

## YouthBuild graduates celebrate the nonprofit's second book publishing



**“Graduates gather with Dr. Crystal Lee around their signed copies of their book “Strong and Unbroken” after a YouthBuild Graduation Ceremony on Thursday, Jan. 24, 2019, at Grace Church in Durham. (Staff photo by John Bauman.)**

By John Bauman  
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Donna Bennett rose, bravely, to share her story. Her truth.

“Good afternoon, my name is Donna Bennett. I will be reading a piece I wrote,” she said.

“Number one in your life’s blueprint should be a deep belief in your own dignity, your own self-worth and your own somebodiness. Having a deep belief in yourself is important, because if you don’t believe in yourself, no one else will.”

Bennett spoke during a Bull City YouthBuild graduation ceremony, which celebrated the publication of a book that the students had written. Through the Bull City YouthBuild program, Bennett had an opportunity to grow and share her story through writing.

On Thursday, Jan. 24, 2019, at Grace Church in Durham, Bull City YouthBuild held a Completion Ceremony to celebrate the 21 graduates. The group also had the opportunity to earn two construction certifications, the OSHA 10 and HBI. Many members of the group also took steps toward obtaining high school equivalency through getting their GED certificate.

“Today, I know we are in here to have a graduation,” Cory Rawlinson, Program Director, said during the ceremony. “But this is also a celebration. We want to see these young people smiling and blushing and crying of happiness because their fam-

ily and friends are here to support them.”

YouthBuild is a national, nonprofit organization that serves youth aged 16-24 who have not completed high school. Through this local branch, Bull City YouthBuild works in conjunction with the Triangle Literacy Council. Students build a Habitat for Humanity home and take classes to learn about English, Math, Geography and more. More information about the program can be found on the organization’s website.

The 2019 class also had the opportunity to publish a book titled “Strong and Unbroken.” It is a collection of short stories, poems and essays written by the students like the one shared by Bennett. It’s available to purchase online.

“Not only are they graduating today, they are celebrating the publishing of a book they have written together,” said Dr. Crystal Lee, an assistant professor at North Carolina State University, who helped spearhead the writing process.

The ceremony was well-attended by friends and family of the graduates. Also in attendance was Wendy Jacobs, chair of the Durham Board of County Commissioners. Commissioner Jacobs spoke briefly to the graduates, sharing how proud she was of the group.

“I was at the first YouthBuild graduation and I think there were maybe 10 (graduates),” Jacobs said. “So to see that the program has doubled, to see how many people are here today to support all of you, and to see how many young women are

“This book holds the narratives of youth who find themselves strong and unbroken despite forces that have held them back along the journey.”

— Lulu.com

in this group as well, I just could not be prouder. I really could not.”

The publication of ‘Strong and Unbroken’ comes from The Literacy and Community Initiative — a collaboration between N.C. State’s College of Education and Friday Institute for Educational Innovation. The first book published by a YouthBuild students was called “Blueprints - Rebuilding Lives and Redesigning Futures.”

“Strong and Unbroken” is the second book produced through the partnership.

Nina Schoonover, lead graduate assistant and project coordinator, worked with the 2018 cohort who shared their stories in the book. Schoonover emphasized the important role the of the book as the youth grew in the YouthBuild program, saying students like Bennett may not have the opportunity to share their story and truth previously.

“I think they’ve always felt silenced by people and like their voices didn’t matter,” Schoonover said. “And I think that’s something that’s so powerful about these books — they have this chance to publish themselves, and to feel empowered in that way, and to realize their voice is important and that people should hear it. So, I think that’s just been wonderful in working with them and talking with them about this whole process and reading the books. You hear that in their voices — ‘I have something to say.’”