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Jesse Shaffer: Re-building lives

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. — I was in 10th grade when I dropped out of high school. At the time I didn't think a diploma was very important, I never thought I'd need a high school education and to be brutally honest, I didn't really care.

I left school to help care for my dad, who is disabled.

On top of that I had a serious drug problem and it consumed me. I just didn't care about school anymore.

But of course, at the time, if I had known all the problems that awaited me because I never finished high school, I might never have dropped out.

But some kids have to learn the hard way.

Soon my drug use escalated, and I turned to crime in order to support my habit.

I ended up getting arrested and spent six months in jail. I certainly wasn't able to take care of my dad from behind bars. Those were not proud days for me.

But while I was in jail, I did a lot of thinking and I decided this isn't what I want for my life this isn't what I want for my kids.

So after meeting with my probation officer once I was released, he introduced me to YouthBuild, a program that helps high school dropouts work toward their GEDs or high school diplomas while simultaneously learning valuable job skills while we build affordable housing for our communities.

I jumped at the chance to reconnect to my high school education.

Two days a week, I'm in class studying, and two days a week, I'm on the job site learning the construction trade while I work on a house purchased by HUD that we are re-modeling for a family that can't afford his own house.

I am also working on a new Habitat for Humanity house. It feels good to be doing something good for myself as well as for my community.

I have to complete 15 hours of community service as part of my YouthBuild contract and when I'm

finished with all my requirements, I will graduate May 13.

There are currently more than 1,000 high school dropouts living in Montour and Northumberland counties, and every year, 30,000 Pennsylvania teenagers fail to graduate with their class.

Pennsylvania needs programs like YouthBuild to help high school dropouts reconnect to their education and learn job skills that will help them prepare for the future.

YouthBuild is a partner in a new statewide campaign called Operation Restart, to urge our legislative leaders to provide funding for these kinds of programs.

This YouthBuild program saved my life. I've been clean for a year and a half now and soon I will graduate and start looking at colleges.

The people at YouthBuild are going to help me with college applications and walk me through the financial aid process.

I can say without a doubt that young people need a high school degree.

It's a stepping stone to the rest of your life.

It feels good that I am going in the right direction.

I know without the ability to reconnect to my high school education I'd be back in jail.

But today my family is proud of me. I am proud of me.

Jesse Shaffer is 23 and lives in Danville. The Central Pennsylvania YouthBuild program is currently recruiting for a new class. Contact the program at 570-644-6575 ext 109. Learn more about Operation Restart at www.operationrestart.org.