

Fourth time's the charm for Fishtown resident

Perseverance Award recipient Pam Russell proves no-quit attitude and hard work pay off.

By Tom Beck
Star reporter

Pam Russell, this year's recipient of the Lutheran Settlement House's Perseverance Award, knew it wouldn't be easy. Russell, who dropped out of high school in 11th grade to have her now-16-year-old son Xavier, was determined to get her General Equivalency Diploma. She had no problem with the reading, English or social studies portions of the test, but math was another story. When she took the test for the first time, she scored a 144 on the math section, which was particularly frustrating. Why? Because she needed a 145 to pass.

Eventually, Russell took the test again. Just like last time, she passed reading, English and social studies. But her math score – for the second time in a row – was another 144.

Russell was frustrated, but didn't give up. She took the test a third time. Her math score? You guessed it. Another 144.

"It's like a penny on the ground," she said. "Just pick it up and give it to me! Just that one point!"

Unfortunately for Russell, that wasn't the way it worked. However with the help of Lutheran Settlement House and her private tutor, Taryn Kutish, she was able to work toward her goal of passing the test.

"Tutoring Pam was a very fulfilling, wonderful experience," said Kutish. "She almost never missed a session. She did every bit of homework I assigned or recommended. She even looked up online videos for extra help."

As a result, Russell earned her GED on her fourth try, passing all of her subjects, including math with a score of 156.

"I don't necessarily feel smarter," she said of her accomplishment, "but I'm more confident. I'm more confident when I speak to young people or other learners at Lutheran because I'm an example of not being a quitter, definitely always trying my best."

It was important not only to herself that Russell completed her test but also to her son and her daughter Angelina,



PHOTO: XAVIER AGRONT

Head of the class: Pam Russell (left) won the Lutheran Settlement House's Perseverance Award for her relentless effort toward earning her GED. She couldn't have done it without her tutor, Taryn Kutish (right).

who just started kindergarten.

"You have kids and you explain to them that it's important they finish school and if they want a career, you need this silly piece of paper," Russell began. "And to think that a piece of paper is what's holding me back from what I want to do – I have to get it. That way I won't be a hypocrite anymore."

All Russell's life she's only been able to attain jobs in retail or has worked as a waitress. She said she got "tired" of "working dead-end jobs where I can't do anything."

Now she feels like she can finally pursue a happy lifestyle doing work she loves, and maybe even go to college – something that she hasn't committed to, but is considering. She said she wants to

work for a nonprofit or open her own nonprofit to help adults with learning disabilities, which is inspired partially by Xavier, who has autism.

The whole process took about nine months for Russell, who worked with Kutish on Tuesday and Thursday nights from 5 to 7 p.m. She said that before she dropped out of school many years ago, she was actually a very good student. She said she often got straight A's. She's extremely thankful to Lutheran Settlement House for all the help the organization gave her. Sometimes, she said, they'd provide her with SEPTA tokens so not even transportation could be a prohibitive factor in her education.

What advice does she have for other people in her position?

"I would definitely tell them to find [something like] a Lutheran Settlement House," she said. If that doesn't work, she said, online services like Khan Academy and even YouTube proved to be extremely helpful resources for her.

"Now that I have [my GED], it's not a silly piece of paper," she said. "It's sort of like I'm free. Like, this burden is off of me, and now I'm an example for my son or my daughter or anyone." **

Be sure to check out next week's issue for a profile on Lutheran Settlement House's Spirit Award recipient, Anna Antczak.