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Event celebrates Broward foster kids' achievements

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Fifty graduates wearing caps and gowns walked down the aisles in a Pembroke Pines auditorium to the traditional processional, *Pomp and Circumstance*.

But the cheers that came from the sidelines weren't from family members, but their peers, caseworkers and others proud of their scholastic achievements.

"It is a major accomplishment in my life and something I want to share with people I have known for my whole life," said Christopher Bahamundi, 18, of Deerfield Beach.

Bahamundi had already celebrated his graduation from Monarch High School weeks earlier. This special commencement ceremony on June 24 honored Broward's 110 foster-care youths who were graduating from middle school, high school, GED programs, technical school or college, though not all were able to attend.

"Tonight, we are recognizing any of the children or young adults that are in foster care that are making educational progress," said Sandy Harris, a board member with ChildNet, which hosted the sixth annual Independent Living Graduation at Broward College South Campus in Pembroke Pines.

ChildNet is a private, not-for-profit organization created to manage the child welfare system in Broward County. The program has 2,100 kids in its care.

Of the 110 graduates, most were at the high school level, but one student was getting his bachelor's degree.

The graduates received a certificate and a gift bag, but Harris said the real goal of the ceremony is to keep the young students motivated and in school.

"The real purpose is to encourage the kids to have an educational plan in place. If not, when they turn 18, they are on their own. If they do stay in school, they receive a small stipend from the state that will help them," said Harris, who added that college tuition is waived at state schools for foster youths.

Bahamundi has been in foster care for six years, but he is now heading to the University of South Florida.

He graduated in the top 10 percent of his class at Monarch High in Coconut Creek and was recently named a 2010 Horatio Alger National Scholar honoree.

The award honors high school seniors who have overcome major obstacles in life. Bahamundi plans to study law or engineering.

"I have been through so much in my life," he said. "I want people to see something good came out of it."

Douglas Hall went to the graduation dressed in a suit, crisp white shirt and red tie. In foster care since 2008, Hall also recently graduated from Monarch High School and has been accepted into Broward College's Honors Institute, where he plans to study foreign affairs.

He is making the transition from foster care to living on his own, and he has his first job. Hall said he wants to get into politics after graduating from college so he can help make a difference in the lives of other foster children.

"I have come through a lot and I hope to one day work to better the foster-care system, and advocate in every way possible," Hall said.

The keynote speaker at the graduation was Harriet McCray, a former foster child and recent Florida Atlantic University graduate. She told the graduates to rely on their faith and to always keep a strong support system around them.

"I want to tell them not to take this lightly because many foster kids in the system don't always make it, and they have," McCray said.

pembroke pines

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