

School work just part of graduates' life achievements

By Kathryn Reed

"Every accomplishment starts with the decision to try."

Those words from Mt. Tallac High School counselor Amy Jackson resonated with the students sitting before her in their blue graduation gowns.



Fidel Valdez Moya with his daughter graduates June 10 from Mt. Tallac High School.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

The 45 students who received their diploma Friday morning have overcome obstacles many adults twice their age have yet to – and may never – experience.

While plenty of family and friends turned out for the momentous occasion, many of these young adults have been living on their own for years. Some couch surf – having no real place to call home. A few are already parents. Many work full time. For some, they are the first in their family to

earn a high school diploma.

And about 70 percent of these graduates are going onto college. Most never thought a high school diploma would be possible, let alone pursuing higher education.

Austin Beentjes was one of three student speakers. His first stint in the juvenile detention center was at age 14. He admits it took a while to confront a drug addiction.

"A while ago I was scared of the world. Now I'm taking it by the reigns," Beentjes said. "A while ago I was in an 8 by 10 cell. Now I stand here free."

All of the speakers praised the school's staff for providing them an opportunity and the inspiration to be successful.

Emily Yelle spoke of how Mt. Tallac has given all students a second chance.

Her spiral downhill started in fall 2009 while she was a junior at South Tahoe High. Her whole family came down with the flu. It hit Yelle's mom the hardest. She was hospitalized, airlifted to a Reno hospital, and eventually suffered a stroke that left her brain dead. Yelle's mom died Nov. 12 that year.

Yelle didn't go to school. She became depressed. She and her dad started fighting. Family finances were thin.

Finally, she was given the chance to go to Mt. Tallac. It turned her life around.

Yelle told her classmates what makes them different is they've been tested so much sooner in life than the average teenager.

"Our stories will not break us," Yelle said.

Fidel Valdez Moya panicked when his girlfriend told him he was going to be a father. How was he going to support a family without an education? With his daughter now 6-months-old, he

doesn't have to answer that question. He has a high school diploma and has a desire to join the military or go the fire academy.

On Friday, he walked across the stage carrying his daughter – with a huge smile on his face.

Plenty of tears were shed (some adults admitted to wearing sunglasses to hide that fact), lots of hugs were shared, and smiles filled the audience as they celebrated this next step in these young people's lives.

“This is a pretty incredible class,” Susan Baker, who runs the school, said after the ceremony. “They are very smart and very focused.”

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