



WHERE EDUCATION TRANSFORMS LIVES

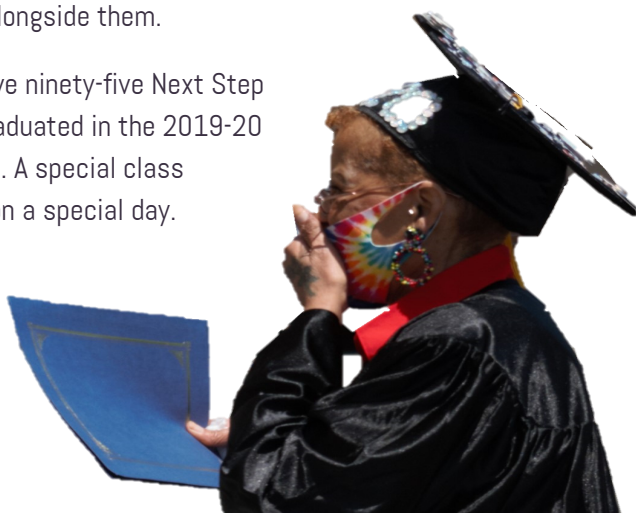
## A Graduation Like No Other

The sun came out from behind grey clouds moments before the first of two Next Step Learning Center graduations on the last Friday in July. The light lent a finishing touch to the decorated parking lot, and made the distanced, family seating pods look all the more inviting. It had taken months of preparation to make everything COVID safe and looking perfect, but - for many - the wait had been much longer. Melda Bryant had waited 45 years for this day.

Melda, pictured below, gasped in wonder as her official diploma was awarded. In her graduation speech, she thanked all the Next Step tutors and staff who had taught, guided and encouraged her along the way; however, most of them were not there to hear the speech. To ensure a safe celebration, graduates were split into two ceremonies - each with a limited guest list. We celebrated outside, and graduates sat distanced from each other in family pods. There was only one speech per ceremony, given from a microphone disinfected between uses. Despite these restrictions (or maybe because of them), it felt more special than ever. The energy and encouragement of every Next Step tutor, board member and supporter were present and felt throughout the day.

Every Next Step student faces obstacles: perhaps the challenges of poverty, maybe balancing parenting and work with school, or the additional hours and patience it takes to learn with a disability. Still, this year's graduates also rose above the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic. Watching them adapt to online tutoring and continue to learn while navigating the hardships of the shut down was moving and inspiring. This was a special graduating class, supported by a special Next Step family that had adapted without hesitation alongside them.

An impressive ninety-five Next Step students graduated in the 2019-20 school year... A special class celebrated on a special day.



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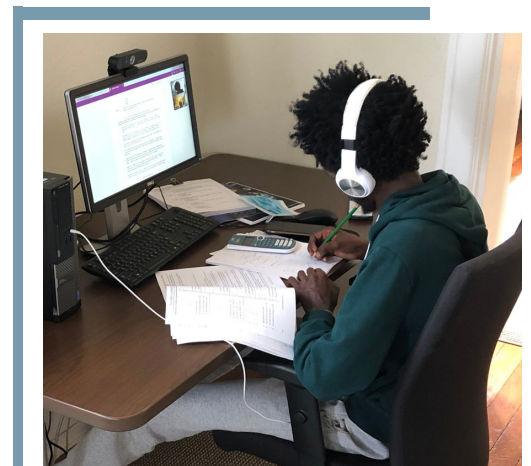
# Student Success in a New Normal

Re-imagining the graduation ceremony was a logistical challenge and exciting achievement; however, it was far from the only or most complex part of Next Step that had to be transformed. As California began sheltering in place, we quickly set about adapting our in-person services to a remote format. Next Step Learning Center has always been, at heart, about personal connection and individual care. Our challenge was to design programs that were physically distanced while maintaining our connection to each student as an individual.

Collectively, the staff, students, tutors and board have learned much over the past six months. The results are awe inspiring and speak to our human ability to evolve and persist. Below is a snap shot of some of Next Step's main program additions and developments during this new normal.

