



United Way of Anchorage

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408 and counting: Back on Track students turn grit into graduation

An inspiring benchmark to start the new school year

Anchorage AK – Back on Track, a program to help at-risk students recover credits to earn their high school diplomas, logged its 400th graduate this summer, and has kept right on rolling.

The count as of July 31 in the four-year-old program is 408 graduates.

Launched in 2016 with an AT&T Aspire grant, Back on Track is a partnership of United Way of Anchorage, the Anchorage School District, and Covenant House Alaska, along with volunteers and donors who give both cash donations and in-kind help. Back on Track is part of United Way's 90% Graduation by 2020 initiative.

These are students who face long odds against achieving an academic and life milestone that many take for granted. They face obstacles from homelessness to hunger to dysfunctional families to medical needs to caring for siblings and working fulltime – and now a pandemic that forces online instruction. Yet they drive on, and the people at Back on Track figure out ways to help them, both in and out of school.

Some students are immigrants, like Garang Ajak, who was born in Uganda and schooled at a refugee camp in Kenya. He came to Alaska in 2016 with no record or transcripts. Back on Track teacher Barb Dexter worked with AVAIL and contacted the refugee camp school in Kenya to get a partial transcript of Garang's records. Garang took it from there. "Garang began the impressive task of completing 18 classes while working fulltime and maintaining a 3.8 GPA," Dexter said at his graduation in 2018. "Garang is an amazing individual. His passion for learning is as strong as his passion for soccer!"

For his part, Garang recently said the need to help support his family forced him to leave regular high school after only three months. Back on Track "was one of the best things that happened to me; I met amazing teachers who inspire hope, ignite the imagination, and instill the love of learning. I cannot emphasize enough the importance the Back on Track program played in my path to higher education."

Overall, Back on Track has served more than 950 students, some of whom were able to return to their home high schools to graduate with their classmates.

About United Way of Anchorage

United Way of Anchorage is a community of donors, advocates, volunteers, and partners working together to improve the health, education and financial stability of every person in our community. LIVE UNITED.

www.liveunitedanc.org