

By: Valerie Hoffmann

Melissa Korpela smiled big for the camera. She had a lot to smile about. The 22 year-old just received her GED. Decked out in a red cap and gown, she joined five of her classmates from Adult Literacy Learning Center Choices for a photo.

"I feel really happy," Korpella said. I couldn't believe I actually went through with it and accomplished it."

Korpella was one of the program's students who had left high school due to a pregnancy.

"I had my oldest daughter when I was young," Korpella explained. "I wanted to be there for her. I didn't want to have to leave her at daycare. I wanted to see her roll over and take her first step."

Now, with her 4 year-old daughter, Maryanna, going to school, Korpella decided it was time for her to get her GED so she could help Maryanna with homework.

She's not alone. Candi Rucinski, 20, also left high school when she became pregnant with her son, Christopher.

"My doctor wanted me to leave school," Rucinski said. "Then I was told I could be home schooled, but even if I advanced, they were going to place me back in the ninth grade when I came back."

Rucinski, who lives in Bessemer with her grandparents, opted not to go back to high school and a few years later enrolled in the GED program. And like Korpella, she did it for her child.

"If it ever got so bad in school where there were shootings and bombs, I like knowing I can take him out and home school him," Rucinski said about her 3 year-old.

Another graduate, Robert Harkanson, 47, sees receiving his GED as encouragement to his daughter who lives outside Philadelphia with her mother.

"My daughter is 17 and has a baby. She dropped out and I hope now I can be a role model for her and encourage her to get hers," Harkanson said.

These graduates faced many roadblocks in getting their diplomas. For some, like Harkanson, it was a long road; for others, it was time, money and math.

Harkanson was a troubled youth who went from grade school to reform school, but in 1976 he tried to turn his life around by getting his GED. He had one hang-up — math.

"I couldn't pass the math. Math was murder for me. If $X \times Y = Z$ it should be part of the alphabet," Harkanson said.

Rucinski didn't hesitate to say math was the hardest thing about getting her GED.

"I didn't get very far in math in high school," she said.

To pass the math in the GED program, students need a 410. On her first try, Rucinski got a 400. She studied longer and harder and on her next test got a 430 — and her GED.

Even though Harkanson received his GED his math still has to improve for him to reach his goal of going to school to become an electrician.

"I just passed my math to graduate. I thought that alone would advance me, but they re-tested my math after I graduated and it wasn't good enough to go to school," he said.

One of Korpella's road block's was time. Having three children, she had to find a baby-sitter or make sure her husband, Brad, was going to be home. Then there was money.

"Some classes cost so much. When you have kids you can't always pay for classes. What your kids need is more important," Korpella explained.

But her youngest child, Braeden, 6 months, got to go to class too.

"I was pregnant with him while I was in the program," she said. "When I graduated he had already been born. We put my graduation hat on him and took pictures, because he went to all the classes with me."

So where do they go from here? Armed with their GED's and dreams the graduates have big plans for the future. Korpella wants to go to business school, Rucinski is going through a training program at Head Start, and Harkanson is hoping to improve his math so he can go to trade school. Who knows, maybe he'll be rewiring your house someday.

All three offer the same advice to anyone who doesn't have a high school diploma and is looking into a GED program — do it. They all agree the teachers at Choices are much more helpful than the one's they had in high school.

"In my school, the teachers brushed you off if you needed help," Rucinski said. "At Choices they take the time to work with you if you have problems."

Korpella agrees. "Even if you have a learning disability they'll help you work through it."

Harkanson adds, "I thought the kids were going to make fun of me because of my age, but they didn't. They were really nice."