

Tidings

Fall 2018 Newsletter of the Durango Adult Education Center



**Durango Adult
Education Center**

Serving Southwest Colorado

Room to Grow

The wind tossed the dry autumn leaves in hectic cyclones. Frost rime silvered the ground. Inside her tent, Riley Shaw puffed warm air into her hands. She wasn't camping. She was homeless.

Almost exactly a year later, 19-year-old Riley sits crossed-legged on her cozy dorm room bed. The windows survey the rainbow displays of leaves around Rochester, New York.

"This is the first time in my life I've had my own room," she beams. "I can't believe I'm here!"

Riley is two weeks deep in her first semester at Monroe Community College where she is studying mechanical technology and engineering.

"It's a little bit hard, but I really like what I'm learning and the campus is gorgeous," she says. The fourth generation Durangoan is the first in her family to ever attend college. The little girl who always loved tinkering with machines, fixing appliances, or later working on her old '99 Mitsubishi Mirage now aims to become an aviation mechanic.



Riley at college

The rapid turnaround in Riley's circumstances began when she heard about the Durango Adult Education Center's housing program for students. A fraught home environment levered her out of school and into the tent camp. Perhaps, if she went to the Center, things might change... Then again, they might not. In her experience, help was a mirage—a ghost on the horizon that evaporated when she got near it.

However, by the end of her first visit to the DAEC, she was enrolled in classes and signed up for Medicaid and food assistance. A few months later, then HSE Program Director, Stephanie Moran called Riley into her office to discuss the future. For the first time in her life, someone was telling Riley she had tremendous talent and potential. She was introduced to Sierra DiMarco, the Career Advisor for the DAEC's BOOST program.

Building Opportunities and Occupations for Self-sufficient Transitions services are available to all DAEC students. The program is designed to boost students beyond the barriers preventing them from attending classes, learning English, earning a high school equivalency, or advancing careers. The Career Advisor helps with resume writing, interview practice, job shadowing or internship opportunities, and so much more.

"What colleges are you considering?" Sierra asked Riley as soon as they met. "Never in my life was I like: yes, I will go to college," Riley says. "I never believed I would make it that far. But [Sierra] said: Here's the deal. We're gonna figure this out and we're gonna get you there."

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Director's Note

Director's Note continued...

Under the excellent management of my predecessor, Teresa Malone, this Center is the state's go-to example for the best in adult education. Never one to rest on any laurels, I'll be meeting with educational and business leaders alike in order to map the community's needs for expanded adult education, as well as for workforce training.

Rest assured, my pursuit of these answers will not subtract from the core mission and values of the Center, which are evergreen and all-weather. I look forward to guiding the Center through many upcoming seasons. With your continued support, we can uphold our commitment to the worth of each individual and to the community. We are stronger together.

Sincerely yours,
Elizabeth Helvey

Everywhere we look, summer's leafy emeralds are making way for autumn's red rubies and gold bullions. I always love the excitement of these seasonal shifts, but this year's colorful fanfare is especially meaningful. Becoming the DAEC's Executive Director represents a wholly new season not only in my life, but also in this organization's already phenomenal trajectory.

My rural upbringing in south central Montana instilled in me the value of community ties—neighbors working with neighbors to make the community function. Whether we were cleaning the one-room school house, hiring a teacher every year, fighting our own range fires, or helping each other at branding—the community kept life moving. We were stronger together.

That same community spirit infuses Durango and the entire southwest Colorado region. People here tackle issues with a collective innovation; crafting the unique and effective solutions that often make our region a role model for the state. Ultimately, that creative, plucky problem-solving inspired me to adopt a more active role serving the place my husband, two children, and I have called home since 2012.



Elizabeth & family

For 20+ years, I was a consultant to the U.S. Department of Energy. Specifically, I coordinated relations between federal, tribal, and state governments so that nuclear waste materials could be safely transported and stored. I traveled constantly across the country and learned more HAZMAT safety than you can shake a stick at! But my expertise uniting different groups and individuals around a common goal will serve me going forward with the DAEC.

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Room to Grow continued...

The two met weekly, pilfering college guidebooks and websites. Riley pinpointed her dream colleges, filled out countless applications, and revised her personal statements again and again. She sensed the mirage of help becoming a true oasis.

Until she saw the tuition price tags. Luckily, Sierra had an ace up her sleeve: the FAFSA!

