

## COMMUNITY

# Bridge opens for college hopefuls

### *Top Floor Learning partners with HCC*

By Douglas Farmer  
Staff Writer

PALMER — Although Top Floor Learning has a successful track record of helping area residents attain their general equivalency degrees (GEDs), the organization housed within the Palmer Public Library often loses track of them after that, said Margaret Boyko, director of the program. And some of them still need direction at that point.

So Boyko has teamed with a group of tutors and the faculty at Holyoke Community College to help those students reach the next level in their lives.

Boyko and Marsha Gaudette, the director of adult literacy programs, said they have a long-standing partnership with Holyoke Community College (HCC) through the GED program. And they said the staff at the college knew there weren't significant resources for college preparation in this area.

In the coming weeks, around 20 prospective college students from the region will receive tutoring sessions in life skills like time and stress management, study skills like note taking, writing, reading and math instruction. Then in the spring, professors from HCC will help fill out their knowledge to prepare them for future coursework, whether at that college or elsewhere.

The program is called "Bridge to College" for which students pay a nominal fee of \$35 per class, and Boyko was quick to point out it was entirely grant funded. Students took an ACCUPLACER test last week to determine what skills and deficiencies they brought into the lessons.

"This is a pilot but we do hope we can keep it going," she said. "I came over from Scotland and I know first-hand how hard it can be to navigate the school system. When we discussed this at a meeting the staff all thought it was a great idea."

And they weren't alone.

Palmer resident Jackie Pyzocha, who holds two degrees from HCC and has worked in the Monson Public Schools, stood up at an orientation two weeks ago and said she wished "Bridge to College" had been available when she was younger. She related her trouble with coursework in high school, particularly math, and said when she finally did move on to college it was pretty much a disaster.

"I had a learning disability, but no one really told me that and there was a stigma attached to special education," she said. "I didn't ask questions and I procrastinated and crammed. But after some time off I went back and got tutoring."

"Holyoke Community College became like a second home to me."

Boyko introduced the majority of the tutors who will lead upcoming sessions like Brad Sperry, who recently retired from the Regional Employment Board and will instruct in different types of writing; Janet Callahan and



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**Margaret Boyko shows an illustration of someone at a crossroads.**

Charlotte Rice who will discuss creating a good schedule and the setting of goals; and Tom Camilleri and Paul Clinton, who will familiarize students with math, particularly algebra.

"You might not realize it, but you use math every day," said Camilleri. "We'll be working in groups and we will be teaching different levels."

But for some of the attendees at the orientation, it was less about specific classes and more about finding a new path in their lives.

For example, Brittany Hutchins of Ware, 16, said that while she recently became pregnant, she had also obtained her GED and wanted to better her situation. She said she was directed to "Bridge to College" through the Ware Adult Education Center.

"I've made mistakes in my life and I dropped out of high school, but I want to try for a better life," she said.

At the other end of the spectrum, Hampden resident Patricia Ehlers said she had come to Top Floor because of a desire to change careers after being "stuck behind a desk for too long."

Boyko and Gaudette said they were using a team teaching model, so that students would hear from perspectives and backgrounds as varied as those from which they had come.

For more information about "Bridge to College" contact Top Floor Learning at 283-2329.