

SO TO SPEAK

Nine grads determined to start anew



The commencement had little pomp but lots of compelling circumstances.

Nine people sat on chairs facing a small crowd of family and friends. They wore no caps or gowns, and they indulged in no displays of youthful exuberance.

In fact, some of them weren't especially youthful.

There was the 67-year-old man whose parents, in their 90s, came to watch him graduate.

There was the 43-year-old woman whose life had been turned upside down 10 years ago.

What linked them all was persistent mental illness. Some battled anxiety, others depression and others obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Although their conditions had left them unable to work, they weren't robbed of the desire.

So, in August, they formed the first class of Careers for the Future, a technical training program offered by the nonprofit Center of Vocational Alternatives, 3770 N. High St.

The 10-month course at COVA, which provides a range of job-skills programs for people with mental illnesses, was designed to give them the computer skills and the confidence to re-enter the work force.

Last week, they graduated in a tearful ceremony at Overbrook Presbyterian Church. ("I told them we were going to do a pool as to what minute I would start crying," said a weepy Erin Moore, their lead teacher.)

The commencement featured a PowerPoint presentation designed by the students and a short speech by Erin Steele, the unofficial valedictorian.

Steele, 29, was last part of such a ceremony when she graduated from Upper Arlington High School. This one, she said, meant a lot more.

"I was doubting myself whether I would make it," she said, "but I did."

Steele said she suffers from anxiety and depression, which have cost her jobs. She's hoping to find employment with a nonprofit agency where she can help people.

A classmate, Nancy Kammerud, 43, would like to follow through on plans that were violently interrupted 10 years ago when her car was broadsided by another vehicle on Morse Road.

Kammerud had graduated with honors from Columbus State Community College and was planning to become a drug-and-alcohol counselor. The accident left her in a coma with traumatic brain injuries. She later developed depression.

Kammerud had trouble holding jobs, and her personal life was thrown into turmoil. Careers for the Future helped persuade her to resume her pursuit of a counseling career.

"I have a goal now, and I know I can do it," she said.

The 67-year-old man didn't want to talk about his story. When the commencement was over, he went to his aged parents, accepting their congratulations as proudly as any newly minted graduate.

About 70 percent of severely mentally ill people want to work, but only about 18 percent in Franklin County have jobs, said Kappy Madenwald, director of Clinical Services for the Franklin County Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health Board.

The graduates leave with new skills, new computers (donated by Grange Insurance and Dawson Personnel) and the hope that they will soon join the fortunate 18 percent.

Commencements are always about beginnings. This one was also about resummptions.

Or, as Kammerud said, "It's the start of the life I was supposed to have."

Joe Blundo is a Dispatch columnist.