## 1 Remote Instruction

For 26 years, students and tutors have met in-person at Next Step. The combination of individual academic support and caring, personal connection has been the key to student success. As the pandemic hit, our first priority was to ensure these services continued online. Our existing team of volunteers along with new tutors trained and made the transition to online instruction. Within a week of the shutdown, students were already studying online. **We now offer more than 70 hours a week of free remote tutoring**, with subjects ranging from ESL and basic literacy to algebra and college support.



## 2 Technology Distribution & Training

In 2017, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics forecast that 77 percent of jobs would require some kind of technology skills by 2020. With the new need for distancing, that rate may well have been surpassed, with digital skills becoming a minimum standard for living-wage jobs. At Next Step, we knew that - without intervention - a lack of technology access and digital know-how would be major barriers to continued attendance and success in our remote education programs.

Immediately, we began distributing donated computers and tablets to students. These efforts were coupled with connecting students with free internet resources and individualized training on technology use. To Date, **more than forty Next Step students have been connected to free computers and internet access, and ongoing technology instruction is now an integrated part of academic support.** Sometimes painful disruptions can push us to change in positive ways. Increasing digital literacy for our students has been one of the silver linings we have found in the COVID cloud.

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## Emergency Financial Assistance

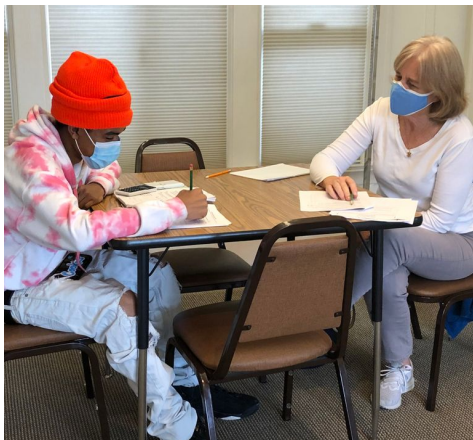
With the generous support of a grant through Tipping Point Community Foundation and individual donors, Next Step Learning Center has been able to provide emergency financial relief to individuals and families. These small, one-time grants have been awarded to students facing unprecedented challenges during the pandemic. Awards have been given for rent, emergency housing, food vouchers and college expenses.



## Safe In-Person Tutoring



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In July, the Learning Center opened its doors to students and tutors once again. There are some for whom remote instruction simply is not viable. These include students experiencing homelessness, those in living situations with no internet capability, and students with disabilities who truly benefit from hands-on, face-to-face instruction. In-person tutoring in a distanced, sanitized space has brought the welcome sound of laughter and interaction back into the center. We also offer safe solo study space, Zoom instruction stations, and continue to provide city-wide homework drop-off and distanced enrollments.

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## Computer-Based Courses

To supplement tutoring, Next Step is adding on-line courses. Students now earn high school credit or gain GED skills through multi-sensory software, and literacy students augment their learning with online reading and writing assignments. These options are especially helpful for those with mobility issues or those who have to remain home for COVID protection. Of course all 60+ of our grads taking college classes this semester are doing so online, many working closely with Next Step tutors to learn both the content and the learning platforms. In addition to classes, we are excited to have added online assessment to our catalog, helping us track student progress. Finally, not least of our on-line growth is the ability to provide GED testing onsite at Next Step. Test-takers can now take the exam with an online proctor right at the Learning Center!



