

Poteet church's high school diploma program helping adults reach goals

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Students (left to right) Alice Alvarado, Patricia Garcia, Feliciana Sanchez, Michelle Hernandez, Melissa Moreno and Marissa Guzman participate in Hosanna Baptist Church's adult high school program.

Diploma program has adult students shouting, 'Hosanna'

By **George Henson**

Staff Writer

POTEET—Vanessa stood before family and friends as class valedictorian.

"I have tried many things, but I have always failed," she said, trying unsuccessfully to choke back tears. "I have always quit."

Her sobbing halted her speech at that moment and all was quiet until her father from his seat in the audience filled the silence. "Not this time, chica," he said, comforting and affirming her with a term of endearment.

That moment sums up the way the high school diploma program at [Hosanna Baptist Church](#) in Poteet changes lives, Pastor Juan Florez said.



Pastor Juan Florez (right) of Hosanna Baptist Church in Poteet and Sam Shore, leader in the church's adult education program, work with student Alice Alvarado.

Now in its fifth year, 50 adults now have high school diplomas. Each year, the class has grown—from seven initially to 19 this year.

Originally, Florez wanted to plant a church, not a school. Seeking the right place to plant a church, he asked the [Baptist General Convention of Texas](#) staff to prepare a demographic study of the area.

One statistic in the study struck Florez. Statewide, 12 percent of adults do not have a high school education, but in Poteet, 47 percent of the adult population lacked a diploma.

Florez still was trying to decide what his congregation of 160 could do about the problem when he mentioned the statistic at church and discovered more than a few members fit into that demographic.

Church members and retired educators Sam and Kathy Shore developed a curriculum, and adult education classes began meeting. All seven of the students that first year were from Hosanna.

The study body has included women who quit school after becoming pregnant while in high school, derailing their education and their lives, and men who had advanced up to a certain point in their jobs but could go no farther without a high school diploma.

One man was motivated to join the class after he did not qualify for a job posting because he had a GED, but not a high school diploma. Without the diploma, he could not even apply for the position, and had to continue to

load trucks.

After he earned his diploma at Hosanna, the position opened again. This time, he applied and was given the position. The man now is manager of that department, Florez said.

After three years, the Shores decided writing and administering the curriculum was too much for them, and they set about finding an alternative.

A representative of the company that provides the school's current curriculum noted the completion rate nationally for students trying to complete their course of study through correspondence is about 30 percent. At Hosanna, it is 100 percent.

The Shores recalled a man who during almost every class would get frustrated and say "I can't do this; I can't do this." Mrs. Shore repeatedly took him aside and talked to him. He came back to her saying, "I can do this; I can do this." And he did.

Students are proud when they accomplish this feat most thought beyond their reach, and they celebrate with style—cap and gown, photographs and a graduation ceremony for family and friends.

The Shores now function as consultants. The class is now taught by Tom and Ann Brooks of First Baptist Church in Poteet and Garnett Hiner of First Baptist Church in Charlotte, but it still is housed at Hosanna.

After seeing the success of the students at Hosanna, the Cowboy Church of Atacosa County in Pleasanton has started its own school with eight students in its first year.

The school has done more than provide students with a high school diploma, Florez said. It also has opened their minds and hearts to spiritual

things.

"First it was to meet the needs of people in our church, but then we saw it as a means to meet needs outside the church," he said.

Bible study and prayer time meet spiritual needs. And the spiritual emphasis has made a difference. Mrs. Shore recalled an evening when two sisters in the class had a loud and heated argument.

"One sister said: 'She says I'm committing adultery, but I'm not. I've been with him seven years.' The other sister fired back, 'I know she is because I'm doing the same thing she is, and I know I'm committing adultery,'" Mrs. Shore recalled.

She sat them down, and they looked together at what the Bible had to say about the subject.

"They have these live-in boyfriends, and after a while they come to realize, 'Hey, we're sinning,'" she continued.

"It's interesting, when you go from being Mr. Shore and Mrs. Shore to Brother Shore and Sister Shore with them, the prayer requests really start coming in," Shore added.

Despite the church's relatively small size, Frio River Baptist Association Director of Missions Jimmy Smith said it is not out of character for the congregation to see a need and meet it.

"It's not surprising, because they are known as a church that really ministers to the community," he said. Hosanna also helps people pay utility bills and with food through its Angel Food ministries.

The school complements those efforts, Florez noted.

"It has been a tool for us to show people in the community that we don't

just want them to come to our church; we want to enrich their lives," he said. "It opens a door for ministry for us, and it opens a door for them to get right with the Lord."

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