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CHILDREN INSPIRE MOMS' SCHOOL SUCCESS PROGRAM ISSUES EIGHT DIPLOMAS

NORTHPORT - Dressed in graduation caps and gowns, eight high school students - each with a baby or toddler planted firmly on her hip - marched down the aisle Saturday to receive their hard-earned diplomas

Before reaching the stage, the moms paused for a moment to hand children over to proud grandparents or fathers who were eagerly awaiting the special graduation ceremony.



Heidi Moores, Shauna Pomeroy and Viktoria Robinson (from left) contemplate the audience during the Passages graduation ceremony while Kristina Vaughan kisses her 2-year-old daughter, Mercedez.

The young mothers had successfully completed the Passages Program through the Community School in Camden, which offers alternative education opportunities.

The Passages Program, with its home-based, one-on-one teaching curriculum, is the only one of its kind in Maine, although there are several similar school-based programs around the state, including those in Bangor, Waterville and Augusta, according to head teacher-counselor Deidre Sousa.

"We don't know of another [home-based] one in the country," she said.

Emanuel Pariser, co-director of the program, said during the commencement held at MBNA's Ginley Hall that he had learned a lot in the past year.

"One lesson that stands out is that the experience of many of our young parents is that they are not always warmly welcomed into our communities," Pariser noted. "Many

people have the attitude that having children young is a problem. Well, these young women in front of us have proved that notion incorrect.

"They have turned their lives around, worked hard at being good mothers, worked hard at being students, worked hard to make their children's lives better than theirs was," he said. "Achieving their diplomas today is a major step in that direction.

"What was seen troubling to some is actually the key motivating force in our students' lives - their children, whom they cherish more than anything else in the world."

At times, misty-eyed family members seemed to make it damper inside the hall than outdoors where it was raining. Fathers, grandfathers, grandmothers and friends shed tears while expressing pride in their graduates.

In the Passages Program, students must successfully complete 23 course requirements, which include basic academics, such as math, science, English and history. They also must pass courses such as parenting, first aid and nutrition.

In the past decade, 59 students have graduated from the program, including one dad. There have been only eight graduation ceremonies because students study at their own pace. The school waits until there are a sufficient number of graduates to hold commencement exercises.

"They basically set the goal for themselves," co-director Martha Kempe said.

The final requirement is completing a "passage," which is addressing or confronting a real fear, challenge, need, interest or passion in their life.

One graduate, Whitney Mills of Rockland, was 15 when she got pregnant. For the now-17-year-old, however, it wasn't the end of the world.

"I was nervous," she said Friday, "but, I was almost excited at the same time."

Being a mother at such a young age and studying at the same time is "definitely difficult," she said, "but it's manageable. There's some nights I just want to sit on the couch and sleep."

Mills said that before she became pregnant, she was an honor student at Camden Hills Regional High School. She chose the Passages Program because it offered her the opportunity to stay at home with her son, Cameron Kilton Jr., now 15 months old and nicknamed "C.J.," and to work.

Students in the program have "one-on-one" teacher-counselors who come to their homes once a week to teach or guide them through the mostly self-directed studies. They also must attend a weekly workshop at the school.

Mills' passage was figuring out how she would manage to attend nursing school.

Two weeks ago, she finished the certified nursing assistant program at the Mid-Coast School of Technology in Rockland. She and Cameron Kilton Sr. are engaged to be married.

"I plan to get my R.N.," she said, referring to becoming a registered nurse. For Viktoria Robinson, 19, of Thomaston, Passages was the only avenue for earning a high school diploma.

"I wanted a real diploma, not a GED," she said.

Robinson, who finished the program a year ago, has been attending the University of Maine's Thomaston campus for a degree in physical therapy, while her mother, Sharon, watches her 16-month-old son Brayden.

Brayden's dad, Andrew Hyatt of Thomaston, also helps with the baby a couple of days a week, Robinson noted. "I'm not totally alone, like some girls are," she said.

Attending school and caring for a baby have sometimes been "overwhelming and tiring," she said. "It's hard, but it will be worth it in the long run."