

Literacy Council and Billy Darnell

Twenty years ago, an 18-year-old high school senior stood up from his desk, gathered his possessions, and walked out of the classroom. Billy Darnell had three weeks to go to graduation, and he had just been thinking things over – high school was tiresome, the teacher wasn't telling him much, and he had a job and money in his pocket. Why hang around?

Actually, Darnell wasn't as reckless as all that sounds – the Culpeper native had been taking advanced courses at William Monroe High School in Greene County and figured he had enough credits to graduate. Only it turned out he didn't, and he didn't graduate. No cap and gown, no strains of *Pomp and Circumstance*, and mostly no diploma.

Darnell grew up on the Spillman farm near Brandy Station, one of six children of a father who worked on the farm. From his family, he brought away a strong work ethic and a sense of responsibility to provide for a family, but not necessarily a faith in the value of education.

In 2018, he finally had enough of the looks that he received when he had to tell someone he didn't graduate from high school. He also had a son, Josh, then 13, who was already making restless noises about maybe leaving school. By then, he had a responsible job at Bingham & Taylor in Culpeper, a long-established maker of components for underground utilities. He had sought out the position seven years earlier because the construction work he had been doing left him with a constant backache at 32 years old.

A few years after that unfortunate walk-out, Darnell had made an attempt to get the General Educational Development (GED®) certification, but he didn't stick with it. This time, now a Madison County resident, he went to the Literacy Council of Madison County (LCMC) to see what they could do to help.

The council offered to set up classes and/or one-on-one help, and Darnell began. Now, nearly nine months later, he isn't sure why he kept at it. "I did it for me," he says, and despite the demands of his job and family, illnesses and even a car accident, he showed up at the council offices twice a week, every week, and put in several hours with each visit. He didn't really do it single-handedly, though; staff and tutors at the council almost immediately doted on their determined student, and pulled for him all the way. Not only was he trying very hard, but literacy council folks Doris Turner, Donna Coffey and Kathleen Hoffman found that his grasp of the various subjects was an immediate and satisfactory payoff to their efforts, a very intelligent young man who quickly soaked up his belated education.

The GED® program requires passing computerized tests in four subjects, language arts, math, social studies and science. While math is generally considered the most difficult, the language arts test includes a writing sample that can be a stumbling block for many learners. Although he began by saying he didn't like to read at all, Darnell gladdened his language arts tutor by picking up quickly on the joys of Jack London, Edgar Allan Poe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. While his first writing sample was rough, he had lots to say about the role of salaries in major league baseball, and had no trouble grasping the concept of arguing both sides of a question. Admittedly opinionated by nature, he took to multiple choice questions with aggressive determination.

Extra reading came from authors like the great sportswriter Paul Gallico, and suddenly Darnell, a high school athlete, thought reading wasn't quite so bad. He passed the GED® language arts.

Then came social studies. He found the presidents and political turmoil that had preceded his own time interesting; he learned to interpret political cartooning, and he proved a whiz at

figuring out the maps that showed the trails people had taken to move west, as well as those more exotic outlines that indicated the extent of the Silk Road in Asia, Africa and Europe. There were even cracks in his stance that politics aren't for people like him. He passed the GED® social studies.

Science was somewhat different. Since he had asked the same tutor who did language arts and social studies to continue with this even though she did not normally do science, it turned out he was better at it than she was. Nonetheless, they spent a few hours making sure his multiple choice reading skills were transferring to questions about density, area, leverage, and the like, and then he was ready to take the test.

But math had added a few unexpected layers in 20 years, had been harder for Darnell. He spent the majority of his time wrestling with it, and it no doubt prolonged his efforts by several months. But some alternate explanations and help from tutors Judy Mahanes, Terry Meadows, and Donna Coffey gave him a boost.

With the GED® program, there are “ready” tests that are given in the Literacy Office to demonstrate that a learner is likely to pass the real thing, given at official locations by computer. Darnell at first fell short on the math, but then was faced with a do or die situation – he was ready, and if he took both the math and science the same day he would be able to officially graduate in May. He did pass both, and was able to don his cap and gown and receive his diploma at a ceremony at the Culpeper Baptist Church. Proud family members watched, including his mother in South Carolina by means of a video transmitted by a sister with a tablet.

Earlier, Darnell had asked his mom what she wanted for Mother's Day. “Just to see you walk across that stage,” she said, and so she did. She also heard several inspiring little speeches by others who were having delayed graduation days, and were for the first time set to realize their ambitions.

A day or two later at work, Darnell was summoned to the office at Bingham & Taylor. When he arrived, he received congratulations, a steakhouse gift certificate, a raise and a readjustment of duties. Had it been worth it?

The new grad says yes, although he admits there was a time or two when he wasn't sure he would make it. He says he has always been able to work his way around not having the official proof of education, that if he had a task he could find a way to do it. His ability to work at a good job and provide for his wife, Christie, and two sons, Josh and Dennis, who is younger and hasn't threatened to drop out of school, was a satisfaction to him. But when he decided to go for the GED® certificate, “I did it for me, really. You have to want to do it; if you're just going through the motions, you can't – you have to want to learn and give it 100 percent.”

In recent years, he had found “I got tired of doors being slammed in my face when I was more than qualified” because he wasn't a high school graduate. He has advice for students who don't feel motivated to finish school. “It might not seem like it now, but that diploma can carry you a long way.” An example: “If you're working at MacDonal'd's, you have to think you can only flip burgers for so long before you have to pay a mortgage.”

And now that he has made it, what is he doing with the extra time that he was spending on his studies? Well, working overtime to save for a summer vacation for his family. And he's reading. “I was surprised by how much I enjoy reading. I wasn't even willing to be read to as a kid.” Just to show he hasn't entirely surrendered, he points out “I still hate spelling and punctuation.”

The Literacy Council recently moved, and is now located at 110 N. Main Street in Madison. Office hours are 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday; the phone number is 948-

5514. Instruction is available in the GED® instruction, basic reading, mathematics, and computer skills.

You are invited to become a member of an organization that helps so many people improve their future as Darnell did. The dues are \$25 and entitle you to a vote at biannual business meetings. You may also take pride in supporting the only non-profit organization in Madison County that offers instruction to adults. Please call the office (948-5514) for more information or to become a member. You may also send your dues to Literacy Council of Madison County, PO Box 575, Madison, VA 22727.