

Synergy grads overcome adversity to get diplomas

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EAST HARTFORD — This was much more than merely commencement for the 65 students who graduated from Stevens Alternative High School on Monday.

It was a sign that they had overcome their own obstacles and proved wrong the many naysayers who had long since given up on them.

The ceremony, held at East Hartford Middle School, gave a handful of students a chance to tell their own stories about how they found themselves in blue robes and caps with diplomas in hand.

Stevens School houses the Synergy and LIFE programs, designed for students who need a different environment than a traditional high school to succeed.

The school has a tradition of not having keynote speakers, but rather letting the graduates explain their obstacles in their own words.

The result was a mix of posturing and tears, “I love you” and “thank you” as the students took the podium.

Among the success stories was that of young mother LaTasha Williams-Johnson, who explained to the audience that most teens with babies are written off as a statistic and expected to drop out.

Williams-Johnson, on the other hand, enrolled at Stevens and will soon attend college in pursuit of a better life for her and her daughter.

“To my baby girl, you have made my life worth living,” said Williams-Johnson, who also honored her mother during the ceremony.

To her daughter, she said, “You gave me a reason to want more so I could give you more. When you grow older, I just want to say that I want you to know you can achieve anything.”

Student Alexandra Cardona explained how in her past, others had labeled her a “delinquent” because she couldn’t seem to stay out of trouble.

Now Cardona is a graduate and is pre-registered in the nursing program at Goodwin College.

In addition to her father, she credited Principal John Karzar and the Stevens staff for contributing to her success story.

“Synergy doesn’t just focus on subjects like reading, math, and science. Synergy is a place to grow, to learn how to be an individual, to learn to believe in ourselves,” Cardona said.

Grad Michael Zitani explained how Stevens had been his last chance after failing classes at East Hartford High School. Yet through the environment at Synergy, he was able to pass his math requirement, thrive as a leader, and even discover a love for William Shakespeare’s “Macbeth.”

“I came to Synergy because I

didn’t expect anything to change,” Zitani said. “But I was wrong. Things did change.”

The commencement ceremony marked the 34th class to graduate from the alternative high school. It was founded in 1973, largely by Sen. Gary D. LeBeau, D-East Hartford, a longtime educator.

In addition to their classmates’ speeches, the students were honored by Superintendent of Schools Marion H. Martinez and Karzar for their achievements.

“You are so beautiful,” Karzar said. “Keep persevering, keep believing in yourselves, and finally, keep using your minds well.”

These students graduated Monday from Synergy Alternative High School:

A-L: Stephanie Alers, Miguel Amaro, Irene Andrews, Ashley Aponte, Fenix Aponte, Josmary Aponte, David Barnes Jr., Heather Bartone, Tasheena Bell, Claudia Benitez, Vanessa Bourgoin, Michael Butler, Jean Buxton, Alexandra Cardona, Taylor Carey, Jamar Cross, Sherri Curtis, Alex Delgado, Tabetha Dumais, India Eason, Nelson Ferry, Dixon Fields, Alexis Fuentes, Janeecia Gore, Stephen Guerrieri, Tena Hiranthom, Kimani James, Sharr Jarrett, Christhina Jiminian, Benjamin Kelly, Kevin Kennedy, LaSaundra Lawrence, Dominique Leach, Diane Leonardo, Janell Lundy.

M-Z: Luis Maysonet, Nicholas Miller, Joseph Miranda, Louis Moreau, Nicole Munn, Carl Packard, Armando Parente, Anthony Petrella, Nicolle Phillips, Sebastiano Pugliares, Amber Quintana, Richard Rivera, Emanuel Rodriguez, Ashley Ryea, Cileena Santiago, Brittany Sherwood, Kwamaine Smith, Soncharea Thomas, Mahlik Thorpe, Denise Vargas, Alice Vaught, Ashley Vaught, Miguel Vazquez, Oscar Velasquez, Jonathan Velez, Devin Webster, Yahmika White, LaTasha Williams-Johnson, Stefanie Zayas, Michael Zitani.

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