

TIDINGS

Durango & Cortez Adult Education Center Spring 2024 Newsletter

Life's Lessons

How One Student Found All the Answers in Loss, Grief, and Growth

*Kindness, kindness
Oh, whenever you try this
You can bring
A smile to someone's face*

Acelynn Samora leads her preschool students through a song. The kids clap to the rhythm. They giggle when they smile extra big and poke their fingers into their cheeks.

Early childhood educators like Acelynn are essential when it comes to teaching young people supremely fundamental yet easily underestimated skills such as speaking and communicating, sharing, creative play, discovery, innovation, having a social meal, and resolving conflicts without hitting or biting others.

Acelynn wants her students to have fun as they learn. She wants them to know the days of the week or the months of the year. She wants them to know their numbers and be able to read their names and basic words. But, more than anything, she wants them to learn how to be confident, play fair, and be kind. Acelynn knows these skills will serve them well in a world that can be biting. One that isn't always fair and can be cruelly unkind.

Only two years ago, Acelynn stood toe-to-toe with cruelty. She was lucky to walk away alive.

Acelynn may be young, but she talks as a much older person endowed with ambition, experience, and poise. It is hard to believe that two years ago, she was just 16. And she was slowly unraveling.

"In high school, I would not be in class. I would be in the hallways, always talking with my friends. You can be so easily distracted," Acelynn confesses. She goes on, noting, "I was completely going down the wrong path. I was failing every class. I was into drugs and everything."

She wasn't alone in that downward spiral. Her older brother had also been dabbling in drugs. The two had been extremely close throughout childhood. In fact, they were often inseparable. Whatever her brother did, Acelynn was quick to imitate.

"I actually dropped out and ran away with my brother," she says, stopping to take deep breath. Tears well up. Acelynn struggles to get the next words out. "He wound up passing away."

Her brother overdosed. Acelynn realized she was following in his footsteps yet again.

"That is what made me wake up," Acelynn explains. The inner storm of her grief gradually subsides. "I definitely wouldn't be here if wasn't for that. I wouldn't have...after that...it really made me want something better for my life."

Acelynn did more than merely want a change. She pursued it relentlessly. Having dropped out of school, Acelynn sought employment. She says, "My family always told me: do a job you enjoy doing. So I wondered, what's something I enjoy? Kids!"

She called the Riverhouse Children's Center and asked if they were hiring. They were and, in fact, they would interview her the next day. Acelynn was dumbfounded. She had no prior experience working any jobs. She pulled together a résumé and selected her best interview attire. She was hired on as a classroom aid and quickly worked her way up to being a lead teacher. She loved the work and knew she had found her career. But to advance in the education field, she would first need to complete her own education.

Acelynn enrolled at the Durango Adult Education Center to get her GED. Her brother had taken online classes there during the pandemic. Although he had not loved the online learning, he had spoken highly of his teachers. Acelynn quickly discovered why.



Acelynn changed her life trajectory after a tragic loss.

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From the Director

Persistence.

We talk about “perseverance” or “persistence” a lot at Durango Adult Education Center.

We know that when students attend class on a regular basis, work with teachers and staff, and take full advantage of the programs available, they experience growth and success. State and Federal granting agencies monitor our “persistence” rate as they decide our funding levels. Teachers and career counselors discuss individual students’ persistence and seek ways to reduce the barriers that keep students out of class.

For most of our students, the barriers are high, sometimes unpredictable, and often scary. Some barriers are due to learned life-long patterns of frustration, while others are from imposed life changes or circumstances.

Between the drive of our students to make change, the incredible enthusiasm and skill of our teachers and staff, dedication of our volunteers, and the support of our board and donors, we see amazing growth. What we do here changes lives.

Be it completing a high school education, working to be literate in the English language, or gaining citizenship, all are amazing accomplishments. For us, each accomplishment is a step along the journey of removing barriers and exploring personal potential.

‘Success if not final; failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts.’

- Winston Churchill

The courage to continue – to be persistent – to show up.

