

Small ceremony highlights grads' stories of success

By BETH BURGER - bburger@bradenton.com

BRADENTON — They were given lots of advice.

Four graduates clad in blue caps and gowns sat at a table facing their families at the Center Academy High School on Thursday evening as school officials recognized them.

Call your mother. Be generous. Believe in yourself. Never give up. Stay positive. Spread joy. Talk to God.



PAUL VIDELA/pvidela@bradenton.com Center Academy graduates Alberto I. thanks his family as each academy senior took turns with the microphone during commencement ceremonies at the school Thursday night.

But some of the best advice came from students who graduated a couple of years ago.

They know what comes after graduation.

Cynthia C., who is partially deaf, was up at 1 a.m. Thursday delivering bread. She takes classes at Manatee Community College during the day.

"I pay everything straight out of pocket. Going to college was not as easy as I thought it was going to be," she said, noting classes cost about \$300 to \$500 per class.

She lives at home, but still has bills to pay, she said.

"I cannot afford to mess up. Whatever you decide to do in the future, don't do it alone. Have your friends and family help you along the way," she offered.

Each member of the small graduating class had their own story of success and hard work.

Alberto "Karlos" I. was recently accepted into a culinary school in Orlando. Devin J. plans to explore college options and keep a part-time custodial job. Jordan P., known to his friends as "JP," plans to work on his Web site. Dan S. was more reserved about his plans. He's exploring his options.

"These four guys are probably the most personable people I've met," said Jerome Pascuzzi, 11th- and 12th-grade teacher at Center Academy. "They're a bit older. They've shown the greatest amount of maturity I've see in a long time."

Candid photos of the students lined a bulletin board outside the extended classroom space where the students graduated.

Center Academy, an alternative school for students with mild and moderate learning disabilities, focuses on teaching to each students needs.

Individualized attention is stressed in the learning environment, said Steven Hicks, vice president of operations for Center Academy.

Center Academy has 11 locations throughout Florida.

"We are a school who attracts kids who have fallen through the cracks, not been successful somewhere else or need a small individualized setting," he said.

Linda Stamp, Devin J.'s mother, beamed at her son during the ceremony. Her favorite piece of graduation advice was reminding graduates to call their mothers.

"It's a dream come true," she said after the commencement. "Back in the ninth grade, Devin said he wasn't going to finish school. ... I think the school has taught him how to handle himself in a mature fashion. ... He now has the confidence to go forward."