

## It's Never too Late to Learn How to Read

If you ask 59-year-old Christina Jones what high school she graduated from, she'll tell you she didn't graduate. In fact she never even enrolled in high school after finishing the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. She was born and raised in Kansas City but struggled with dyslexia and was placed in the class with "slow learners" that made going to school a struggle every day. It's something that has haunted her, for many, many years.

Christina paid a price for quitting school at such a young age. She had trouble reading and doing simple math. She grew up shy, lacking self-confidence, had trouble speaking to more than one person and found it impossible to find a good job. Mostly she had to settle for working for temporary services, accepting jobs where she didn't have to know how to read or do simple math. She settled for the kinds of jobs where you do work and get paid at the end of the day.

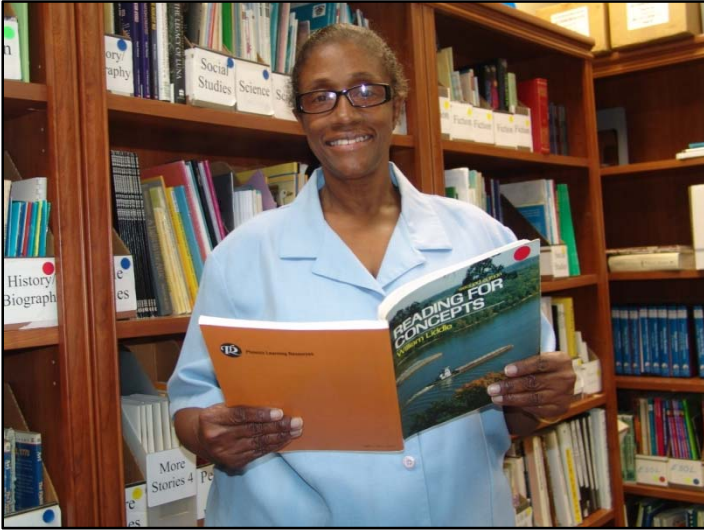
Christina was pretty much convinced that things were never going to change for her until one day in 2007 when she went to see a movie called "The Great Debaters," starring Denzel Washington. The movie told the story of an African-American teacher who convinced students at historically black Wiley College that they could do anything they set their minds to, including debating some of the best, most articulate college students in the world. Christina was so inspired by the movie that she vowed to do whatever it took to earn a GED.

She started looking for programs that could help and someone told her about Literacy Kansas City, one of more than 300 programs funded by United Way. A placement test showed she had 3<sup>rd</sup> grade language skills, 4<sup>th</sup> grade math skills and could read at a 5<sup>th</sup> grade level. So, she had a lot of work to do. She began meeting with a tutor for 1½ hours at a time, twice a week. Christina says he had the patience of Job. "If I didn't understand something, I'd ask him questions and he answered every one. Sometimes I'd ask the same question three or four times, but he never seemed to get frustrated, he expressed compassion and concern and did everything he could to help me learn."

It took two years but in October 2011, Christina finally passed the GED exam and was awarded her high school equivalency degree. Christina says she feels better about everything. "In the past, I was afraid someone would ask me something I couldn't answer or ask me to read something I couldn't read. I'm not afraid anymore." Christina is now confident and excited about her future. "Doors that used to be closed are now open to me."

She just started a job as a school bus driver and is enrolled in classes at Metropolitan Community College's Penn Valley Campus, studying to become a CMA (Certified Medication Assistant). She couldn't have enrolled in the classes without her GED. Christina says, "Learning to read and do math has changed my life. I don't have to live in fear anymore. If you can't read, you're living in darkness and the light has finally been turned on for me."

Christina is so convinced about the difference literacy can make that she has convinced several others who didn't graduate from high school to work on improving their reading and math skills through Literacy Kansas City so they can pursue their GEDs, including one woman she met at a bus stop while they were waiting for the bus to come. Christina is also vowing to become a volunteer tutor one day so she can pass along the gift of learning that she received. She appreciates the fact that when she was finally ready to do something to improve her life, that Literacy Kansas City and United Way were there to help.



Christina Jones is proud of earning her GED at the age of 59 after working with volunteer tutors at Literacy Kansas City to improve her math and reading skills. She says having her GED is opening new doors to employment that were previously closed to her.



Now that she has her GED, Christina Jones is able to enroll in classes at Metropolitan Community College's Penn Valley Campus where she will be studying to become a CMA (Certified Medication Assistant). She says it never would have happened without the help of Literacy Kansas City and United Way.