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### Skills program gives hope for a better future

By **NATALIE TORENTINOS**

Updated: 12.03.08

Dekeisha Fitzgerald wanted a better future for herself and her kids – to be independent, career-savvy, and financially secure. The commitment to follow through on this promise was long, not always easy, but eventually resulted in increasing her income by at least 20 percent.

Fitzgerald, a Pearland resident, participated in Skills for Living workshops over the course of seven months that helped prepare her for job interviews and saving money.

"I had been going to the PNC (Pearland Neighborhood Center) for counseling, and at first I thought I didn't have time for this," she said. "But everyone motivated me to do better."

Skills for Living, a Houston-based non-profit organization offering career planning education in partnership with the Pearland Neighborhood Center, offered weekly college-style financial and career workshops to help people find better-paying jobs.

To qualify, one must be actively seeking employment. The entire course is free to families and taught by volunteer instructors and mentors.

Four courses focus on several themes to help students earn more and save more: developing an action plan for the future, identifying and marketing your skill set to find jobs, achieving financial security by learning how to manage banking, credit, taxes, insurance and investing, as well as understanding how to buy a home or a car.

"Going over my action plan all the time made me want to follow through and learn not to overload myself, to set realistic goals," Fitzgerald said. "I needed self-sufficiency. I was experiencing the end of a divorce and I depended on my parents. Now I was by myself and had to provide for the kids."

Knowing this, Fitzgerald was a committed student in a class of 15 in Pearland. They heard of the program from several sources, including the PNC, Habitat for Humanity and the Adult Reading Center.

Five out of seven who graduated from the program in November made either a 20 percent increase in income or a 20 percent increase in net worth, while one student met both goals.

One student increased her income by almost 1,200 percent – she went from being an occasional substitute teacher to a full-time long-term substitute teacher. Four students began the program technically bankrupt and two only had a net worth of \$2,000, but today the group increased its net worth by \$30,000.

Program-wide, the results are similar, said volunteer instructor Kim Christensen, but Pearland was one of the most successful.

"The students were tight," Christensen said. "They were calling each other, and building each other up.

"I can see clearly an endpoint for people. But trying to get other people to see the same thing and the value of their commitment is difficult. It's extremely gratifying to see everybody graduate."

There were frustrating moments, especially when it came to discussing what to do with wealth before having wealth, but overall the students remained optimistic and met their goals, said PNC Director Kelly Perusse.

Fitzgerald had been working as a paraprofessional in Fort Bend ISD, but just earned a teaching certificate for grades 4 through 8.

"I created new relationships and started networking," she said. "If I need something, I know I can call on these people.

"I have my coworker signed up for the next class already. I've told a lot of people and I push it in my church. If I can do it, they can too."

Registration for next year's workshops end Dec. 15. and classes begin Jan. 10. For more information, call Tammy at 713-782-9974.

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