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Foster care children's achievements celebrated at Pembroke Pines ceremony

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By Chris Guanche, Forum Publishing Group

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A group of graduates recently took to the stage at the Broward College South Campus in Pembroke Pines, but it wasn't a typical graduation ceremony.

The 7th Annual Independent Living Graduation Ceremony recognized the efforts of more than 130 current and former foster children to graduate from middle and high school, receive a GED or a college degree. Performing well in school can be a problem for children in the foster care system, said Jeanne Tamargo, assistant director of permanency at the nonprofit ChildNet, the event's host. ChildNet manages the county's child welfare system and works with abused and neglected children.

"When you come into foster care, your whole life is turned upside down," Tamargo said. "It's difficult to acclimate to new surroundings, so we try to keep them in the same school."

Staying in school proved difficult for 25-year-old Mackenzie Ramsay, a former foster child and the graduation's keynote speaker. Ramsay never knew his parents and spent his childhood moving in and out of the foster care system until eventually going onto subsidized independent living. He attended four different high schools and eventually dropped out of school, later earning a GED.

When he "aged out" of the foster system at 18, he didn't do much for a while.

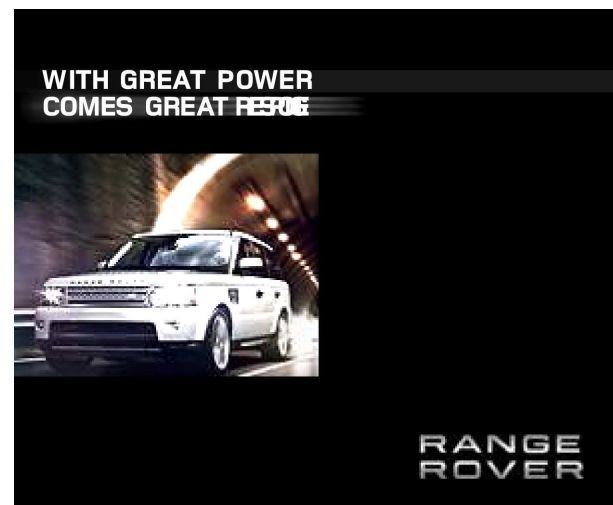
"I had my car, and I couch-surfed for a couple of years," said Ramsay, of Cape Coral.

Ramsay said he had mental health issues and some legal troubles, but he removed himself from negative influences by moving to Fort Myers in 2007 to attend college. Ramsay credits education with helping to turn his life around.

"I learned more about myself, how the world works and how to correct my behavior," he said.

Ramsay now has a master's degree in social work, works in a hospital as a social worker and is raising

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his 8-month-old son, Carter. Ramsay's message to the graduates focused on education and one main point: Don't make the same mistakes.

"It took me seven years, and I hope it doesn't happen to you," Ramsay said.

Melissa Acker, 19, of Fort Lauderdale, graduated from Stranahan High School after spending all four years there. Being in one school the whole time helped, she said.

"It made me feel closer to people," Acker said.

Acker entered the foster care system at age 5, spending several years in shelters and homes. She plans to study English at Broward College before moving on to Florida Atlantic University.

Attending BC and FAU also is part of the plan for 18-year-old Melinda Paul, who graduated from Sunrise's Piper High School. Paul spent nearly five years in the foster care system, split between a shelter and two group homes. Paul intends to study health care management.

"I like to work in an office and help people," Paul said.

For more information, visit <http://www.childnet.us>.

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