

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO GRADUATE



STAFF PHOTOS: AUGUSTO F. MENEZES

Ida Ruth Hayes Greene wears a cap and gown to receive her high school diploma from Perth Amboy Superintendent of Schools John M. Rodecker at AristaCare at Alameda Center in Perth Amboy on Monday.

Woman, 98, gets diploma

By SUZANNE C. RUSSELL
STAFF WRITER

PERTH AMBOY — As she approached her 99th birthday, Ida Ruth Hayes Greene had just one regret in her long life: She never graduated from high school.

Greene achieved that goal Monday when Superintendent of Schools John M. Rodecker presented her with a diploma from the Perth Amboy Adult High School that she earned after fulfilling requirements related to her life experiences.

"Hello, Ida, I have something for you right here," Rodecker said as he handed her the diploma.

"I'm so pleased. I've wanted it for so long," said the soft-spoken Greene, dressed in a cap and gown. She waved the diploma to the crowd in the resident dining room at AristaCare at Alameda Center in Perth Amboy, where she has lived since August

"I couldn't forget not finishing my education. I did the best I could."

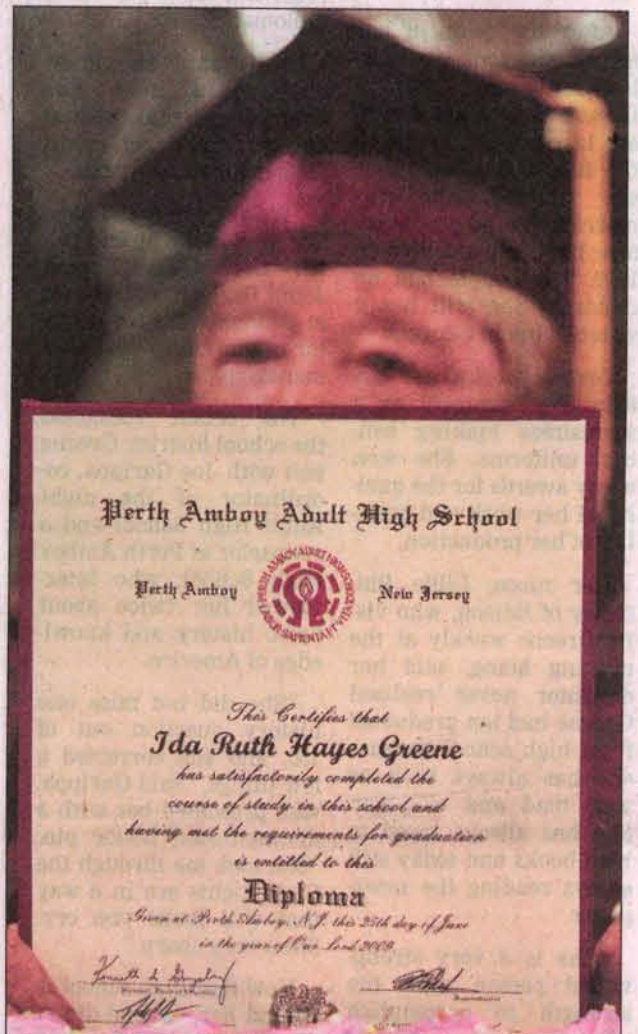
— Ida Ruth Hayes Greene, 98

2008. "This is a big thing to be honored at my graduation (at) 98 years old. I'm so grateful and thankful to God.

"Thank you for making my dream come true," said Greene, who was surrounded by family members for the special graduation celebration.

Although state officials have not yet confirmed it, Greene, who turns 99 on April 9, is believed to be the oldest person in the state to earn a high school diploma. She has been

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Greene holds up her diploma from Perth Amboy Adult High School.

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invited to participate in the adult school's graduation ceremonies in June.

Rodecker said Greene is an example of how pursuing education is part of someone's life.

"She felt her life was not fulfilled without a diploma," Rodecker said.

The best part of the celebration was that Greene's diploma was not honorary; she earned it, the superintendent added.

"It's never too late to get an education. You proved it," said Mayor Wilda Diaz, who presented Greene with a proclamation.

Growing up in Colquitt, Ga., Greene was the oldest of 11 children. She had responsibilities at her family's farm and became the surrogate mother to her 10 siblings when her mother died. She woke early each day to make breakfast for the family, did chores and made lunch for everyone, including those working in the fields.

Her educational experience was impacted by the needs of her family, as well as a nation at war. She often missed school to work in the field or to manage workers.

She attended high school until the 10th grade, when she was 17.

"I couldn't forget not finishing my education. I

did the best I could," Greene said.

History was always her favorite subject.

"You are history," said Renee Pruzansky, AristaCare Health Services senior vice president.

After the death of her father, she took over the leadership role in the family and taught her brothers to read and managed the family business after she married. She was married for 64 years before her husband died in 1997. The couple had no children. She still has a sister living in Georgia.

Greene worked for the federal government as a seamstress making sailors' uniforms. She won many awards for the quality of her work and quantity of her production.

Her niece, Lillie Pinckney of Edison, who visits Greene weekly at the nursing home, said her daughter never realized Greene had not graduated from high school because she has always been so well read and eloquent. She has always loved to read books and today still enjoys reading the newspaper.

"She is a very strong-willed person with the strength to accomplish what she wants to accomplish," Pinckney said. "I'm very happy for my aunt to have achieved her dream."

"Aunt Ruth has always been an inspiration to the family" said nephew Willie Burke of Edison. "When you get to be 98

and still have dreams to fulfill, God blesses you."

About eighth months ago Greene mentioned to Virginia Basile, recreation aide at AristaCare at Alameda Center, that her only regret in life was not receiving her high school diploma.

Basile said she knew she could help her achieve that goal because Greene would get credit for her life experiences.

"We are blessed to have her as a resident and fulfill her dream," said Jenni Carlock, AristaCare at Alameda Center director of marketing and case management.

The center contacted the school district. Greene met with Joe Garippa, coordinator of the night Adult High School and a counselor at Perth Amboy High School, who interviewed her twice about basic history and knowledge of America.

"She did not miss one history question out of 150, and she corrected a few things," said Garippa, who presented her with a distinguished honor pin. "She took me through the Civil Rights era in a way that will make you cry. She's very sharp."

Now that high school is behind her, Greene didn't dismiss the idea of college in her future.

"I always wanted to go to college. I wanted to keep going, but it wasn't possible," she said.

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