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SECTION B

'Bridge' signals road to college

By LORI STABILE
lstable@repub.com

PALMER - Some dropped out of high school.

Some are recent graduates. Some struggled with health problems.

Another stayed home to raise children.

Another wants a career change.

Eleven people, all with different stories but with the same goal of going to college, came together on Thursday for an orientation at Top Floor Learning for its new "Bridge to College" program in partnership with Holyoke Community College.

Geared toward those who have a general equivalency diploma (GED) or who are high school graduates, the program's mission is to help them succeed in post-secondary education.

"I think it's wonderful that you all came; we want to help you to succeed," said Marsha N. Gaudette, director of adult literacy programs at Top Floor Learning.

She oversees the GED preparation program at Top Floor Learning, which began with support from HCC two years ago.

Margaret A. Boyko, chief executive officer of Top Floor Learning, said there was concern that there was nothing else for people after they completed the GED.

"They get the GED, but then they disappear from our horizons," said Gaudette. "People often have no idea how to navigate the college system. Holyoke Community College is aware that there is nothing in the Quaboag Hills region for further education."

Enter "Bridge to College."

Through the program, the students will go to Top Floor Learning, on the top floor of the Palmer Public Library, through December. There, they will be taught mostly by Top Floor Learning volunteers.

They will have three hours of academic preparedness each week, plus homework. Next month, they will visit the HCC campus to meet admissions, financial aid, and student services staffers.

Starting in January, they will take a credit course in English and/or mathematics at Top Floor Learning taught by HCC faculty members. Graduation will be in June.

Then, they can start college in the fall of 2009.



Staff photo by JOHN SUCHOCKI

At the Palmer Public Library on Thursday, Top Floor Learning Director Margaret A. Boyko addresses a group of would-be college students.

Donald J. Connors, 50, of Ware said the program is "a new beginning" for him.

"I feel very positive about it," he said of "Bridge to College."

Megan R. Rodeen, 19, of West Brookfield dropped out of Quaboag Regional High School last year as a senior. She gained her GED, but did not know how to go about starting college or acquiring

financial aid.

She is interested in writing for a newspaper or magazine.

"I figured this would be good," Rodeen said.

Brittany R. Hutchins, 16, of Ware said she dropped out of high school this year but received her GED in June. She wants to study law.

"I've always been told I'm good at arguing my point," she said.

Boyko noted that the cost for "Bridge to College" is low, with a \$35 registration fee for each class. While the program exposes the students to Holyoke Community College's offerings, they may opt to go somewhere else after completing the program.

For information about "Bridge to College," people may call Top Floor Learning at (413) 283-2220.