



# PRESS RELEASE

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## Six Graduates in First Year: Library Program Helps Adults Achieve

**Gonzales, LA**—On a cool December night, Leelyn Penn’s family walked into Ascension Parish Library in Gonzales, unsure about what they were looking for. The group’s only directions were to meet at the library to talk. When Leelyn stepped out in a graduation cap and gown, 20 surprised faces looked at her.

“I didn’t tell anyone I was doing this,” Leelyn said, smiling. “Well, my husband knew. He helped me keep it a secret. My mom and daughters always told me to go back and get my GED, but I wanted my diploma.”

For several months, Leelyn says she has hidden books, her laptop, and anything that might have given away her plans.

“My daughter knew the library had this program, and she kept telling me to check it out. She didn’t know I was already in the middle of my classes.”



APL is one of five library systems in Louisiana that offers Excel Adult High School, a free, accredited program for residents 21 and older to complete their high school education. The library began accepting applications for the program in January 2024 and will finish the year with six graduates: two graduated during the summer and four more completed classes at the end of the year. Students are not required to attend graduation ceremonies. To participate in the program, students must live in Ascension Parish and have an APL card (free at all library locations). Courses are 100 percent online, self-paced, and include unlimited one-on-one tutoring sessions and support from success coaches. Students have 24 months to complete the program.

Leelyn, who turns 50 in a few months, graduated from the program with a 4.0. She received a \$1,700 scholarship donated earlier this year by United Community Bank, which covered the cost of her attendance and a laptop. The bank was the first Ascension business to partner with



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the library through its *Partners Advancing Literacy* (PAL) program, which invites organizations and individuals to sponsor essential initiatives.

“One of our core values is to help develop and strengthen our community. We are excited to partner with APL to invest in our local community and transform a resident's life,” a UCB representative said.

At her graduation ceremony, Leelyn said every year during the holidays, her family has a big get-together where they share milestones and accomplishments they've reached for the year.

“This is what I did this year. I'm so happy. I'm beyond blessed, and I'm going further than this. This is just the beginning.”

She is considering enrolling in truck driving school but is also interested in becoming a pharmacy technician. Her classmates, Jordy Valentine, 37, and Johnny Norman, 47, also have higher aspirations.

“In my interview with the library, they asked me why I should be chosen for this program. I told them I have to, for my kids,” said Jordy, looking at his sons. “Ya'll see this? This is important. Stay in school. Get your education.”

Jordy is pursuing his barber's license and then plans to enroll at Delgado Community College for business classes. Johnny will be enrolling in culinary school.

“I wish my mom was here to see me get this,” Johnny said, looking up and lifting his diploma in the air. “Mom, I got it.”

To learn more about Excel Adult High School, visit [excelhighschool.org/library/myapl](https://www.excelhighschool.org/library/myapl). Businesses interested in sponsoring a student can email [communications@myapl.org](mailto:communications@myapl.org).

## About APL

Ascension Parish Library (APL) is an award-winning library system committed to providing opportunities for lifelong learning to all ages. APL delivers needed resources through traditional library services, digital materials, and innovative programs. Ascension Parish Library encourages residents to read, learn, and create by visiting their local library.

To learn more, visit <https://www.myAPL.org/>.

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