



Annapolis resident Manuel Nicolas (left) works on multiplication tables and fractions with volunteer math tutor Michael Green. The math section is a barrier between many students and their GED.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ALEX MANN
Correspondent

"I don't want to work in retail jobs anymore," said 25-year-old Christina Lynch. "It gets kind of depressing."

And, the Glen Burnie resident added, "I want to be a 'boss' mom."

Lynch got pregnant at 16. Struggling with anxiety during her teenage pregnancy, she felt disconnected from her peers, like she was being judged. She was hesitant to ask for help from teachers after falling behind, worrying about how others would perceive

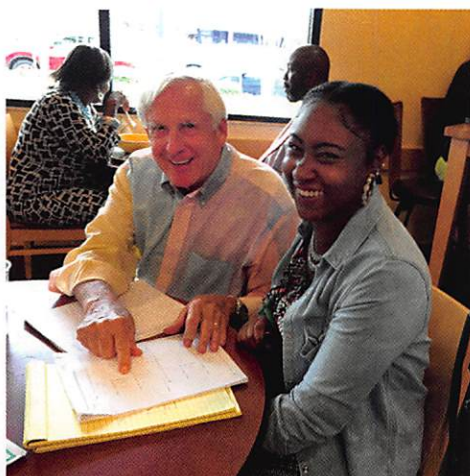
her. School seemed to be an uphill battle and the challenges of motherhood loomed.

"I was in denial for a while that I was pregnant," Lynch said. "I was embarrassed." So, she dropped out.

Almost a decade later, she regrets dropping out, but is determined to secure a better life for herself, and her two children: an 8-year-old son and 6-year-old daughter. Getting a GED, she said, is paramount to doing so.

"It's going to be a big weight lifted," Lynch said. "I can finally go to college."

The GED examination has four sections: language arts, science, social studies and



Tutor Pete Schanck (left) and his math student Johnetta Jones after a session on multiplying fractions at Panera Bread in the Festival Shopping Center in Annapolis.

MATH TUTORING ADDS UP

En route to a GED, math is barrier for many adult students, but Anne Arundel nonprofit has spent 40 years trying to change that

mathematical reasoning.

Lynch easily passed the first three sections, but math is her nemesis.

Struggling with the reality that math was the obstacle between herself and a potentially better life — a more interesting career — she found out about the Anne Arundel County Literacy Council online.

The nonprofit is celebrating 40 years of providing individualized tutoring for county adults and out-of-school youth in reading and English language skills. In the past year, though, the council expanded its educational efforts to include math, a barrier for many

adults trying to get their GED.

There are 1,000 adults in the Maryland who have passed every GED section but math, said Lisa Vernon, executive director of the Literacy Council.

The council's math program "has exploded this year because there's such a need for it," Vernon said.

Anne Arundel's literacy council pairs students like Lynch with volunteer like Deena Fujimoto. Volunteer tutors work one-on-one with students at the students' convenience.

"It's very challenging being a mom and helping (the children) with everything they

need," Lynch said. Making sure the kids do their homework is challenging enough, mustering the drive to pursue her studies is exhausting.

Fortunately for Lynch, Fujimoto, who is in the Air Force, volunteers because she wants to be a math teacher. The 24-year-old empathizes for those who struggle with math because she did once, too.

"I hated math," Fujimoto said. "Then, I had one really good teacher in high school."

"My teacher managed to make it fun and with her help I caught up and was able to take accelerated courses."

Johnetta Jones also hated math. But math is also the only section of the GED keeping the 28-year-old Annapolis resident from starting at the Steiner Institute of Esthetics at the Baltimore School of Massage. She loves skin care and wants to pursue a career that aligns with her passion.

Jones dropped out of high school in the ninth grade when her mother fell ill with Lupus, she said. She's remains her mom's primary caregiver and helps take care of her two nephews most of the week.

"She has a different schedule every week," said Pete Schanck, Jones' math tutor. But Schanck is committed to working with her. When Jones has time to meet, Schanck makes it work.

All of the program's volunteer tutors work with students at times that are convenient for the working students, Vernon said. "That's really powerful for adults because they have such busy schedules."

Schanck is a 79-year-old investment adviser. He lives in Annapolis, works over 40 hours a week and plays tennis competitively. His motive for volunteering his time is simple.

"As you get older, you get more into helping people," he said.

When Jones does have free time, she likes to do makeup. For her, her friends and her mom. She does nails for her brother's patients — he works with the disabled.

"I want to make people look beautiful," she said. "If you look beautiful on the outside, you'll feel better on the inside."

After loathing math for so long, Jones has developed ambition to overcome her longtime foe — a testament to her progress under Schanck.

Now, Jones said, "I'll be at home by myself and be like 'Ooh, let me try to figure this problem out.'"

Jones is Schanck's first student, so he, too, learns from her.

"She teaches me new ways to solve the same problem," he said.



