



STAFF PHOTOS BY JOHN STORMZLAND

Bowing out: Audrey Tjalsma makes a graceful exit from Farmington Adult Education at the recent graduation ceremony.

Hats off to Charles! The Rev. Charles Cotton, 62, is capped and gowned for his graduation in Farmington.

Minister caps inspirational quest for diploma

BY LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

He's a grad and he's glad. But a few things got into the Rev. Charles Cotton's way in his quest for a high school diploma. First, there was the need to support the family after his father died. Then there was the Korean War, in which Cotton served as an Army medic on Pork Chop Hill. And then there were a litany of diabetes-related health problems, costing the Farmington Hills resident both his legs and a finger. He wouldn't let any of this

stop him, though. At 62, Cotton walked across the stage at the adult education graduation ceremonies at Farmington High auditorium June 8. "It was a challenge, but I constantly prayed," said Cotton, who is a minister at Glory & Praise Tabernacle Church of God in Christ in Detroit. His is one of 46 or so inspirational stories that highlight the annual graduation ceremony. Adult education and students from the Farmington Alternative Academy are recognized. Some use the moment share their own struggles, which un-

derscore those accomplishments even further. "To me, it's very emotional," said Terry Klenczar, director of Farmington Adult Education. "Those students have gone through a lot. They've gone through a lot of decisions and sacrifices to come back to school." Cotton left Highland Park High in the ninth grade. He later landed a job at the old Dodge Main auto plant to support his family, before getting drafted into the Army. Cotton was a conscientious objector, but went anyway. He didn't carry a gun. He was

awarded a purple heart after suffering a shrapnel wound. When he returned, Cotton went to work for the U.S. Postal Service. He was employed for 30 years before leaving for health reasons. He's concentrated on his ministry, which involves preaching weekly to a congregation of 30 or so members. Though his spiritual house was in order, Cotton felt the scholastic one needed tidying up. He started taking adult-education classes five years ago, stopping only because of recurring side effects from diabetes. Amid government and per-

sonal finance classes, Cotton found time to study and run his ministry. He thinks schooling has enhanced his church work. Though he has his diploma, Cotton plans to continue by taking a computer course. "It's something about learning," he said. "You can tell when people are educating themselves. . . . As far as words are concerned, understanding words, how you study. You feel better about yourself." People from the congregation attended the adult-education graduation. Another person present made the occasion even

more cherished. His niece, Angela McIntosh, also went through commencement and received her diploma. Cotton, who refers to Angela as his daughter, encouraged her to return to school. His own story was the most persuasive sales tool. "It really makes you feel like you're not second-class," he said. "Certain opportunities come up where they ask for this type of thing. It's better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it."



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Hey, cousins: Above, graduate Lena Dabish is surrounded by cousins after the ceremony, including Marisa Brihko (left) and Antonio Mifskoor (in Lena's arms). At right, adult education graduate Brenda Nannooshi (left) has a big smile for classmate Steve Phillips who tries on his cap.



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