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*Financially and emotionally, this pandemic has been tough. But I am not giving up this time. I have support from Nancy. It is team work!*

*- Kimberley*

”

Kimberley is not the first inspiring woman in her family. Her great, great grandmother Callie Campbell left school in 6th grade to take up domestic responsibilities. Callie was later featured in Ebony magazine for earning her GED at the age of 75! And Kimberley's grandmother, Fanny Lou Abrahams, raised Kimberley and her brother through tough times while battling cancer. The memories of these women, and the daily inspiration of her son, keep Kimberley motivated to strive for her own education. At 53, this working, single mom is about to graduate with her high school diploma. She reflects on her experience:

*I am very excited and proud of myself. Not graduating has always been an empty hole in my life, and I carried that shame. It has held me back, but I want something better for my future.*

*I went all the way through 12th grade, but we had mental health and drug abuse in our house. As a child living in those circumstances, I struggled. My parents were young and were party people, so I went to live with my grandmother. She did the best that she could, but she was very, very sick by the time I went to high school and was in the hospital much of the time. I was left at home. I was raising myself. I was going to school every day, but I wasn't earning credits.*

*Before I was a mom, I enrolled in the GED program at Next Step. When I did not pass, I stayed gone for a long time. But I remembered how kind everyone was. I would pass by the building and think 'I need this.' I took a chance and came on back.*

Kimberley faced a lifelong struggle with math to reach this finish line. Math kept her from graduating high school and later stopped her from passing the GED. "When I came to the math this time, I panicked. I had those same feelings of wanting to give up" shared Kimberley.



## Technology Distribution

Kimberley is pictured above receiving a free laptop to continue her studies after the shutdown. A heartfelt thank you to all those who donated computers to the many Next Step students who now rely on them for online tutoring and college classes.

We knew that the support of a Next Step tutor would be essential, and we knew Nancy was just the tutor for the job. "Nancy's support has really made all the difference." Kimberley says with a seriousness in her voice. "She is patient and has helped me understand the math but also helped me come to a realization about what has been so hard for so long...to understand myself and how I learn."

When the shelter-in-place order came in March, Next Step became suddenly and sadly silent. It was a Tuesday; Nancy's regular day for tutoring – part of her routine since 1996. It soon became clear that we would not be back the following Tuesday or indeed for many, many Tuesdays to come. When the board and staff decided to move services online, we were unsure how tutors and students would respond. We should not have doubted the commitment and spirit of those such as Kimberley and Nancy.

The pair enthusiastically embraced online tutoring. Kimberley picking up a donated computer from Next Step and Nancy familiarizing herself with online platforms. The two have been conquering algebra together twice a week ever since. When asked if the transition was difficult, Nancy's response is predictable: "No. To not have Next Step be part of my life was not something I wanted. I didn't want to be home with all this time. I wanted to do something to help."

Why predictable? Because Nancy welcomes every student and every learning challenge with calm, kindness and care. Something, she says, she learned from the founding sisters: "I came because I had reading challenges myself as a child, but I stayed because of the level of respect every student received."

Nancy emphasizes the opportunities that the new, online format offers. "This has forced us to explore something that has had potential for a long time," she says. Kimberley agrees. Perhaps the two will remain tutoring partners once Kimberley starts her college studies next year. After all, says Kim, "With us, it's teamwork."

# College Stories

Students take the next step

## From Next Step to Yale

NSLC GED graduate of 2013, Nawang Lobzang, has been accepted at Yale University to complete a PhD in the Philosophy of Religion; he is currently in his first semester. Congratulations Nawang!



**Above:** Nawang receiving a certificate of achievement from Jennie (Next Step's college coordinator) just a few months after earning his GED with us.

**Right:** Patricia, Lakeisha (studying college English with her tutor Tea), and Sadonia.

**Below:** Laura showing off her new Cal ID.

## Moms Become Proud Scholarship Recipients

Next Step college students Patricia, Lakeisha and Sadonia have a lot in common. They all started their college studies this year, each has a passion for learning, and each will tell you that her children are her biggest motivation for post-secondary success.

Now, they share one more attribute: They are all proud recipients of P50 Forward scholarships. Professional 50 Forward is a non-profit Employee Resource Group encouraging diversity appreciation and inclusion in the AT&T workplace and community. AT&T are long-time friends of Next Step, especially the Women of AT&T, a group that has generously paid for students' GED test fees for years.

