

# Laptop program boosts outlook for workers

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'So much more to us.'

**Angela D. Appleton walks up to receive her certificate during the completion ceremony of a pilot program that provided training and education to help single mothers get better jobs. (Tribune photo by Bonnie Trafelet / August 2, 2008)**

Four-year-old Ramone Shaffers Jr. bounced on his mother's lap and pointed a tiny finger at a certificate she held in her outstretched hand, a symbol of a milestone in her young life.

Nearby, another mother, sitting tall and looking professional in a black suit, savored a similar moment with her 9-year-old daughter, Kayla King.

Balloons tacked to the ceiling and shiny confetti tossed onto tabletops signified that this Saturday morning gathering would be different from all the ones that had gone before.

Fifty people turned out to celebrate the achievements of 10 women who met in this downtown Chicago conference room once a month for a year to encourage one another through layoffs and family crises and failures of nerve. The women had been singled out—many for the first time in their lives—as worthy of the type of investment that most professionals take for granted: a chance to learn, to move up, to get ahead.

They were trailblazers in a pilot program that tackled a pressing problem: With so many working families falling behind, how do we help people break out of dead-end jobs? How can breadwinners with limited formal education and even less time and money get the training and education they need?

"Just getting people employed isn't enough," says Grace Jenkins, chief executive of non-profit employment and training agency National Able Network Inc., which operated the program. "They need work that can sustain families."

Toward that goal, the 10 women were given laptop computers and Internet access for 12 months. The computers linked them to a system of career assessments, online courses and coaching.

They logged hundreds of hours online, completing courses in [Microsoft](#) Word, Web design and computer networking, customer service, project management, human resource management and more.

Five got better jobs or raises or increased hours. There were setbacks, too. Three lost jobs and two remain unemployed. But as a group their average wages increased 15 percent—a showing that helped National Able Network get a second round of private funding to offer the program to 18 people in September. And an application is pending for federal funds to roll it out to 100 participants next year.

As the numbers served go up, costs go down, from more than \$6,000 per person for the pilot group to about \$3,000 for the proposed federally funded project.

It seems a small sum to gamble on changing a life.

## Facing fear

Jacqueline Higgs hadn't been to school in more than a decade when she joined the pilot. One of her most vivid memories was dropping a typing class at a technical institute in 1993.

"I had to face that fear," says Higgs, who logged more than 1,000 hours online taking technology courses.

She recently started a \$10-per-hour job as a church secretary—"A stepping stone," she says—and enrolled in an online degree program in information technology. She would be the first in her family to earn a college degree.

Jacquelyn Hoyer, a customer service representative at a title company, plans to enroll in nursing school in the fall.

Robin Martin, Ramone's mother, hopes to return to school in January. The 25-year-old mother of two was an honor roll student when she graduated from a Chicago public high school.

"This program got my mind back into the 'school' way of things," she says. "It's given me a chance. Now I don't feel like I'm stuck as a single mother and can't make it."

Kayla's mom, Jacqueline King, was working as a school crossing guard in Oak Park when we featured her in a Dec. 24 column, "Laptop Lessons May Help Light Way to Brighter Life."

Now she earns \$11.50 per hour at an office job at RedSpeed Illinois, an automated photo enforcement program to catch traffic violators. "I get paid more in two weeks than I got paid in a month, and that's only the beginning," says King, who plans to earn a degree in business administration. "Now I have choices. I like who I am. I like learning instead of being embarrassed that I don't know."

## Difficult choices

But not every woman's confidence soared. A participant who asked that her name not be used was laid off from a clerical job in January when her employer shut down. She struggles every month with hard choices: staying current on rent and utilities or her car loan.

"It feels like either/or," says the single mother. "I don't want to lose my apartment but I don't want to lose my vehicle either because it's in my mom's name and it would ruin her credit. If I lose my apartment nobody else is going to rent to me because I don't have a job."

Another participant, Lois Crump, a single mother with six children still living at home, fights depression after getting laid off from a clerical job at National Able Network in March, when the agency lost a large contract. Yet the program paid dividends for her children, whose grades went up. Ten-year-old Shynasty, who had repeated third grade, passed fourth grade with flying colors this year.

"Since the computer's been in the house she doesn't feel afraid," Crump says.

Despite their struggles, both unemployed women joined the celebration. Crump won a special award—nominated by classmates as the participant who showed greatest growth.

It would be hard to measure which of the women's prospects improved the most, but Angela D. Appleton would be one candidate. When the program started, she worried about keeping a roof over her 6-year-old daughter's head.

"There were no frills in this house," says the single mother, who works part-time as a health and wellness professional at Rauner Family YMCA in Chicago's [Pilsen](#) neighborhood. "I could barely pay my rent."

Her online classes gave her the skills she needed to research and design programs, create training schedules and chart her clients' progress using graphs. "Doors began to open" at work, says Appleton, who takes home at least \$200 more per month.

A visit to a summer festival suddenly was within reach because she could spring for a carnival ride and a souvenir for her daughter, J'Lee.

But the changes go much deeper than financial relief.

What initially attracted her to the program was the promise of a free computer, she told her classmates in a celebratory speech, "but it was so much more than a computer.

"I came to the realization that I really am somebody. There is so much more to us than meets the eye."

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