Fort Bend residents benefit from Knowledge-First program

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Missouri City resident Ottressia Williams holds photos from her high school graduation last month. Williams, 48, was a teenage mother who stopped attending school after the 10th grade. She graduated from Knowledge-First Empowerment Center last month. (Photo by Michael Sudhalter)

Missouri City resident Ottressia Williams believes that stepping into the Knowledge-First Empowerment Center, 2651 Cartwright Road in Missouri City, was the best decision of her life. "I can't thank God enough for bringing me to this school," Williams said. Williams, a 48-year-old who has three children and eight grandchildren, stopped going to high school after 10th grade because she was a teen mother in the early 1980s. "They didn't have the programs then, like they do now, for pregnant teens," Williams said.

Williams got married, started a family and worked in the health care field, but she always wanted to fulfill her dream of earning a high school diploma. Knowledge-First is a fully-accredited school that helps students, regardless of age, an opportunity to achieve their dreams. Some of the students, like Williams, were pregnant teenagers, while others dropped out of school for various reasons or had trouble with the law. Missouri City resident James Allen, a former Houston ISD assistant principal and teacher, started Knowledge-First in 2007, to help teenagers return to the right path, and to assist adults reach their goals and better their lives. He now serves as the school's principal.

The non-profit school currently has 28 students, three teachers and works closely with larger Fort Bend and Houston non-profits such as Fort Bend Cares, Fort Bend Junior Service League Houston Center for Literacy and The George Foundation. They also collaborate with Fort Bend ISD and local governments to help students in need. In addition, Knowledge-First helps high school students with credit recovery courses and hosts a summer school to enrich academic skills.

As for Williams, she graduated from Knowledge-First in December and plans on enrolling at Houston Community College with plans of becoming a Registered Nurse—a path she didn't think was possible as recently as a year ago.

"I had given up on earning a high school diploma, but they let me know I had a second chance," Williams said. "It empowered me. It makes me feel like I can accomplish anything. I tell anyone that will listen or anyone who wants to better their lives to come to Knowledge-First." Knowledge-First has a 95 percent graduation rate. The school is partnering with Clarence "Doc" Holliday, President of the Missouri City NAACP, to emphasize the importance of technical education. Some of the students who attend Knowledge-First plan on attending a four-year college, but that's not for everybody. Holliday said graduates of technical schools can often earn six figure incomes, but that fact isn't widely known throughout the community.

"Vocational-Technical Education has had such a small voice in the past," Holliday said. "We've got to put this stuff on people's radar." Fort Bend ISD has placed an increased emphasis on Career & Technical Education (CTE) as well, with more than $50 million in last year's school bond dedicated to CTE. Knowledge-First is working on building a partnership with Houston Community College, which has had partnerships and is working on additional partnerships with FBISD. "People have to maximize their potential," Holliday said. "Many students who don't succeed (on the college track) kind of get lost in a low-paying job or turn to a life of crime. That's what we're trying to avoid."

If you would like to join them in their efforts in providing these learners a fresh start and contribute to their efforts, please consider providing a tax-deductible contribution that will help meet financial obligations and provide materials and supplies for the needs of the students! In Mr. Allen's words, "*We* are our brother's keeper!" *Wisdom~Honor~Perseverance*