

The Record

"Friend of the People it Serves"

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EDITORIALS

Back on track

Success stories of county college's GED program



Myles Williams, center, and Michael Oliveri, right.

THERE are many reasons why students drop out of high school, and they aren't always the most obvious. For every student who is bored or distracted or taking up with the wrong crowd, there are others with more legitimate excuses.

Some may need to work to help support struggling parents. Some may have problems at home. Some may be facing illness or other obstacles that slow them down. They don't all fit the common stereotype of the high school dropout with no future and no hope.

In many of these cases, it actually takes a great deal of maturity and determination to go back and get a high school equivalency diploma so these individuals can get on with their lives.

Sometimes, that determination is extraordinary. That is true of Mike Oliveri, the young man who spoke last week to graduates of the GED program at Bergen Community College. "Nothing ever holds me back," he told the graduates, "and nothing should ever hold you guys back."

As Staff Writer Ashley Kindergan reported, Oliveri has muscular dystrophy, a degenerative disease. He has used a wheelchair for the past seven years, since he was 17. He dropped out of River Dell High School at age 16. But he later resumed his education, earning his GED and then an associate's degree in psychology from Bergen Community College.

He has since moved from his par-

ents' home in Oradell to Los Angeles, where he is determined to live independently, despite all the obstacles his illness places in his path. He relies when necessary on his own ingenuity and the kindness of others to see him through. He also wants to travel and see the world.

His smile at the ceremony was infectious.

Another source of inspiration for the graduates was the valedictorian of the GED class, Myles Williams, who is 51 years old and blind. He returned to school after dialing the wrong number and reaching the GED program by accident. He is now planning to get a degree in broadcasting at the college, and he told his fellow graduates that he is optimistic about the future.

So, too, is Oliveri. His mother said she worries about him, but he has a "vitality and a thirst for life" that he didn't have for many years.

Oliveri said he wanted to leave the GED graduates with two messages: first, that he loves his life, despite his disabilities, and second, he loves it because he had the courage to trade comfort and security for independence.

That's a message that he can share with all of us, no matter how many years of schooling or how many degrees we have. His message has more to do with innate wisdom than with what he has learned in any class.

"I'm happy in the world," Oliveri said. "I'm just happy, period."