"A student must complete the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) to obtain federal financial aid like grants, work-study, student loans, and scholarships that pay for college," Sierra explains. "I tell students it's a couple hours of work to potentially receive thousands of dollars in free money to go to school."

Outside Riley's dormitory, a soft wind combs the blushing maple leaves. Her tuition and housing are secure thanks to scholarships from the Beta Sigma Phi, PEO Chapter CS, High Noon Rotary Club, the Center, and a Pell Grant.

"I'm living the dream!" she exclaims. "I'm all the way across the country doing exactly what I always thought I couldn't do!"



Riley at May GED Graduation

Thanks to Your Support...

Where the Wild Things Are Taught

"It's very hard for me to sit still," Bobby Simmons says. "I'm a very high-strung person."

When he was young, everyone thought he was a wild thing—just like boy in the Maurice Sendak book. But Bobby didn't have a wolf onesie or a secret island to rule. He had ADHD. He took prescription medication and attended special classes in school to work with or around his condition. Even so, he struggled to learn, feeling like a bottle rocket in a jar.

As far as he was concerned, school was pointless compared to the great wide world so full of adventures, hijinks, and fun. So, he dropped out of the 8th grade. Like the boy in the book, he went to be where the wild things are.

Unfortunately, all that wild fun turned to trouble with steep consequences. While serving time at the La Plata County Jail, Bobby met Mary Mullen, High School Equivalency Lead Teacher at the Durango Adult Education Center. Mary regularly tutored inmates preparing to obtain a high school equivalency through the GED.



Bobby in GED class

"Mary is awesome!" Bobby declares. He recalls how her positive, welcoming attitude made it easy to ask questions. Finishing his education seemed all too feasible while talking with her.

Before he could begin, however, he was transferred to Hilltop House, a community corrections facility providing transitional housing, substance abuse treatment, and mental health services. Hilltop residents undergo strict supervision. To leave the building for any activity requires a lot of paperwork and preapproval.

Nonetheless, Bobby thrived in the disciplined environment. He became more organized and responsible. He secured two jobs and took self-development courses to hone his emotions and impulses. But despite the steady yearning to get his GED, Bobby resisted visiting the DAEC.

"It was intimidating," he confesses. "If they saw how uneducated I was or how hard it is for me to learn, then... I would be judged."

Remembering Mary's kindness finally nudged him through the doors. Even though Bobby's already full schedule and Hilltop procedures meant his attendance would be spotty, the Center encouraged him to enroll. After all, flexible attendance would enable him to ease back into academics.

Bobby now attends classes full-time and the Center continually adjusts around his regulated coming-and-going from Hilltop House.

"The more that I come, the more I want to be here," he says. "I feel a lot more respect for myself."

He especially appreciates how his teacher keeps him engaged with a lot of hands-on activities. She also allows him to go for a brisk walk down the hall whenever his bottle-rocket energy buzzes.

"I've never even thought in my wildest dreams that I would get my GED," says boy who knows best about all things wild.



Durango Adult Education Center

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Return Address Requested

Upcoming Events

Tuesday, December 4:

CoGives Day

Colorado Gives Day is an annual statewide movement to celebrate and increase philanthropy in Colorado through online giving. Donations are accepted through ColoradoGives.org.

Thursday, December 20:

High School Equivalency Graduation Ceremony

Durango Public Library
6 - 7 pm

Wednesday, January 30, 2019:

Spellebration - Snowdown Spelling Showdown

Henry Strater Theatre
5:30 - 7:30 pm

Our Mission

The mission of the Durango Adult Education Center, a caring learning community, is to fill educational gaps by providing the skills and knowledge necessary for livable wage careers, post-secondary education, and social and economic mobility.

Why I Volunteer

I have been volunteering at the Durango Adult Education Center for about 4 years. I decided to volunteer because I feel the Center fills a desperate need in our community; it offers education to some of our most vulnerable and to those that public education did not work out for them. Another deciding factor in volunteering is because everyone here feels valued.

I tutor GED and Adult Basic Education students in social studies, reading and writing. I continue volunteering with the Center because I believe in the organization and the students. It's always inspiring when one of my students passes their GED.

The first student I tutored was so very motivated and such an incredible human being who overcame many odds to excel. Another memorable student was a woman who worked extra hard to pass her language arts test because English was not her native language. She should be a role model for determination and hard work for us all.



Nicki Massieon, Volunteer