

Graduates tell how Bidwell changed their lives

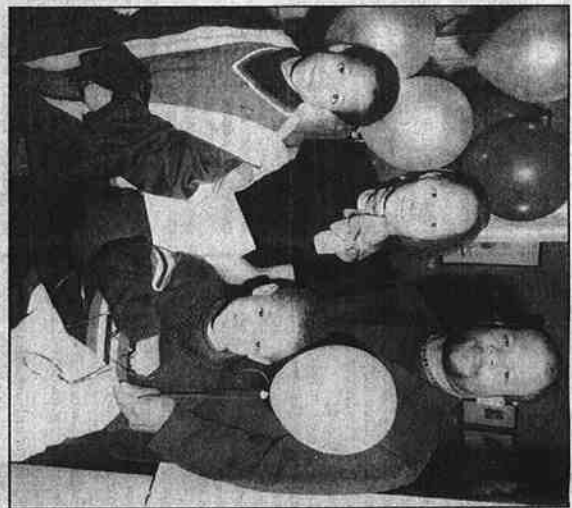
by Christian Morrow
Coulter Scott Wither

Ashley Woodson told the 2001 graduating class at Bidwell Training Center he was a "hard case" when he first started there. So if he could succeed, he said they certainly could, because Bidwell is a remarkable place.

Now a research assistant at the University of Pittsburgh, Woodson told the 220 graduates the center turned his life around, and that even before he graduated from the information sciences program last year, he had several job offers.

"Since graduation, one good thing after another has happened for me. I travel, have great benefits and go to school free (at the University of Pittsburgh) all because of Bidwell," he said. "I'm telling you this because now, it's your turn. As long as you stay committed, anything is possible."

Though Woodson's address was one of the highlights of the Sept. 28 graduation ceremony, he said meeting former Pennsylvania House Speaker K. Leroy Irvin, was the highlight for him.



FAMILY AFFAIR—Clinical laboratory technician graduate Phillip Irvin, seen with her husband John and sons Zavier, right, and Jordan, says her kids enjoyed seeing their mother have to do homework.

and building maintenance. Lesha Walker said she and her sister Gloria, who graduated from Bidwell's medical transcription program, enjoyed the ceremony, especially the flute performance by Germaine Watkins from the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild.

"It was beautiful," said the information sciences graduate. "And Bidwell was wonderful. It's a real learning environment, and all the teachers and professors want to see you succeed."

The ceremony also featured speeches by Manchester Bidwell Corp. President and CEO Bill Strickland, who like Irvin, talked about the early history of the training center, and future projects like the Harbor Gardens Park Greenhouse.

Graduates and family members also heard civil rights leader, Bidwell founder and Executive Director of the Manchester Youth Development Center Rev. James J. "Jimmy" Joe Robinson give the benediction. Iphillirang White, who graduated from the center's chemical laboratory technician program, said she especially en-



REV. JAMES J. ROBINSON

joyed meeting Irvin, and was glad to see her math teacher, Academic Director Joseph Mayo, get an award for 30 years of service.

She said her experience at Bidwell was invaluable because, "It really made me

know what I want to do." It was intense. Our class started with 22 people, nine of us graduated," she said. "My husband and kids were proud of course. But what my kids

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Irvin joined state Sen. Jack Wagner, D-Beechview, in congratulating the graduates, Bidwell staff and faculty on another job well done.

One of those honored graduates was Raymond Moore, who finally received his General Equivalency Diploma 30 years after dropping out of high school to work in a steel mill.

"I was the first one across the stage, so I was real nervous. But it's an accomplishment to finally get my GED after all this time," he said. "I wanted it so I could be an example for my kids because I stress the importance of school to them."

Moon currently works at Allegheny General Hospital and plans to attend Connelley Technical Institute to study hospital



FOUNDING FATHER—Former Bidwell Training Center Chairman K. Leroy Irvin recounts the center's history for the 2001 graduating class as Operations Vice President Valerie Njia and Manchester Bidwell Corp. President and CEO Bill Strickland look on.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER CANNAMAN