



May, 2021

Next Step Learning Center

Where Education Transforms Lives

Next Step Learning Center persevered this year. Together, we have grown, learned, grieved and succeeded through these difficult and inspiring times. Here is the latest news!

Education Solutions that Never Shut Down

The pandemic hit Next Step's students hard. While poverty has always impacted our community, this year was especially challenging. Losing a job is always difficult, but this year we saw whole households suddenly forced to survive without work. Unprecedented numbers of young people who left full-time school to help support their families turned to us for alternatives to dropping out. While home-schooling has been a challenge for parents across the world, it has been especially difficult for parents who are still learning to read or for families crowded into relatives' small apartments.

A spotlight has been held up to the very real digital divide, as students turned to us for both technology and digital literacy skills. Finally, while racial inequity has always been present in the lives of Next Steps largely Black, Brown and Native students, the events of the past year have opened these wounds for many.

Throughout this journey, we are immensely proud of the Next Step students, staff, volunteers, and board for all that they have achieved. As more and more enrollees looked to education as a way to a better future this year, we have not turned a single student away. Through technology distribution, online tutoring, distanced in-person services, digital curriculum and emergency financial relief we have served a remarkably brave and inspiring group of students. This newsletter shares just a few of their stories. To those readers who invested in our work this year, we hope you are proud, too. We did it together.

The up-side of remote learning

As Next Step welcomes back students and tutors for in-person learning, we recognize that things will never be the same...and there is a lot to celebrate in that!

As tutors and students alike embraced online learning this year, we have seen some extraordinary successes. Much of this is *because* of remote options, not despite them. Distanced learning has eliminated the transportation, childcare, and work schedule issues that prevented so many from attending Next Step in the past. In addition, we have new tutors in multiple time zones to meet the diverse needs!

Importantly, digital literacy has taken a front seat, and we are excited at the doors these new skills are opening for students.





Changing Lives The Next Step Way

Next Step's continuum of programs are making a difference for low-income families!

Here's how it works:

1



Literacy and Adult Education

What: Education foundations for beginning readers

How: Reading intervention, small groups and intensive tutoring

Impact: **160 students learn to read annually**

GED and High School

What: Pathways to high school completion

How: Tutoring, online learning, and special education support

Impact: **90 diploma and GED graduates annually**

2



Bridges to Careers

What: Job placement and career development

How: Career exploration, job placement and training assistance

Impact: **86% of graduates complete job training or work**

3



College Transitions

What: College matriculation leading to degrees

How: Matriculation support, continued tutoring, scholarships, and mentorship before and throughout college

Impact: **70 Next Step grads annually maintain a 3.4 average GPA**

4





Nomonde Literacy In Action

Coming to Next Step with a 3rd grade reading level, Nomonde now reads and writes with high school proficiency.

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At Next Step I saw a lot of caring ... that's what encouraged me not to give up, why I stayed, and what I love.

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Eight long years after making the difficult decision to leave high school, Next Step student Nomonde is now just months away from fulfilling her dream of getting a high school diploma and starting college.

Nomonde's life journey began half a world away in a small South African village: "When I was at home, everything was good - I loved it there because we do everything together." At school, as elsewhere in the village, everyone spoke Nomonde's native Zulu.

Aged 13, the death of her mother necessitated that Nomonde move to Johannesburg. Life in the big city was a huge adjustment. At school, instruction was exclusively in English, and adulthood came early. In her senior year, Nomonde had to quit school and work to help support her younger siblings. In the ensuing years she dreamed of getting her diploma, but it was not a workable option for Nomonde, by then a young woman and mother.

Fast forward to the present, and Nomonde is a U.S citizen, married with three children, and attending Next Step. She studies tirelessly with tutors and Next Step's reading specialist – starting at a 3rd grade level, Nomonde now writes essays and is tackling algebra.

She recalls the first time she came to Next Step, after trying other local adult education programs–: "It just felt right to me. I felt welcome and like people were willing to help me. At Next Step I saw a lot of caring ... that's what encouraged me not to give up, why I stayed, and what I love. I feel like I'm part of something."

About the prospect of graduating, Nomonde's beautiful smile captures the joy and exhilaration she feels: "It's going to make me feel so good; this is what I've been wanting. There are not words to describe how I feel... I'll be accomplishing something so amazing."