In recent years, Kathleen Draper (one of the groups' most enthusiastic advocates for adult education and Next Step Learning Center) has sponsored Next Step applications for the P50 Forward scholarships - awards of up to \$2,000 for non-traditional students returning to school after a break of 5 years or more. Thanks to Kathleen's championing and the generosity of AT&T, all three are in the third round of Next Step students to win grants. Collectively, the three were awarded \$5,000, and - for these hard working moms with nine kids between them - every penny will be well spent!

Patricia, Lakeisha and Sadonia all have A's and B's in their classes so far, and we look forward to seeing what the future brings. Thank you Kathleen and P50 Forward for your investment in them and their children.



## The Power of Second Chances



In 2017 Laura Rambo was referred to Next Step through a special grant supporting formerly incarcerated students. A previously high achieving high school student, she suffered from an undiagnosed anxiety disorder and turned to substance abuse. She dropped out of SF State in 2012 and experienced homelessness and incarceration for the next three years. In one interaction with authorities, they told her she would never amount to anything and never recover. This pivotal interaction led her to enroll in a substance abuse treatment center, and, through this program, was connected with Next Step.

Laura came to us at a vulnerable time. She dreamed of returning to college, but was just beginning her recovery, was nervous about the pressures of school, and had little support. Laura says her nervousness began to dissipate when she was welcomed to Next Step without judgement and with warmth. She soon formed a trusting relationship with Jennie, Next Step's college coordinator, who helped her set realistic goals, clean up her academic records, and get financial aid. With Jennie' support and encouragement Laura enrolled at Berkeley City College. She set her sights high, and dreamed of transferring to UC Berkeley.

Laura dove into her studies and took advantage of any opportunity she was offered. She maintained a position on the Dean's list every semester and earned a Pedrozzi Foundation scholarship and an internship with the Livermore Chamber of Commerce - where she continues to work part time. After graduating with an AS in Business Administration and AA in Economics, Laura was accepted to UC Berkeley and is in her first semester as an Economics major. While Laura has made many connections on her journey, she credits the continuous support she has always received from Next Step for carrying her through the hard times.



# Impact

Next Step Learning Center has a clear mission: Ensure that our students today have the skills to determine their own tomorrow.

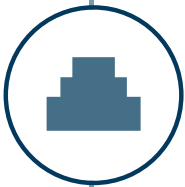
We have identified key milestones that tell us if we are successful and measure students' progress towards identified educational and vocational goals. We know that strong data helps us prove and improve our impact, so we track outcomes closely and with an eye to growth and improvement.

Here is a look at what we measure and our achievements for the 2019 -2020 school year:



**Graduating High School** | earning an accredited diploma or passing an equivalency exam (such as the GED)

This year: 95 students graduated with a diploma from our on-site high school program or with a GED or HiSET equivalency



**Progressing Towards Graduation** | advancing a grade level in terms of high school credits, passing individual equivalency sub-tests, or advancing a grade level in reading and math on pre and post tests

This year: 186 students advanced their skills and progressed towards graduation



**Succeeding in College** | entering, succeeding and earning a post-secondary certificate or degree from college

This year: 81 students passed college classes, with an average GPA of 3.4



**Increasing Income** | Gaining employment and increasing income after earning a high school or college degree

This year: 84% of graduates increased their income within 6 months of graduating

# Get Involved

Community is the engine that keeps us running, and there are many ways to make a difference. Thank you for all your support!



## SHARE

Donate your old, working computer or tablet to a high school or college student in need

## TEACH



Make the difference in someone's life as a volunteer tutor. Online and in-person, distanced opportunities are available



## LINK

Support us every time you shop by linking your Amazon account to Next Step learning Center on Amazon Smile

## INVEST



Create an enduring legacy that will change lives for years to come by remembering Next Step in your will



## SHARE

Know someone who might be interested in our work? Share this newsletter and ask us to add them to our mailing list

## CONNECT



Refer a student - Next Step is providing unique COVID-safe services and is open for new students!