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## Adult Education Students' Share Stories of 'Grit, Empowerment, Love and Peace' with Kent County Lawmakers and Policy-Makers

GRAND RAPIDS, MI – Lawmakers attending a *Students Speak* adult education forum sponsored by the Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education (MACAE) and Michigan's Children this month were asked to do two things: Take in the powerful stories they heard, and apply their influence and support programs like Kent County's.

Among many compelling stories told by refugees and immigrants from across the globe that day was one from ESL student Buddi Subba. Subba had made such a connection with members of her American church that when she became ill and needed a kidney transplant, a congregant shared one of theirs with her.

Another student, Myanmar native Sai Hlaing, abandoned by his parents at a young age, arrived as an adult in America just two years ago, and has already learned to read and write in English. It's a remarkable achievement that will help him realize his other goals – to become a mechanic, and afford a safe home for his children. "(English) can lead to a better job," he said, speaking without prepared notes.

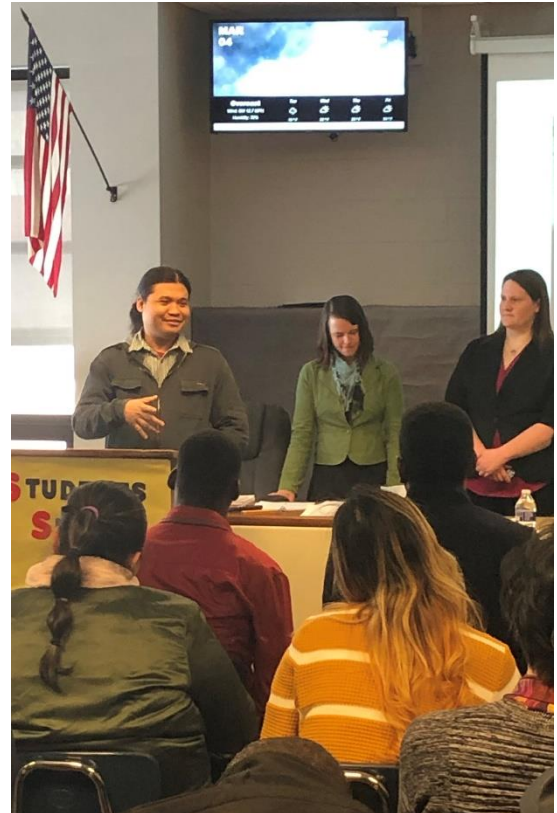
The stories were commanding because of the hardships students overcame to improve their life and employment skills in American society, and important because of the need for new adult education investments that advocates such as MACAE and Michigan's Children seek to help others benefit from Michigan's growing economy. The *Students Speak* forum at the Kent ISD Adult Education- Wyoming Center in Grand Rapids was one in a series taking place in recent weeks in Oakland, Kalamazoo, Calhoun, Jackson and Hillsdale Counties, Detroit and out-Wayne County. More are planned elsewhere in Michigan.

Other voices before an audience of 80 educators and policy-makers were:

**Josue Mutabaje**, an adult learner from Congo in Africa, said his wish was to learn as much as he could and return to help bring peace to his country.

Many, including Andres Ajualip Jimon from Mexico, expressed gratitude to America and adult education. "By coming to this program, now I can read and write to help my children," he said.

While the majority of the 13 speakers were English-language learners and representative of a large immigrant population in the Grand Rapids region, other native Americans also shared accounts of



preserving against tough odds. Single mother Jaclyn Marrero told an emotional story of completing her educational journey so that “they (her children) can believe in themselves.” She plans to become a licensed practical nurse, a position that’s in short supply in many areas of Michigan.

The students shared their stories at the Kent ISD Adult Education – Wyoming Center in Grand Rapids before an audience including Bill Fetterhof, Superintendent of Godwin Heights Schools; Craig Hoekstra, Superintendent of Wyoming Public Schools; Peter Dickow, representing U.S. Sen. Gary Peters, D-Michigan; Mary Judnich, representing U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow; state Rep. Thomas Albert, R-Lowell; state Rep. Tommy Brann, R-Wyoming; Dr. Bill Pink of Grand Rapids Community College; and Ramiro Galvan, representing state Sen. Winnie Brinks, D-Grand Rapids.

**Many said the** testimonies moved them. Fetterhoff said the students exhibited grit, empowerment, strength and empathy. Albert said the stories recalled his own childhood. As a 2-year-old, he would tag along with his mother to her classes at Michigan State University where she sought to improve her circumstances. “These stories resonated with me,” Albert said. Brann said he was moved by Josue Mutabaje’s message of love and peace.

“Your journeys matter,” Judnich said, promising to share her impressions with Sen. Stabenow.

For years, adult education programs have been underfunded and inaccessible for many in Michigan, but today program providers and advocates are emerging to fight for a renewed state investments to benefit more under-educated and under-employed Michiganders. MACAE estimates that more than 42,000 Michiganders of child-bearing age do not have more than a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education, limiting their employment opportunities and economic self-sufficiency.

“Michigan will have over 811,000 career openings through 2024,” said MACAE President Bob Steeh. “Who’s going to fill those jobs openings when 1 in 10 Michiganders over 18 do not have a high school diploma? MACAE President Bob Steeh said. “We are at a critical stage. Adult education can play an important role in workforce development and in closing that basic skills gap.”

**With strong programs** in GED, ESL (English as a Second Language) and High School Completion, Kent County is better equipped than many areas in Michigan to support adult learners. The Kent ISD Adult Education program is the largest provider of its kind in the county with 900 students and two locations in Grand Rapids and Wyoming. The district recently launched a new CTE program (Career and Technical Education) with training courses in phlebotomy, welding, and IT fundamentals – an example of the comprehensive nature of adult education services meeting individual needs and local employment demands, advocates say.

Serving a diverse population including immigrants from across the world, the Kent ISD program offers an ESL program for beginning English literacy learners that’s particularly critical for those moving on to naturalization interviews and U.S. citizenship. There are 50 dual-enrolled students pursuing GED credentials while receiving training to become certified in high-demand careers. For daytime GED students, this means coming to their GED class five days a week while committing to two evenings a week to their CTE training.

Hollin De La Cruz, a spokesman for the Kent County ISD at the Beckwith Adult Education Center, said the students he works with are as hard-working and determined as they come. “Every single one of them have overcome large, and at times, seeming insurmountable barriers to get into class and gain the skills they need to provide for themselves and their families,” De La Cruz said.