

# Profiles of Hope

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A mere nine months ago, Kayla Bross was frustrated and about to drop out of high school. Today she is the proud owner of a General Educational Development (GED) Certificate and is well on her way to college. What caused the abrupt turnaround? The Youth Connections program at Project Self-Sufficiency. “I decided to take this route instead,” noted Kayla, who elected to try the Youth Connections Program at Project Self-Sufficiency after seeing a flyer about it at her high school. “I am definitely feeling better about myself. I am doing the prep work for the college placement test, applying for college, and getting ready to move on with my academic career.”

Kayla notes that she has a learning disability which had always made it difficult for her to concentrate during high school. “One of the first things they do at the Youth Connections program is test your learning style. Then they teach you based on your learning style.” Being in a smaller class size also helped.

Like Kayla, approximately 7% of high school students will drop out of school before reaching the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Students from low-income families are almost twice as likely (13.8%) to drop out of high school as their higher-income peers. There are many significant reasons teens drop out of high school before graduating, ranging from peer pressure to lack of parental support to failure to address special needs. A feeling of boredom or lack of engagement at school is another common problem. While the reasons for dropping out are varied, it is predictable that those without a high school diploma will fare worse economically than their peers. Without a diploma, they will have a difficult time finding meaningful work. High school drop outs will earn less, have poor health, live in poverty and have children at an early age, many of whom will also grow up to be high school drop outs, according to EduGuide, a non-profit organization that works with schools and other non-profit groups.

The free Youth Connections program at Project Self-Sufficiency is designed for teens and young adults who are no longer enrolled in school, or those who have graduated from high school but who may be struggling with literacy. Youth Connections helps guide participants through GED testing, job training, and placement at a work site, in college or the military. Once a participant is accepted into the program, they can expect to undergo a battery of assessment testing followed by help with attaining their GED, life skills training, pre-employment training, and other remedial education efforts. Childcare, lunch and limited transportation assistance is available to all participants. Upon completion of their education, participants will be placed in internships, followed by placement in paid employment, college or the military. Follow up support will be provided by Project Self-Sufficiency staff to ensure that the newly-minted workers are faring well in their positions.

Kayla completed her school work and was assigned to an internship at the Little Sprouts Early Learning Center. “It was really fun. I loved working there and I like being around little kids.” She has no interest in pursuing a career in education, however. “I want a business degree so that I can open up my own yoga studio.”

Along with her coursework in the Youth Connections program, Kayla took advantage of the life skills classes offered at the agency which has assisted her with her current job search. “They helped me to build my resume and taught me how to interview which definitely helped me a lot.”

For Kayla, being able to meet people like herself was just as important as receiving a diploma. “My favorite thing about the program is the people I have met. I have made some of my best friends here. I consider the class my family. The people that come here really want to be here. I have changed and grown, and I am a much happier person since I came here. Project Self-Sufficiency has taught me how to be an independent person.”

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**Kayla Bross**