

THIRTEEN AND THE NEW YORK CITY BOARD OF EDUCATION HONORS STUDENTS

MICHAEL M., AND PROJECT RENEWAL

Literacy News

September 2001

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The New York City Board of Education – Office of Adult Education -- Region 4

Every morning a class of men travel from Project Renewal's Third Street shelter to their New York City Board of Education GED class called Next Step. The educational arm of Project Renewal is responsible for helping homeless men living in Project Renewal shelters.

In the academic year 2000-2001, twenty-one Next Step students received their GEDs. In addition to overcoming various addictions and homelessness, they got that magical piece of paper testifying to the fact that they have achieved something significant. They have obtained their GED. Besides opening the door to many job opportunities and increased salaries, this piece of paper proves to these men (and everyone else) that they are capable, that they can succeed. Just like the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*, they need a piece of paper as proof of what they know. They dare more and they try harder with "that paper" in their hands. Doors closed to them in the past begin to open.

One such student is 24-year-old Michael M – a resident at Project Renewal. In his own words: "the strange thing is that I had no idea that I had a drug problem until I was offered help. I remember I was at a shelter with no money, no job, and no sense of direction. I had come to New York from North Carolina on New Year's Day 1999 with only five dollars in my pocket. Things went all right working at a restaurant and living in a studio in Brooklyn. After about a year of living the high life in New York City, I lost my job at the restaurant. And when my savings were depleted, I found myself in the Wards Island shelter. Project Renewal got me on my first day there and took me back to their facility. Due to my addiction to marijuana and lack of education, I had no dreams. Project Renewal allowed me to come to their facility and get my priorities in order. The first thing was to stop using. After 30 days, I was allowed to attend Board of Education classes at Next Step. These classes gave me a dream and became an essential part of my ability to stay clean. The staff helped me to believe in myself and to understand that I could accomplish what I set out to do, after only four months in the program, and with the strong encouragement of my teacher, I was able to earn my GED diploma. For me, earning my diploma was my greatest accomplishment. The support that I got gave me the confidence to take the GED test and I scored 285, which is 60 points over what I needed to pass. I truly do feel that without the help of Project Renewal and the people who took the special interest in me, I may have very well still been sitting in that Wards Island shelter with no drive and no ambition.

"Now after having been in treatment for over six months and my new diploma in hand, I'm planning to re-enter the work force. I have my eyes set on the real estate industry and one day, with a lot of hard work, I hope to earn a college degree. But for now, I'll just take it one day at a time."

"Life tests us all from the minute we are born until the moment we die. We pass and fail tests daily. The GED test is "somethin' else" though, and the GED diploma represents something, which is often beyond measurement."