

The Journal Gazette

\$3.50

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2024 FORT WAYNE, INDIANA ♦ LOCALLY OWNED SINCE 1863

www.journalgazette.net

Adult education plans to get awards

Literacy Alliance, FWCS, others to be honored

LISA GREEN
The Journal Gazette

Jhenna Adams has two jobs: one full-time and one part-time.

She also has an associate culinary degree, obtained last May from Ivy Tech, and expects two more - in baking and in pastry arts - by the middle of next year.

"I've always kind of wanted to be a chef. I've always wanted to be a cook," Adams said.

As a teenager, though, Adams dropped out of high

school. She found herself pregnant and then parenting at the young age of 16.

But when she saw a news story about The Literacy Alliance, Adams decided to resume her education, earning a high school equivalency, and get focused on a career path.

"Honestly, without the support that they have given me, I wouldn't be where I am today," Adams said.

The Literacy Alliance is among 21 organizations the Indiana Department of Workforce Development

will recognize during an Thursday awards ceremony. The state agency started a Program of Excellence in 2022-23 to recognize adult education initiatives that meet certain metrics in areas including student academic achievement, enrollment and partnering with employers.

This is the first year that The Literacy Alliance has received the designation. In an area the state designates as Region 3, other adult

Alliance, Page 4A



Stan Sussina | The Journal Gazette

Jhenna Adams checks in with sous-chef Andrew Tarter as they work on Blessings in a Backpack's annual celebrity chef fundraiser at Sycamore Hills Golf Club.

"Honestly, without the support that they have given me, I wouldn't be where I am today."

- Jhenna Adams, crediting The Literacy Alliance

ALLIANCE

Continued from Page 1A

education providers being recognized are Fort Wayne Community Schools, the Grant Regional Career Center in Marion, and the Impact Institute, which is based in Kendallville but serves a six-county area, according to the state.

"These programs are the best of the best and help set the bar for high-achieving (adult education) providers," Lindsay Lindsey, chief of marketing and communications for Workforce Development, said through email.

Region 3 includes Allen, Adams, DeKalb, Grant, Huntington, LaGrange, Steuben, Noble, Wabash, Wells and Whitley counties.

Statewide, more than 25,000 students were enrolled in Indiana Adult Education in the past program year, according to Workforce Development.

FWCS is "incredibly proud to receive this designation for the second year in a row, and it's truly a testament to the dedication of our teachers and staff," Lonnie Heck, manager, continuing education for

the district, said through email. "Their commitment to connecting with students, encouraging them through every challenge, and fostering hope is the heart of our program's success."

In the past year, FWCS has assisted more than 1,000 people through its various programs. That includes about 600 students enrolled in the High School Equivalency program, and nearly 200 earning a diploma.

Heck also said more than 400 adults participated in the English learning courses FWCS offers and another 100 have successfully obtained job certifications.

The program of excellence designation, Heck said, reflects "not just the numbers, but the meaningful impact we are making in the lives of our students and their families as they work toward brighter futures. It's an honor to serve our community in this way."

The Literacy Alliance has helped dozens check earn their high school equivalency diploma, similar to what used to be called a GED, as well as connect adults with others to assist in career development.

The U.S. Department

of Labor estimates the average yearly wage increase for those who earn a high school credential is \$8,400, the alliance said in a news release. Having that credential also provides access to postsecondary education or training, which further increases employment and economic opportunities.

Melinda Haines, the Literacy Alliance CEO, earlier this month credited the excellence designation to having "an amazing team of educators." She said the instruction they provide helps empower adult learners to improve personally and professionally.

Adams' full-time job is as a line cook at Sycamore Hills Golf Club. The part-time job is as a lab tech at Ivy Tech, where she works in the culinary department and handles various tasks including classroom setup.

She earned her high school equivalency after a series of classes through The Literacy Alliance and taking the test. After she gets her next two associate degrees in baking and pastry arts, Adams envisions pursuing a bachelor's degree.

A passion for cooking runs in the family. Ad-

ams said her dad worked as a chef in a New Mexico restaurant, and she had a grandfather, now deceased, who won a "Best Cheeseburgers" recognition from a national publication.

"There's a competitiveness in our family, so I've always had to rise above them," Adams said. "It's a playful competitiveness."

Adams is from St. Louis, but as a teenage mom moved to Fort Wayne because her dad was here.

She's now 40 with children ages 23, 18 and 16. Adams said when she decided to pursue her high school equivalency diploma, she had strong support.

In completing the culinary associate degree, Adams had a 4.0 GPA and said she also received an award of excellence, given to the top students in the Fort Wayne-Warsaw area.

Staff at The Literacy Alliance and Ivy Tech were "amazing," she said. "I had no faith in myself."

Amy Watson of Decatur had a similar experience. She got pregnant her senior year of high school.

"I was constantly sick, and so I ended up dropping out," Watson, 36, said in

an interview last week.

Watson works full-time as assistant manager at JJ's, a gas station and convenience store. She's been there for about three years.

The owner of the business knew Watson was interested in completing the high school education work - she had tried before unsuccessfully - and helped get her connected to The Literacy Alliance.

"The first time I tried, I just didn't have that drive. It was like, I'm still young and I can go back later and get it," Watson said.

"It was hard work. I'm not going to lie," she said, "but I think I had more supporters, family and friends." Watson started her high school equivalency classes in August 2023, spending three hours in class three times a week, and completed them by January this year.

She has since earned a phlebotomy certification through Fort Wayne Community Schools and would



Watson

like to work in the field, drawing blood.

"There nothing around Decatur, and there's nothing that's worth the drive to Fort Wayne because everything I've seen there is what I make currently," Watson said. "My dream job would be with the Red Cross."

Watson had three children, all of whom were adopted.

Today, she's married, and still thinking about expanding her professional prospects through more education.

Eventually, Watson said she may consider becoming a registered nurse. She'd be interested in transcribing files from a physician or emergency room into the medical terminology and codes.

The academic achievements so far have been "a big confidence booster," Watson said.

"I believe more in myself now than I did back then; more self-esteem instead of just settling," she said. "I'm becoming the person that I feel like I'm supposed to be: an independent person who can stand on her own two feet and help people."

lisagreen@jg.net