Above: Nomonde (right) with her tutor Sheila (left)



IDA

Adult Education Transform Lives

Hard work, remote tutoring and Next Step's online writing group have led to giant academic and soul gains

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Returning to school has been both healing and mind opening.

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In late 2018, Ida was in a very transitional period of her life. Recovering from a slew of health problems, she was looking for a way to move her life forward. She'd dreamed of getting her diploma since leaving high school after having three children.

Education was always valued by Ida, as it was instilled in her by her mother; however, life took Ida down a different path. She had careers as both a hospice nursing assistant and a DJ! She raised her children and became a grandmother. Little did Ida know that over 40 years later, her dream of education was going to be put in motion by her granddaughter.

In a visit with her granddaughter, Ida mentioned that she was looking for a change in her life. Her granddaughter told her about a program in West Oakland called Next Step that her friend had graduated from, adding "They even take people your age, Grandma!"

Ida took the advice and enrolled. At first, transitioning back into school was difficult and she had reservations.

"I was struggling with going back to school. Thankfully, I had conversations with staff members at Next Step who got me together. They encouraged me to keep going and for me to push myself to work towards my goals. Returning to school has been both healing and mind opening. This process has shown me how much I am trying to change and trying to heal. Next Step is different. They care; they really care"

Ida's educational journey has not been linear, yet she continues to persevere through all obstacles and make immense progress towards her goals, week after week.

"This journey is not just for me." Ida advises others out there who need a second chance at education. "It is for anyone who is looking for change."



Cesar Pathway to the Trades

A different way of learning and inspiring tutors led this father to a diploma and into the trades



Having my diploma has helped me get into trade school, to become someone, and provide for my family.



What made me come back to school? Well, it was my kids. They asked me why I never finished school and wanted to see a high school picture. I didn't have one, so it made me want to show them, "If I can do it, they can do it."

When I was younger, family life was not easy, it was kind of painful. So, school was a way to get away from the problems at home. But at school I didn't focus and the teachers didn't mind. They didn't check to see if I was turning in work or doing work. They just passed me on. That's how I ended up going to continuation school, one after another until I found Next Step.

When I enrolled at Next Step, I had been to about 10 different schools and this is the best one out of all of them. I felt loved, appreciated and welcomed. The tutors here want you to succeed – they understand the problems people have.

Being one-on-one, it was easier to learn. As you get comfortable, you open up. I couldn't learn in a class. With individualized tutoring, I actually learned. I was able to complete my credits here at Next Step. Other schools never really taught me anything like Next Step did. If you have problems comprehending, reading challenges, learning disability or staying focused, Next Step is the place to go.

Sometimes I felt depressed and stressed, but by coming to Next Step I could talk to my tutors and they would give me good advice: like the harder things are worth working for. The easy things everyone can do.

Having my diploma has helped me get into trade school, to become someone, and provide for my family. I want to become a machinist. Now my kids (who are aged 8, 5, 4) are happy and they can't wait until graduation day. Now I see them more focused in school now that I have shown them its possible.



MY College Opens New Doors

Starting at Next Step as an English language learner, My is now a college graduate with new dreams

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Next Step is like a family that has continued to support me past receiving my diploma, all the way through college.

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My arrived in the U. S. from Vietnam at 17. She was naturally shy, so to be faced with the challenge of finishing her diploma in her third language was daunting, to say the least. Similar to other students who find their way to Next Step’s door, there seemed to be few options available to her.

My desperately wanted to progress and support her family’s efforts for a better future. Completing her G.E.D. was the way to go, but she also needed to increase her English skills. Where to go? My says that she had no idea when she enrolled that she had found a place that would do both!

Since enrolling at Next Step in 2016, My has: completed two English language certificates, passed her G.E.D., and now earned an Associate of Science degree Laney College. She has also completed all of the pre-requisite courses to transfer to the Radiologic Technology program at Merritt College in the fall.

There, she will complete the transfer requirements for her future B.S. in Radiologic Science. With her 4.0 GPA, it should not be a problem!

Now a U.S. citizen, My has flourished vocationally as well. After starting as a tutor at Laney College, she now works in the EOPS center – a support program for non-traditional college students.

My inspires her sister and cousin, also Next Step grads now in college. When asked to describe her support from Next Step, My says:

“I expected to work hard for my G.E.D., but I did not expect to find a place like Next Step. They are like a family that has continued to support me past receiving my diploma, all the way through college. The impact of the support Next Step provides is hard to picture, just within my family alone.”