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GE volunteers connect with students

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Rosetta Flowers says she is not the girl she used to be.

As a young teen, Flowers ran away from her home and from foster homes. She stole cars, smoked marijuana and got into fights. She was distrustful of most people.

By the time she was assigned to Lighthouse Community School last fall, Flowers was so far behind her peers that she was sure she wouldn't graduate on time.

She was wrong.

Flowers, now 17, has caught up on her coursework and credits at Lighthouse, a Madisonville charter school in for youth with mental or behavioral problems. She, along with a handful of other graduates, will celebrate their diplomas and achievements with friends, family and caseworkers at a luncheon Monday.

Another group that will attend will be about a dozen GE Aviation engineers and other staffers, who volunteer at Lighthouse.

Flowers is grateful, she says, to the Lighthouse staff and to the volunteers.

"The people I'm surrounded with from GE and the staff at Lighthouse, they really give good encouragement and advice to young people who struggle with believing in themselves," said Flowers. "I have a hard time believing in myself."

Flowers doesn't remember the names of all the GE workers who helped her. One woman, she said, recently spent a couple of hours having lunch with her and conducting a mock job interview.

GE Aviation volunteers insert themselves into the school throughout the school year, including PTA organizations, said Principal Daniel Trujillo.

The volunteers are there for canoe rides, museum trips, holiday parties, glider rides and art projects. In February there was a business lunch etiquette session at a private dining room. On May 20 there was a day of sports and games.

"They started coming to re-do our library but they didn't come to paint and fix it up themselves," Trujillo said.

"They chose students to be part of every step. They worked side by side with the volunteers, prepping and sanding, painting, and they got the bookshelves up."

In April, GE workers held mock jobs interviews with each senior, pretending they were potential employers and providing tips for how to answer questions about their pasts.

"Most of our students have emotional disturbances or behavioral problems at schools that they got kicked out of," Trujillo said. "Typically that's the result of growing up in homes where they've been severely abused or neglected. Over a period of time, they develop behaviors that tend to be difficult to manage over the long term."

David Markstein, an engineer and program manager at GE, says several dozen workers repeatedly volunteer while others cycle in and out of the program. Each time, volunteers gain more understanding of the kids' lives.

"There's not a lot in common between these kids, who grow up in the inner city with a lot of abuse, and a lot of us middle-aged, suburban professionals," Markstein said.

"Just as we're trying to embrace them and give them hope and point them in the right direction, it's not a one-way street. We learn a lot from them."

Flowers says she's no longer afraid of job interviews; she can handle the stress. Now she plans to go to a community college to get an associate's degree. She says she might become a cosmetologist or a social worker.