We could not lower these barriers without the support of our community. You show up for DAEC year after year, and we thank you.

In Gratitude,

Susan

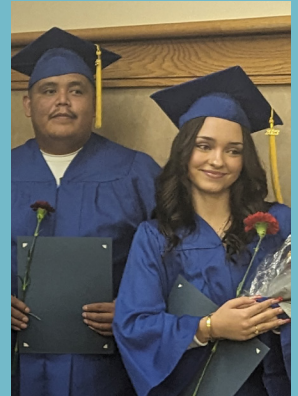


Susan Hakanson, Executive Director

Life’s Lessons, continued...

“I’m the type of learner that asks a lot of questions,” she explains. “The teachers were right there to answer every single one of them! The teachers made the environment feel so inclusive. Like no one’s judging you for being there. That made it better. Even meeting the other students and hearing about what got them into that classroom with you. It honestly made me feel better. There’s so many reasons why so many people land here.”

Acelynn donned her graduation cap and gown in December 2023. Not only had she achieved her GED, but she also had earned an Early Childhood Training Scholarship. Generously backed by the Buell Foundation for over 20 years, these awards help aspiring educators springboard their careers by obtaining licensures, certifications, and advanced degrees.



Acelynn graduated with her GED in December 2023

In 2023, the DAEC awarded \$41,838 in these scholarship funds to 38 recipients, including Acelynn. The scholarship enabled her to enroll in a Lead Teacher Certification program through Colorado Northwest Community College. After completing the one-year program, Acelynn’s professional credential will open the door to working at larger schools on an even better salary.

For now, Acelynn must juggle her full-time job and her certification coursework. In the evenings, she makes dinner and gets her homework done before getting to bed early. Lessons kick off in her classroom just after 7am. She reflects on how very grown up and responsible her life is, in contrast with so many of her friends who are only now preparing to graduate from high school in May.

She mentions that her life would be very different had her brother not died. She shakes away these thoughts as she affirms, “I am where I want to be. It’s tragic, but it’s...beautiful. And working with kids, it helps so much. I’ve got new light. I have to help them live a good life. It is really rewarding!”

One, two, three...
Red, blue, green...

As Acelynn leads her preschoolers through their lessons, she appreciates the importance of education. Better than most, she also knows that not all life’s lessons come from a textbook. The main lesson she wants her community to know is how special the DAEC is as a safety net. As she puts it, “What’s amazing about the Adult Education Center is that it gives people a second chance. People like me. It opens up so many opportunities. It gives people confidence. It gives that first step back into their life through education.”

The Impact of Your Support

Setting High Bars Behind Bars

For Incarcerated Students, Served Time is Not Time Wasted

As soon as they became inmates at the La Plata County Jail, both Patricia and Donald swiftly reframed their circumstances into one of gratitude and opportunity.

“I love what I’ve come through and where it’s getting me to,” Patricia says. “You just gotta make the best of it. You gotta take the pros and not focus on the cons.” At almost 60, she speaks with the soft tones of a mother, but has the articulate staccato of a news anchor.

Donald quotes his favorite adage with a thick Mississippi drawl, “In the middle of every difficulty lies an opportunity.”

Patricia and Donald have never met, though they do inhabit the same building and work with the same teachers. Donald is studying for the GED Social Studies and Math tests. And Patricia still needs to pass exams in Math and Reading & Language Arts. Plotting linear equations and solving for x on a two-hour test has them both on edge.

“I’ve never been good at math,” Patricia admits. “It’s going to be the biggest challenge for me.”

Test anxiety is not the only roadblock to learning for student inmates. The common area can get very noisy. Donald confesses, “With everybody talking [in the common area], it’s a little frustrating trying to study. From watching TV to working out. It gets a little hard to focus. Your mind can wander. It’s not like a classroom setting.”

