Good for U.! Meet pair who go extra mile to get degree

BY ELIZABETH LAZAROWITZ

These Brooklynites aren't letting anything dash their college dreams. Money troubles and family obligations have turned the quest for a higher degree into a decade-long haul for Alfatah Kader, 29, who awakens before dawn each day, straps on a backpack and headlamp, and jogs 15 miles from his Midwood home to classes at Baruch College, to save on subway fare.

Medgar Evers student and single mom Carolyn Sealy, 28, has faced similar issues, forced to quit college three times as she struggled to juggle courses, child care and minimum-wage jobs.

"There were times when I was having a serious nervous breakdown," said Sealy, who first attempted community college courses at age 19 after landing in a homeless shelter with her toddler son, but soon found it too taxing.

Both Sealy and Kader are among nine finalists selected from 200 applicants for "Take America to College," a contest sponsored by media company Purple States. Five winners will be part of a documentary about nontraditional students, expected to air on a major news Web site this May.

"Going to college is not easy for Carolyn Sealy (r.) or Alfatah Kader (l.), who jogs 15 miles to school." 

College students who don't go the traditional route of finishing in four years, "now represent the majority," said Stan Jones, president of the nonprofit Complete College America. While admissions are up, rising tuition costs means students have to work more and take on more debt.

Kader said he has racked up thousands of dollars in student loans over the past 10 years.

He has held various jobs — as a shelf stocker at Rite Aid, a tutor, an executive assistant at an investment firm and now as a customer service representative at TD Bank. But any earnings are quickly eaten up.

"When you're making $7 an hour, you don't see that much of your money to pay for snacks, let alone rent," said Kader, who shares a one-bedroom apartment with his parents and 25-year-old sister.

With his father now retired from a city job, he feels obliged to chip in for the family's living costs and to send money to relatives in Bangladesh, where he lived until he was 9.

Then there's the challenge of finding study time. Kader sometimes listens to science lectures or Italian lessons on his iPod during his morning runs, and only sleeps a few hours a night, he said. "Trying to keep a balance between work life and academic life is the hardest thing."

But hope that a college degree will lead to better-paying jobs is pushing him to finish the nine credits he still needs to get his bachelor's degree.

After numerous false starts, Sealy is now just shy of an associate's degree in biology. "I'm definitely going to feel a small sigh of relief," she said. "It's not the end, but it's like a new beginning."

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