her future didn't look as promising. As a young, single mother Bender battled alcoholism, and her addiction eventually led to her experiencing homelessness.

Over time, Bender says she sought help from a local agency called Solutions for Change, a recovery facility that provides aid and counseling for people struggling with substance abuse, homelessness, incarceration and poverty. She says she became so inspired by the help she received there that she decided to pursue a career working for the organization.

To do that Bender needed state certification, and to study for certification she needed to finally complete her high school education: "I wanted to become an alcohol drug or a peer support specialist, but I didn't ever think it was possible for me to get my GED," she says..

Once he finishes his classes at Vista, which include business courses, Enriquez plans to return to Guadalajara and enroll in college to complete his studies. "Your education is what tells people about you, your family and your country," he says.

Despite those doubts, Bender enrolled at Vista Adult School, determined to finally earn a high school equivalency certificate. She says that when she signed up for the school, it had been nearly three decades since she attended her last high school class.

Open since 1977, Vista Adult School offers a range of educational programs for adult learners, from career technical education and English as a second language to basic education and secondary education, as well as community education courses. Within the adult secondary education program, students can earn their high school diploma by taking English, math,



Pursuing higher education has enabled Tara Bender to not only improve her own life, but offer a hand up to people struggling the same way she used to. Photo by Charlie Neuman

United States and world history, government and economics, life and physical science, fine art and several electives.

To earn their GED, students must pass tests in language arts, science, social studies, and what Bender says has always been her weakest subject in school—math.

After enrolling, Bender attended classes as Vista Adult School three days a week from 9 a.m. to noon. She says she still found math difficult, especially geometry, but found essential help and support from one particular teacher.

"The number one teacher who was just a huge part of my journey and my success is Kathy Boyd," Bender says. "She taught me up on the board, which really helped because I had a hard time doing it online. The way she explained things just clicked for me."

And Bender says she appreciated how Boyd always encouraged her.

"I really thought it was impossible, but she continually told me, 'Yes, you'll do it,' and 'You're going to make it' and, 'You're going to get it,'" she says. "She had a lot of patience with me because I got really frustrated, wanting to give up, but she told

me giving up was not an option and that I could do this.

"She told me not to give up and to look how far I had come, and that it would be just another success under my belt. She's super proud of me right now," she says.

Last November, Bender earned her GED.

"I passed the math portion by two points," she says. "I got my GED 27 years after high school, and then I got my peer support specialist training out of the way."

Today, she is a certified peer support specialist for mental health systems and plans go back to school and to pursue a bachelor's degree in psychology.

"I want to continue enhancing my education," she says.

"Anything is possible," she says. "If you want to work hard enough, you can achieve it. Vista Adult School helped me to achieve my goal."


Vista Adult School
To learn more about Vista Adult School, visit www.vistaadultschool.org