

There's
a place
for you.



Triton College

For Immediate Release: October 27, 2025

From GED to PhD: Triton College Student Reignites His Education Journey



Christopher Portalain has rekindled a love for learning. After completing his GED at Triton College earlier this calendar year, he's now continuing his education as a Trojan.

RIVER GROVE, Ill. — When Christopher Portalain withdrew from high school nearly 10 years ago, he thought he was done with education. But after earning an Illinois High School Diploma through Triton College's Adult Education Department earlier this year, Portalain, 28, feels as though he has conquered the nearly insurmountable slope of a mountain.

"I just feel like this massive weight has lifted off my shoulders," he said. "I couldn't stand that I walked away from my education. That ate at me for years. So, I decided to do something about it."

Having discovered what he's capable of, Portalain has no plans to slow down. Now, he's headed for the mountain's peak.

Portalain's story is deeply intertwined with the longstanding identity of Triton College, an institution dedicated to providing individuals and families with accessible, high-quality education that empowers them to transform their lives at a fraction of the cost.

With a GED under his belt, Portalain has decided to continue his education at Triton College to study physics. After two years, he plans to transfer to the University of Illinois Chicago to earn his bachelor's degree. His ultimate goal: earning a doctorate in physics and pursuing a career in research and discovery.

"I'm a big sci-fi guy," Portalain said. "I've always liked the idea of looking at the universe, making the unknown known and really understanding the chemical makeups of our Earth."

While describing his career aspirations, Portalain acknowledged how far he's come. Growing up, he said he struggled in school and didn't feel he had the resources he needed to succeed — eventually prompting him to walk away from his education.

"I never thought I would be where I am now," he said. "If my younger self were to see me, they would be in such disbelief because I never had an inclination to take honors courses or pursue a college degree."

Triton College's Adult Education Department offers free, quality educational programs to help adults acquire the academic and employment skills needed to be college- and career-ready. The goal is to help individuals, families and communities thrive. Programs include English as a second language, GED and HiSET preparation courses, citizenship classes, and Gear UP! for adult learners transitioning to college or the workforce.

While studying for his GED, Portalain said he occasionally felt discouraged, but his instructors responded with optimism and encouraged him to keep going. His reading and language arts teacher, Nancy Kokat, was key in helping him discover his potential, he said.

"It's been great to see that the professors at Triton are in my corner, rooting for me," he said. "They've been really helpful — not just in assisting me with homework, but also in checking in on me. I always appreciate it when they take the time to ask how I'm doing."

Kokat has worked as a GED instructor at Triton College for 10 years. Known among many of her pupils as "Kool-Kat," she believes it's her calling to help her students continue their education.

"I teach totally from love," she said. "My job is to help them whatever their needs are. Most of them are all here willingly, so they can get a better job, or because they need their GED so they can move on and take college classes. So, knowing that, I have to make sure I give them all 100 percent."

Kokat said Portalain was known in class for being kind and for his fun, wonderful personality. She added that he almost always had a correct answer when called upon, but occasionally had difficulty focusing. As the class progressed, she said she was pleased to see him grow and succeed.

“I’m so excited for Christopher because he has great potential,” she said. “He truly does. All this time he just needed to be more confident within himself and to see that happen, I’m very proud of him.”

Now, knowing what he’s accomplished, Portalain is confident he can reach the summit of his potential. For those following in his footsteps, he offers this advice:

“No matter the obstacles you’re presented with, don’t ever give up; don’t ever stop pursuing your education.”

###

Media Contacts:

Melissa Ramirez Cooper | melissacooper@triton.edu | 708-456-0300, Ext. 3496

Hunter Oberst | hunteroberst@triton.edu | 708-456-0300, Ext. 3820

ABOUT TRITON COLLEGE

Triton College is an institution of higher education dedicated to student success. Triton offers more than 120 degree and certificate programs designed for students to realize their career aspirations and effectively compete in a global economy. The college campus spans 110 acres in River Grove, Illinois, holds classes at satellite locations and offers online learning opportunities. Triton’s exemplary faculty and staff work to provide high-quality, convenient and affordable educational opportunities to more than 10,000 students each year. Triton College is a member of The Community Colleges of Illinois and accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. Learn more at triton.edu.