

COMMUNITY

UPLIFTING THROUGH EDUCATION



CLAY JACKSON, THE PANTAGRAPH

Jaleesa Owens is planning to attend classes at Heartland Community College after graduating from life skills classes through Dreams Are Possible, a Bloomington nonprofit. "Me going to school will show my children that it's possible," said the mother of three. "I want to finish this race for my kids."

Bloomington nonprofit aims to arm women with life skills

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BLOOMINGTON — For a long time, Jaleesa Owens walked past a flyer at The Junction Community Center advertising Dreams Are Possible, a nonprofit that helps women and non-binary individuals learn valuable employment skills.

"I wanted to get in class, but I was still reserved about it," the mother of three said during a recent interview. "Like, maybe I'm

not a good student, or maybe it's going to be hard and I'm not going to pass."

Eventually, after some pressure from her friends, she called. And she's glad for it.

"I mean, look at me in a class helping to set me up for my future," Owens said. "And not just my future. Like, me going to school will show my children that it's possible ... I want to finish this race for my kids."

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Uplifting

From AI

Dreams Are Possible was co-founded in 2019 by Mary Campbell and Feli Sebastian as a way to help women and non-binary individuals learn life skills to find better employment and further their education. The organization is housed at 1311 W. Olive St. in Bloomington.

The COVID-19 pandemic hampered their mission greatly, Campbell said, and they could not offer classes for the first few years.

For three years now, the nonprofit has been offering morning and evening classes for women to learn essential workplace skills for better employment, said Rebecca Mafazy, the program's essential skills instructor and curriculum coordinator.

"We bridge our students to a better job," she said. "And so, we often emphasize the idea of getting a better job where you already work."

To that end, they also focus on teaching leadership principles on top of "hard skills" like resume building, home maintenance, budgeting and computer proficiency, she said.

"You practice those great worker skills where you are at, and then you're going to be identified as someone who's the go-to person," Mafazy said. "And then, when a job opens up that's a better-paying job ... you're going to be the first person (that) people think of."

Programs feature two classes, each about 10 students, running in either eight- or 10-week intervals. There are two-hour courses every Tuesday and Thursday, occasional classes on Saturdays and optional mathematics classes on Wednesdays, Campbell said.

Students get paid minimum wage for coming to each class, she said.

"If they go to the two hours on Tuesday, two hours on Thursday and two hours on Wednesday, that's \$90, because we pay minimum wage," Campbell said. "Soon as class is over, they get a check."

The nonprofit is funded in two ways, she said, both through donations.

"One is money goes into the Illinois Prairie Community Foundation, and that helps us pay for the staff salaries," Campbell said.

"And then, if the check is sent directly to Dreams Are Possible ... then I put it in the account at the Illinois State Credit Union, which is what we use to pay the women," she said.

After the courses are done, students often continue their educational journey, Mafazy said.

"We have Tommy Johnson and Nayoka Griffis come in from the Workforce Equity Initiative at Heartland (Community College) ... So, a lot of our students go on to those certificate programs," she said. "They're all under a year."

The classes are designed so



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Chasity Coleman and Naila Fernandez take a class on effective workplace communication on Thursday, July 17, 2025, through Dreams Are Possible, at 1311 W. Olive St. in Bloomington.



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Angel Bailey, left, and Mary Campbell talk about how Dreams Are Possible helps create friendships and bonds between women who take their classes and volunteer with the nonprofit.



Left: Angelina Durbin, left, Michelle Peloquin and Angel Bailey, students at Dreams Are Possible, fill packs with period products for students in McLean County as a way to ensure that students have access to the personal care items they need. Right: Students and teachers with Dreams Are Possible fill packs for female students around McLean County who may not have access to period products they need while going to school. Clockwise from the bottom left: Rhonda Nievelt, Rebecca Mafazy, Angelina Durbin, Michelle Peloquin and Angel Bailey.



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Diane Zosky, retired professor from Illinois State University, gives a class on effective workplace communication on Thursday, July 17, 2025, to women enrolled at Dreams Are Possible, 1311 W. Olive St. in Bloomington.

that students can form friendships and bond with one another, Campbell said.

"We want it to be small enough that they get close to each other and that they start to help each other," she said. "And a lot of them come back and volunteer."

Annie Gearhart is one graduate who comes back to volunteer.

"I'm not exaggerating when I say it's life-changing," she said.

"Women like me that have had obstacles or struggles or just need, you know, to connect with people, to create a com-

munity for themselves — that's what this program can do for women," Gearhart said.

"Besides all of the perks of being educated, you know, getting some food help, and some education help — the benefits are endless."

That sense of community encourages the students to give back as well, Owens said.

After last Wednesday's storms, there were many downed branches and tree limbs around the building, she said. The students cleared them.

"There's no way we're going to leave this at our school," Owens said. "I've never pulled branches or anything — like, my husband does the heavy lifting. But (it was) us women just saying, 'We can do this.'"

One of Campbell's dreams is to expand the mission.

"I'd like to get a condemned building and, eventually, get to the point where we can get some women that we can hire who are interested in construction and stuff, and have them work on it," Campbell said.

GET INVOLVED

For those interested in helping out or who would like to register for classes, visit dreamsarepossible.org, email dreamsarepossible2@gmail.com or call 309-287-5109.

Donation checks can be sent directly to the organization at 1311 W. Olive St., Bloomington, IL, 61701.

"And then get the building up and going and turn it over to the (Home Sweet Home Ministries) so that they could have a transitional home for some residents," she said.

Dreams Are Possible is not Campbell's first venture into nonprofit and community engagement. Alongside Sebastian, the 2023 McLean County History Maker is known, in part, for starting Labyrinth House to help formerly incarcerated women readjust to society.

In 2016, YWCA McLean County took over Labyrinth and continues to provide services, and Campbell would like to see something similar with Dreams Are Possible, she said.

"I'd really like to see some larger organization take it over, and I'm not sure who that would be," Campbell said. "So, there's nothing in the works."

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