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## New beginnings for non-traditional students

Sunday, 21 June 2009

By ANDREW THOMPSON

PAWTUCKET — Alcinda Da Cruz used to be a full time machine repairer in a factory from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. every weekday, as well as a part time dish washer and cook at a nursing home. Maria Lopes used to be a home daycare provider. That was, at least, until Da Cruz and Lopes each decided to reach for a college education.

Both originally from Cape Verde, an island nation off the Atlantic coast of Africa, Da Cruz and Lopes are two of the 19 recent graduates of the Woonsocket-based Rhode Island Regional Adult Learning (RIRAL) project's "Transition to College" program. The students were honored at their graduation on Thursday at the Blackstone Valley Visitors Center in Pawtucket.

The program, operated in partnership with the Rhode Island Department of Education since 2000, works to help non-traditional students get into post-secondary educational institutions.

"These are all adults anywhere from high school age to their 50s and 60s, choosing to go back to school and find a career path to better their lives," said Marie Crecca-Romero, RIRAL's Program Director for Transition To College (TTC). Many of the students are immigrants, and English is their second language. Lopes said she was looking to go to school, and found out about TTC by herself when she started taking English as a Second Language classes, and went to enroll in the program's weekend session last October. Da Cruz said she also found the TTC program when taking ESL classes.

The TTC program is free for students, and has one weekend session and two evening sessions each academic year, with an average of 15 students in each session.

Crecca-Romero explained that the program has three comprehensive components, ranging from "student success workshops" dealing with issues such as time management and organization; an academic component, where students build writing and math skills, and take a college-level reading course at the Community College of Rhode Island; and finally a mentoring component, where each student is paired with a mentor who follows and helps them through their first semester of college, including the application and financial aid process.

"We model the college environment, so [students] have a good idea when they leave our program what college is about. One of the biggest things they leave with is a [greater] sense of confidence in their ability to go forward," said Crecca-Romero.

Da Cruz will enroll in CCRI in September as a General Studies student. Looking to the future, Da Cruz said, "I would like to work with people, [as a] social worker [or] counselor. Helping people, that's my goal!" Her family is already civic-minded, as she has a son in the Air Force, based in Texas.

Lopes, also enrolling in general studies at CCRI, enjoys children. "I hope I will be able to work with kids, maybe in a school or daycare," she said. Not only striving for her Associate's degree, Lopes also wants to work toward a certificate in early childhood development as well.

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