

# Profiles of Hope

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Six years ago at the age of 15, Larissa Connors hit a rough patch and dropped out of high school, a decision she says she has regretted ever since. Severe health problems, coupled with the tragic death of her father, caused her to miss too many days of school. Rather than try to catch up with her school work, she gave up, and stayed home to help her ailing mother with the other children in the family. Larissa used the time to volunteer as part of the Beemerville Auxiliary, and she picked up odd jobs during the summer months. Still, she felt that there was something missing in her life. Having spent so much time around physicians and hospitals as a result of her childhood heart condition, she yearned for a career in the medical field.

Getting there was the problem. One day she learned about the Youth Connections Program at Project Self-Sufficiency from an article in a magazine. She picked up the phone and enrolled. The agency's Youth Connections program is an outreach effort targeted at young people who have either dropped out of school, or who are high school graduates struggling with literacy issues.

Like Larissa, approximately 30% 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. Statistically only 55% of the nation's students between the ages of 15 and 19 will successfully complete high school and receive a high school diploma. Another 15% will receive their GED or high school equivalency before the age of 24, which in total accounts for 70% of students that will graduate annually.

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 youth 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.

Larissa has worked diligently towards her GED testing since the day she walked through the doors at Project Self-Sufficiency. After she takes the test, she will be placed in an internship with a local health care practitioner. Her goal is to attend Sussex County Community College and obtain a degree in medical office administration. "I've been thinking about this for a long time. Ever since I was little I knew I wanted to be in the medical field. I like helping other people. Because of my heart condition, I have always been around doctors and hospitals. I see the way that they help people and I want to do that, too."

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Larissa Connors