The pair meets weekly at the Panera Bread in the Festival Shopping Center in Annapolis. They're working on canceling before multiplying fractions. Jones is stumped.

"We haven't even gone over it yet," Schanck said. "Once she knows how to do something she finds it really easy."

Jones is a bright student, he said, "She has a computer memory, we just have to figure out how to program it."

The determined tutor said he has no doubt she'll succeed in tackling GED math and "reach the top of her industry."

He added: "She's a hard worker."

Jones and Schanck are one of many tutor-student pairs. The literacy council matched 223 students with teachers last year, Vernon said. "We're Anne Arundel's best-kept secret."

Teachers and students can meet at any public location, Vernon said, like restaurants, coffee shops or public libraries.

Tutor Michael Green and his math student Manuel Nicolas meet at the Anne Arundel County Public Library on West Street in Annapolis.

Nicolas, 31, is from Mexico. He's similar to

other students in that his schedule is crazy. He works two full-time restaurant jobs and has two sons: a 6-year-old and 2-year-old. His wife works part-time and between the two of them it's a struggle to take care of their sons. But Nicolas — having found the Literacy Council online — is invested in his education because he wants to improve his family's future.

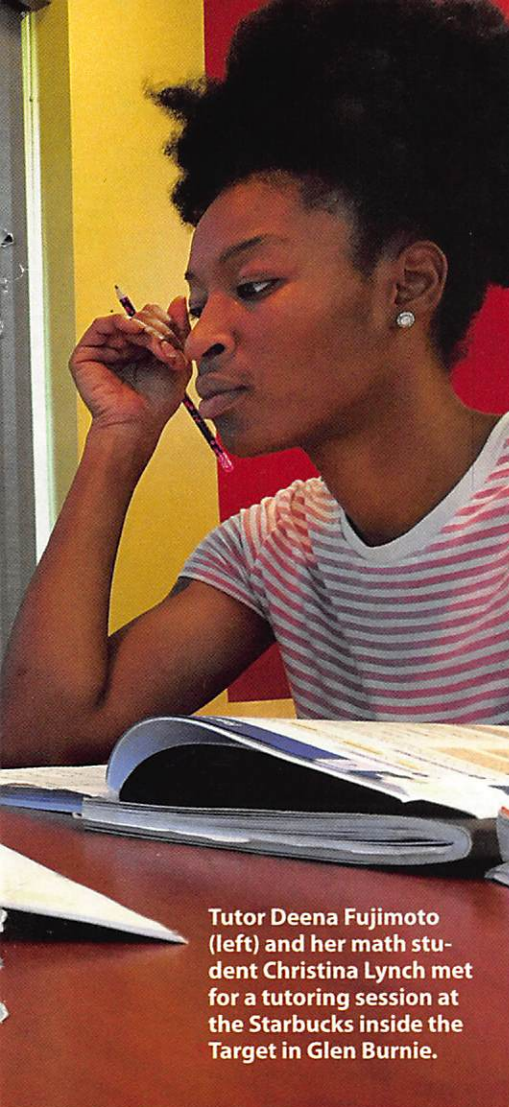
Green, 66, is retired and moved to Annapolis from California where he was a restaurant manager. He said he understands how demanding the restaurant business is and that he's impressed Nicolas works two tough jobs and finds time for his studies.

"It's a brave thing to do to go back to school," Green said. "That says a lot about him as a person."

Just like Jones and Lynch, Nicolas is working on fractions. His story is a little different though. He's done fractions before. He even graduated high school ... in Mexico, more than 10 years ago.

Also, math isn't the only GED section Nicolas needs help on. The 12-year Annapolis resident chose to start with it, though.

English is Nicolas' second language. Vernon



Tutor Deena Fujimoto (left) and her math student Christina Lynch met for a tutoring session at the Starbucks inside the Target in Glen Burnie.

To Find out more about the Literacy Council

Go to: www.icanread.org
Call: 410-269-4419
Email: director@aaclc.org


estimates that one-fourth of the council's students are English Second Language learners, meaning he's learning math in a foreign tongue.

The Mexican-immigrant leans on his belief that he's helping himself and his family.

"One day my son is going to come to me and ask for help with his homework," Nicolas said. He wants to be able to help. He also yearns to have more time off work, more time with his kids as they grow, to have a positive impact on their education.

To get more time off, he needs a better job. To get a better job, he needs to have a diploma. To pass the GED, he has to tackle math.


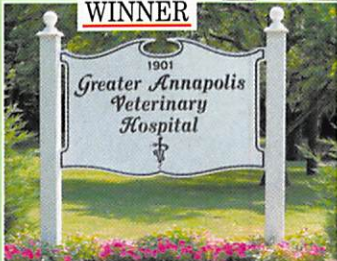
"And, he's doing it in another language," Green said. "It's harder than anything I've ever done."




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