

Black Diamond Foundation Helps Local Adults Complete GED Studies

By Jill Ludowese

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Withlacoochee Technical Institute (WTI) honored the Class of 2013 during an uplifting graduation ceremony on May 20th, at the Curtis Peterson Auditorium in Lecanto. That evening over 200 students were recognized for completing their high school equivalency coursework, and passing the General Educational Development (GED) Test. Six of those students benefitted directly from Black Diamond Foundation's financial support through a synergistic partnership with United Way of Citrus County.

In January, Black Diamond Foundation and United Way of Citrus County joined forces to fund an education initiative to attack a root cause of one of the systemic problems in our community: unemployment. Over 17,000 adults in Citrus County lack a high school diploma or GED equivalency. Simultaneously, there are over 600 jobs open in Citrus County with no educated/skilled workforce to fill the positions.

The United Way of Citrus County opened a dialogue with WTI to identify why adult students weren't able to complete their GED studies. Answers varied. Some needed help with tuition. Others needed help paying for childcare, or care for elderly parents, while they were in class. Others needed assistance paying for transportation costs associated with their commute to Inverness. The way ahead was clear: initiate a pilot program for select, motivated students at WTI to help them reach their goal of completing GED studies and entering the workforce in Citrus County.

The United Way partnered with Workforce Connection to pay tuition costs for 26 students that WTI guidance counselors identified for the pilot program. Black Diamond Foundation agreed to provide up to \$15,000 for "gap funding" designed to pay costs for these students that

were not covered by other assistance programs. Foundation funding is contingent on the student staying motivated and regularly attending classes. If he/she skips or quits, the “gap funding” stops immediately.

Over the last six months, a portion of the Foundation’s community grant was used to provide gas cards and bus fare, pay car insurance costs, and augment child care expenses. The grant also covered the cost of a used bicycle for a student who was walking from Homosassa to Inverness to attend GED classes.

The first six students in the pilot program completed their GED tests, and graduated in the WTI ceremony on May 20th. They included a young mother from Homosassa who received Foundation “gap funding” to help pay for her car insurance so she could drive to classes in Inverness. The group of graduates also included Virginia Nugent, whose story was highlighted by Eryn Worthington in the Citrus County Chronicle on May 30th. Virginia received gas cards from United Way, funded through the Black Diamond Foundation partnership, which removed barriers and helped her complete her GED studies and obtain permanent employment with the Citrus County School District.

Your contributions to Black Diamond Foundation truly “Make a Difference” in Citrus County every day. In this case, through the unique partnership with the United Way of Citrus County and Withlacoochee Technical Institute, you’ve helped motivated adults in our community complete their education and attain skills to earn a family-sustaining income. We look forward to sharing the inspiring stories of more students as this pilot program progresses throughout 2013.