



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Jeffrey Knight (right) laughs with a classmate during the ceremony.

Rough road ends with high hopes for CV grads

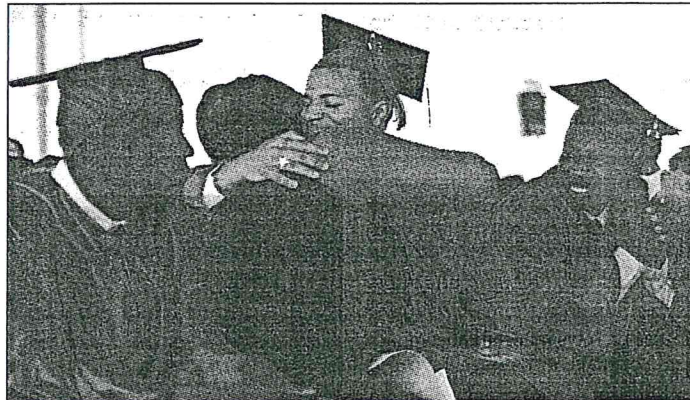
By Colleen Michele Jones

DOBBS FERRY — For Jeffrey Knight, last week's walk to the podium in his satin blue graduation robe could never have seemed farther from the inside of a Rikers Island jail cell.

But just four short years ago, that was where Knight, now 20 and a proud alumnus of the Mary McLeod Bethune High School on the campus of The Children's Village, found himself after multiple scrapes with the law and a serious juvenile criminal record.

"I never thought I'd be standing up here," Knight told the Enterprise. "I didn't see myself going back to school after I got out of jail."

After being placed at the Dobbs



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Moses Blanchard hugs Valerie Boyde, a substitute teacher at Bethune High School.

Ferry residential treatment facility at 17, not only did Knight buckle down and hit the books, but he found that when he put his mind to it he was a natural student.

Last Friday, June 10, Knight graduated as the Class of 2011 valedictorian with an impressive 86 GPA.

Knight was one of 15 graduates from Bethune, otherwise known as the Greenburgh 11 Union Free School District, which educates troubled young men who find themselves at CV for a number of reasons, as well as a small number of day students who need special attention.

While graduations are always exciting, with cheering friends and

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CV grads

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family, the atmosphere at CV's annual diploma-granting ceremony is even more jubilant since the majority of its students have overcome tremendous odds to achieve this milestone, both personally and academically.

This year's graduation was made even more special by the presence of New York City Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott, who delivered the commencement speech for the first time in CV's history. State Sen. Andrea Stewart-Cousins, a supporter of Children's Village, also attended the event.

One by one, the graduates made their way up to the stage set up under a large tent on the grounds to shake hands with CV's educational and administrative leaders and bask in their achievement. Among the graduates were Moses Blanchard, whose extreme sensitivity crippled him after he lost his biological mother at age 10 and pushed away those closest to him, and Joel Delacruz, who was living on the streets two years ago but now dreams of a career in music.

For Knight, who could have used a wheelbarrow to collect the academic awards he earned, it was a particularly triumphant moment.

"It's been a long time coming," Knight said, addressing his classmates. "The road I was taking was literally one with a dead end. But I made the necessary changes to get here."

Knight was just shy of enough credits to receive a diploma last June, but the extra time "just motivated me to be better, to set the bar higher," he told the Enterprise.

His father, who adopted Knight from Costa Rica when the boy was young, felt like he could only sit by on the sidelines as the teen made mistakes growing up in Washington Heights. A week ago, Dee Knight got to cheer on his son, donning a tasseled mortarboard, from the graduation viewing section.

Knight, who was accepted to all three colleges he applied to, recently settled on Westchester Community College to study economics.

"I want to be a financial adviser," said Knight, his eyes glinting in the sunlight.

'Singin' a tune'

The Greenburgh 11 choir sang loud and proud as they ran through a number of inspirational gospel and R&B songs on the graduation program. The underclassmen, in crisp white shirts and blue vests, stood out from the robed graduates in the group, and looked as moved by the ceremony as any of the guests in the audience, wide smiles on their faces. With any luck, they would be up there next year, or the year after.

One voice that will clearly be missed in the choir is that of 17-year-old Blanchard. The talented singer, who has previously performed at Radio City Music Hall and Madison Square Garden, is an equally gifted dancer. But it wasn't until recently that Blanchard had enough focus to have confidence in his dream of performing professionally.

"I was unmotivated and down on life in general," said Blanchard, who also writes poetry.

"For the past few years, she's been a huge support" — Blanchard motions to his foster mother standing next to him, and begins tearing up — "but I was pushing her away. She always found a way to bring me back."

Blanchard, who graduated second in his class behind Knight, also



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Joel Delacruz (right) smiles as he and his classmates march with their diplomas.

received many awards last Friday. He will attend Dutchess Community College in the fall.

After shaking hands with choir director Robert Einfrank afterwards, Blanchard turned on his heel, calling out, "I told you, I'll keep my promise. I'll be here for graduation next year. I'll be singin' a tune."

Against the odds

In his speech to the Class of 2011, Children's Village President and CEO Jeremy Kohomban didn't mince words. While offering sincere congratulations to all the graduates, he also warned them not to accept complacency and to stay the course.

"Your work begins today," he said.

By that, Kohomban referred to the

continuing challenges and obstacles that they would face after they left the confines of the CV campus.

"Things will happen... Way too many young men of color end up on a dead-end street," he told the class.

The majority of the campus' graduates this year were more than two years behind grade level when they entered Bethune High School and faced all kinds of adversity due to environmental, behavioral, and educational problems.

Teachers in the intentionally small classrooms at the high school get to know the young men as they work closely with them in their studies. All were able to sum up in a word or two what was unique about each graduate who had made it to this point.

"Determined" is the word Sandra Mallah, Greenburgh 11 superintendent of schools, used to describe this particular class as a whole.

"They decided they wanted to be here, and we just helped them get there," said Mallah.

Joel Delacruz is aware, more than most, of what it will take to succeed.

"His determination — he saw that there was a better future," was what his father, Richard Minayn, said Delacruz had to realize before he could come into himself.

Graduating ahead of his class in January, the 18-year-old went to work as a stock boy at the Abercrombie & Fitch store at The Westchester in White Plains, living in transitional housing.

Coming back to Dobbs Ferry to walk down the aisle with his classmates last week, Delacruz also received a good citizenship award from CV Board of Directors Chairman William Krupman, who called him "a very special young man" and "a wonderful success story."

"It wasn't easy being on the streets," Delacruz said in an interview with the Enterprise. "I was staying out past curfew, sometimes not coming home at all, cursing my parents out, doing drugs, cutting school. But for me, I guess that's what it took [to see the error of his ways]."

Delacruz, who will attend Lehman College in the fall, is interested in going into music production.

Six of the other 15 graduates will also attend college right after graduation. The other eight will either work or enroll in vocational training. CV will continue to support them through its aftercare transitional program.

"You're not done yet," Kohomban said as he embraced one of the graduates. "You can't be done."