Melissa Joseph of Bridgeport is a student in the IDEAL program at the University of Bridgeport.

Photo Credit: Contributed Photo

BRIDGEPORT, Conn. -- Melissa Joseph fell into the trap that ensnares many students in Bridgeport. With her own determination and help from the University of Bridgeport’s IDEAL Program, she fought her way out of it.

Joseph still has a long way to go. She started at UB last fall, and stands at least two years away from graduation. She is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Professional Studies with a concentration in Organizational Leadership and Change.

Change is a good word to describe Joseph. She was kicked out of Bridgeport Central High School as a senior -- “I was not a stellar student,” Joseph said -- and seemed destined for the path to nowhere.

“I don’t know when my attitude toward education changed,” said Joseph, who obtained her GED one year later. “I thought, ‘If I want to get to where I see myself, this is what I need to do.’”

She had seen many of her friends in Bridgeport drop out of school and land low-paying jobs with no career path. “It’s a cycle,” Joseph said. “They drop out of school, and then they have kids at a very young age. Nobody puts importance to education, to say to you need to finish school. My parents did not push me. It’s very hard to break out.”

Joseph saw friends and family struggle, and wanted something more. “It was a combination of everything,” she said. “Seeing people I’ve known become stagnant in their own lives and my parents living paycheck to paycheck. That’s not what I wanted to do. I wanted something more.”

Joseph spent three years at Housatonic Community College in Bridgeport. She took another three years away from school before deciding last summer to enroll in the IDEAL Program.

“This is something I always told myself I was going to do,” Joseph said. “I wanted to achieve that. After I attended Housatonic, there were financial issues and I had a sick parent. It just wasn’t the right time. I wasn’t focused.”

She is now though, and she’s also determined to help Bridgeport youth to take education seriously. She worked as an Achievement Coordinator at Public Allies Connecticut, a program of the Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership. The organization helps communities bring about lasting social change by working with citizens of all backgrounds.

She currently works as a program assistant in the STRIVE For the Future program at Career Resources in Bridgeport, which helps job seekers get the training, support and resources to find employment. Both the Public Allies Connecticut program and her work at Career Resources support Bridgeport youth.

“When I get my degree I’m hoping to climb the ladder and help more children of Bridgeport realize the importance of education,” Joseph said.

She enjoys the IDEAL Program because of its online learning and the school’s counseling staff. “I can do things while I’m at work or at home,” Joseph said. “It gives me room and space to be able to do my work.”

She even recruited a friend to pursue a degree through the IDEAL Program. She now spreads the message that education is the path to escape the destructive lifestyle that has derailed so many children in Bridgeport.

“My message to them is just to stay focused,” Joseph said. “As much as I know there are a lot of things going on around you, stay focused and think about where you want to see yourself. Keep that person in mind, and you can’t go wrong.”