Good morning. My name is Deborah Simmons, and I am a student at Academy of Hope in Ward 8. I would first like to thank Academy of Hope for inviting me to speak this morning.

Over the past twenty years, I have faced many struggles that forced me to give up my education.

I quit school back in 1978 when I was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade because the other kids taunted me so much about wearing glasses that I could not cope. About a year later, I enrolled in an adult education program, but I didn't feel like I was getting anything out of it, and the teachers were rarely there, so I left. I was 17, and I started working.

Later, when I had my daughters, I wanted to show them the importance of having an education. I also felt ashamed I could not help them with their homework.

I tried another GED program, and I would have stayed that time, but the school closed down. I continued to work, and in 1989 I enrolled in a program to become a nursing assistant. I wanted to become a Licensed Nurse, but for that I needed a high school diploma. So, I tried several GED programs and continued working as a private nurse's aide at night, while attending school in the day. Finding the right GED program was a struggle. Many of the GED programs I tried closed down for lack of students. They seemed more interested in the number of students than about students getting their GED.

Then, my mom had a stroke and I had to stop working and going to school to take care of her. Once she was situated in a day care program, I started school and work again. Then, I developed glaucoma. It hit me rapidly, and I lost 80 percent of the vision in my right eye. I was ready to give up again.

What made me keep going was realizing how God blessed my life. I thought to myself, "I went through so much and am still here, so I owe it to myself to go all the way."

So, about a year ago, I was tired of sitting at home feeling sorry for myself. I looked around for a school, and I discovered Academy of Hope in Ward 8. And here I am.

I love Academy of Hope and the staff. They're caring and don't let you give up on yourself. They accommodate my low vision. I also see they're not about the numbers, they're about the students.

I am here to get my GED and to feel good about myself. My goal is to work with people with disabilities. I want to show them that even though my vision is poor, I continued on and reached my goal to walk across the stage.

I thank you again for allowing me to share a little about me and my journey.

-Deborah Simmons, GED student at Academy of Hope Ward 8 site, speaking to guests of the 2012 Breakfast for Literacy event.