High school equivalency teacher, Mary Mullen, teaches GED subjects at the jail and explains other challenges for learning. “A lot of the students need eyeglasses. So that’s a challenge for them when they’re

trying to read or test.” Other student inmates have mental illness or learning differences and were never taught helpful coping skills. Some are recovering from trauma or addictions. “Most of the inmates I deal with carry a lot of guilt and anger,” Mary says. “And a lot of them are experiencing fear. They worry about their families supporting themselves.”

As if all these factors were not tricky enough to work around, GED study sessions have to compete against other inmate programs and activities. Between counselors, court appearances, and precious time outside, most student inmates only get 45 minutes of classroom time per week.

Given all these stressful impediments, it is no small wonder Patricia and Donald relish their quiet time in the study room to focus.

While prepping for their GED exams, Donald and Patricia learn more than just concepts, facts, and vocabulary. They learn about themselves, too. “I’ve learned I’ve got what it takes to succeed in something if I put my mind to it. Focus. Just focus and take the time to learn it,” Donald says.

Patricia resonates with this experience. “To be able to read the material, understand it, and pass a test...it’s just validating. It makes you feel good about yourself. You’re inspired to do other things. If we work on things, we can get there.”

She credits these deeper lessons to the exceptional kindness of her teachers. “Our teachers are great. I just love it. Good people... compassionate people, they bring out the best in us in dire situations.”

Donald concurs, adding, “It’s a blessing that they’re able to dedicate their time and actually see us and work with us one-on-one. And they actually care. And that’s something I’ve not seen a lot. That’s a change for me and makes me want to put forth more effort to care myself.”



Donald with teacher Mary Mullen.

Donald notes, “With support for the GED program in the jail, you’re actually doing something that can keep someone from going back to jail. We need somebody to believe in us, to give us a chance. And we’ve got to give ourselves a chance.”

Giving himself a chance means ultimately changing the limiting beliefs and narratives he has built up over a lifetime. Patricia picks up on this thread saying, “The battle’s in the mind.” Her voice rings with the confidence of one who has finally turned the tide in a lifelong skirmish with doubt.



Patricia enjoys the quiet study room.

For anyone financially poised to support adult education, Mary, Donald, and Patricia strongly advocate earmarking that support specifically for the jail program.

“[Give] because there’s a lot of us that really want to get ahead or get back on our feet and overcome the challenges of prison and jail time,” Patricia says. “The educators need all the support they can get. I don’t know what we would do without them. Bless their hearts; they are really wonderful.”

