

"It is like a weight is lifted."

Amber McMunn overcomes challenges, pandemic to earn high school equivalency

When Amber McMunn dropped out of high school in 2008, she immediately found a job and entered the workforce. Over the next 11 years, Amber worked at a variety of different places—restaurants, factories, gas stations—and felt like each job was a step above the last. But in 2019, she came to a realization.

"Not having a diploma didn't really impact my ability to get jobs," she said. "For the most part, I had worked since I left high school. But without a diploma, I didn't have as many choices for the types of jobs I could get."

That's when she found out about Cook Vandergrift's high school equivalency (HSE) program through her friend **Shana Dunmire**, a supervisor in the Pipette department there.

"I was definitely excited when I heard about this program," Amber said. "I figured that I had put it off for a long time—why not just take it now and be done with it?"

She started at Cook on December 4, and not long after that began working on earning her HSE. She attended classes twice a week at



► Despite the pandemic, **Amber McMunn**, an assembler for Pipettes at Cook Vandergrift, earned her high school equivalency in late September and became a full-time employee on October 1.

Vandergrift's Armstrong Learning Center to prepare for the different sections of the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET).

"It was so hard when I first went back!" Amber said. "I told my teacher, that I had been out of school for a while, so I am going to need a little bit of refresher. But I got the hang of it after being there for a little bit."

As is true for many of us, it was the math that she feared the most.

"I was never good at math," Amber said. "I don't like math. I'm not going to lie, the further I got into the class, my feelings about the math didn't get any better. So I was saving my math test for last."

Everything was going according to plan until the COVID pandemic forced Armstrong to close in early spring.

"I was mad when I found out they were stopping," Amber said. "Everything got put on hold."

But rather than just sitting around waiting for in-person instruction to restart, she decided to take advantage of the online review resources that Armstrong had made available to the students.

Amber soon developed a daily schedule that saw her working her shift at Cook Vandergrift (including some weekends) from 5:00 am to 1:30 pm, then heading home to spend around three hours a day doing online review for school, followed by housework, and then hanging out with her cat **Harper** (see photo to the right) until bedtime, which was usually around 8:30 pm, day in, day out, for several months until the learning center reopened in late summer.

"I didn't want to do the online work," she admitted. "I wanted to slack off during that time. After I got off work, it wasn't easy to get online and do schoolwork. But I wanted to get my HSE. I was serious about it. So, I made sure every day that I went home and I got that computer out and I got on it. I did the best I could."

Immediately after the learning center reopened, Amber scheduled the remaining three HiSET sections she needed to earn her HSE.

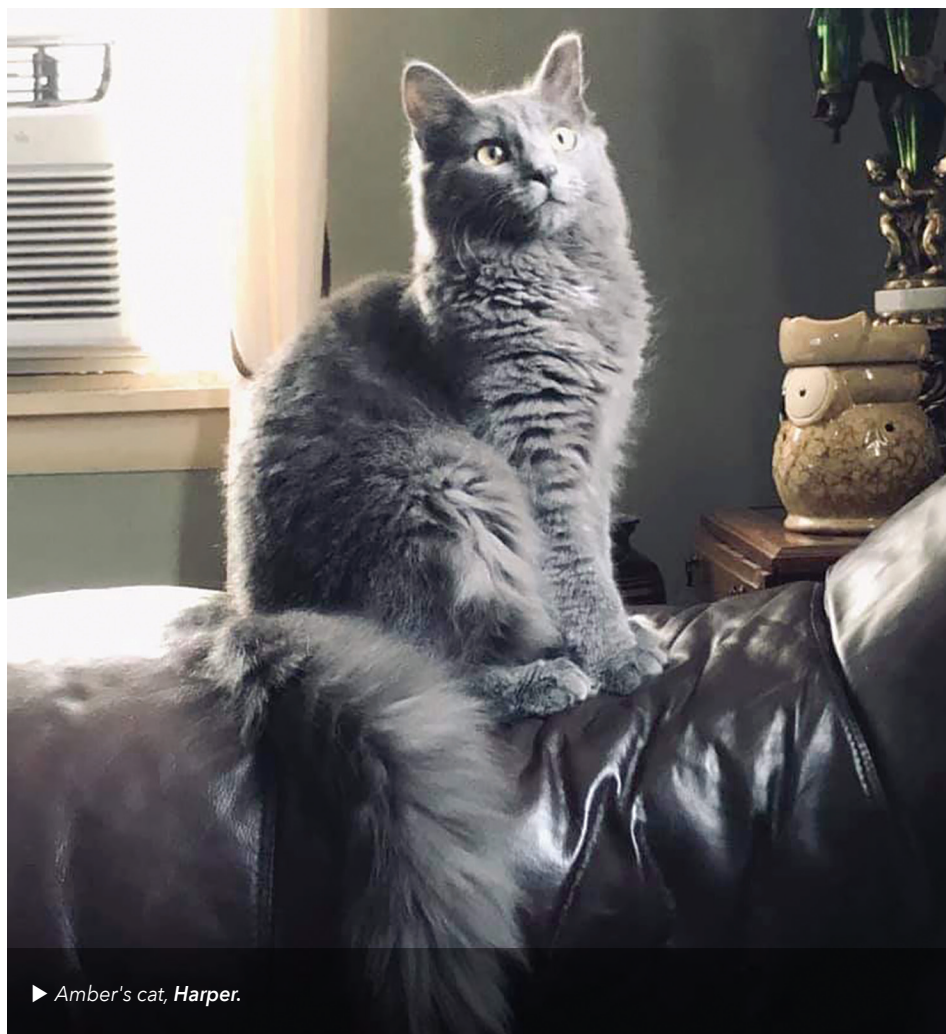
"I was excited, I was ready, and I was ready to be done," she said.

While she was confident in her preparations, Amber wasn't totally free of doubt. Thankfully, her Vandergrift coworkers were a constant source of reassurance and confidence-building.

"They encouraged me when I didn't think I could do it," she said. "They would tell me, 'You got this. You worry too much.'"

And they were right.

Amber plowed through her remaining HiSET sections in a matter of weeks—excitedly running down the halls of the learning center to find her teacher and give her an update after each successful result.



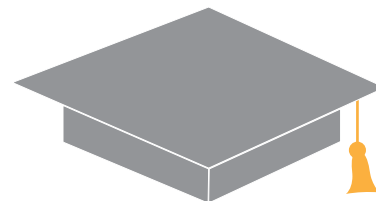
▶ Amber's cat, **Harper**.

In September, Amber received her HSE certificate, and on October 1, she became a full-time employee at Cook Vandergrift.

"It is like a weight is lifted," Amber said. "I shouldn't have waited, but it was hard to try and do this with a full-time job. I just kept putting it off and putting it off—and if it wasn't for this program at Cook, I probably would have kept putting off getting my HSE. Doing it here, with this program, made things a lot easier.

"This is a big deal for me. I feel great!"

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