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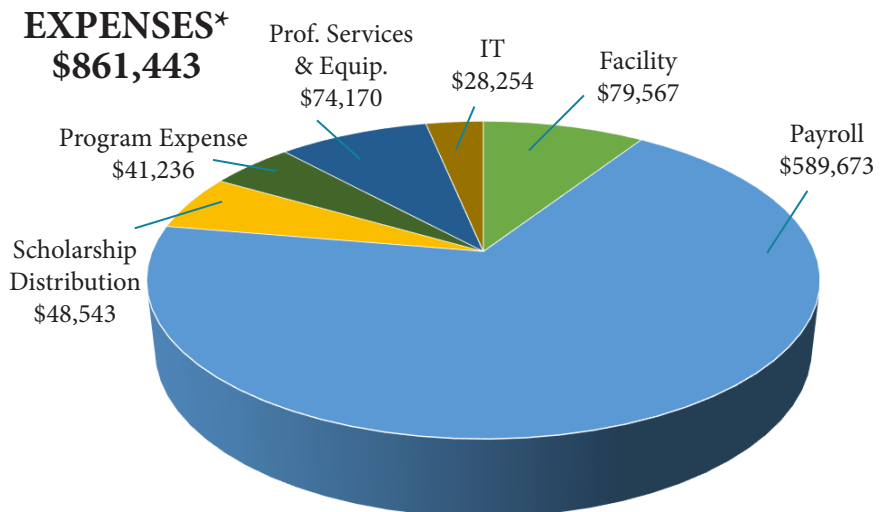
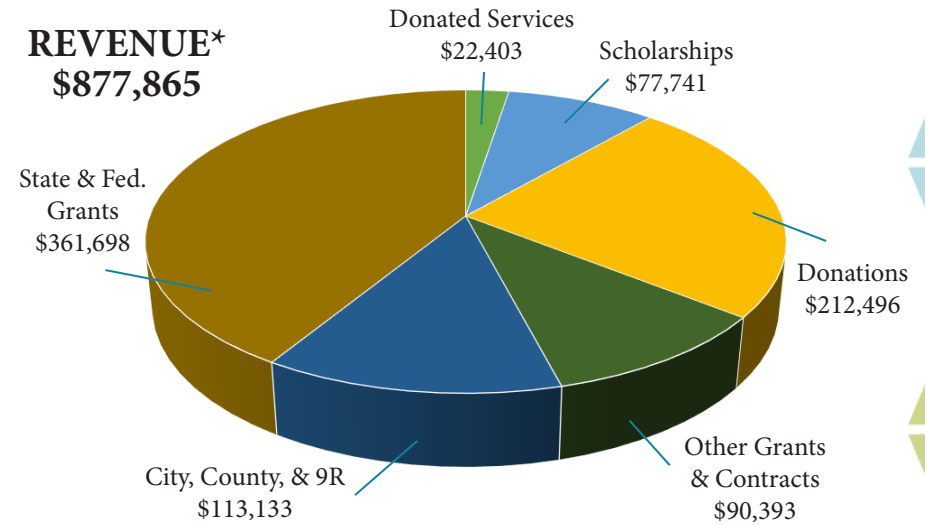
Alison Williams
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2023 Benchmarks

228 learners attended our ESL and GED classes
174 GED tests received passing scores.
37 students achieved a GED. **90** students representing
17 countries learned English. **113** individuals received career & support services through our BOOST Program. Additionally, **38** learners were awarded over **\$41,800** in scholarships for early childhood education training.
403 career certification and licensure tests were administered at our Pearson VUE testing center.
 Volunteers donated **863** service hours.

2023 Finances



**The pie graphs do not reflect a corrected error: The Colorado Dept. of Education mistakenly sent us \$121,204. We returned this amount in full and reversed the error. It has been removed from our revenue and expenses.*

Thank You, 2023 Donors

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Adult Education Center

Serving Southwest Colorado

701 Camino del Rio, Ste. 301
Durango, CO 81301

**Upcoming Fundraiser:
5k/10k Fun Run on August 17th!!**



Seeking runners
and volunteers!

Scan code for more details:



Upcoming Events

Wednesday, May 29th, 5:00pm
Cortez GED Graduation Ceremony
Turquoise Raven Art Gallery

Thursday, May 30th, 6:00pm
Durango GED Graduation Ceremony
Durango Public Library

Saturday, August 17th, 8:30am
The Fast and Curious 5k/10k Fun Run
Santa Rita Park

September 24th, 12:00pm
Literacy Luncheon Fundraiser
DoubleTree Ballroom

Our Mission

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



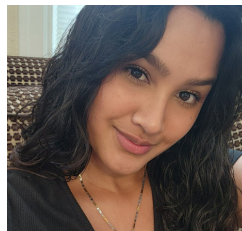
New Staff Members Join Our Team!



Buck Blankenship, ESL Teacher, Durango
Buck recently returned from overseas where he had been living for the last 20 years teaching English as a Second Language. He taught in Ecuador, Japan, Thailand, and Saudi Arabia. He is new to town and enjoys Durango's good vibes.



Carrie Coffin, Math & Science Teacher, Cortez
Carrie is a certified life coach and has a background in nonprofit work. She is excited to help our students explore opportunities and potential. In her free time Carrie enjoys hiking and camping with her two dogs.



Arlyn Marin, Childcare Specialist, Cortez
Arlyn moved here from Panama three years ago. Her husband is from Cortez and they met while he was in Panama for work. Arlyn studied hard learning English and enjoys giving back to our students as they also learn English.