



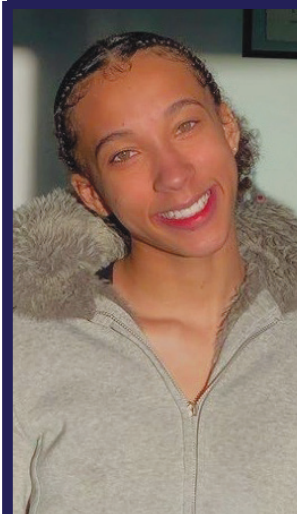
SCHOOL NEWS

HAPPENINGS FROM OUR CLAY COUNTY SCHOOLS

MAY 2023

2023 *Senior* SPOTLIGHTS

As high school seniors prepare for graduation, these are compelling stories of students who turned difficult challenges into success. We profiled some of our outstanding seniors from our Clay County Schools. Here are their stories.



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RIDGEVIEW HIGH AYA OSMAN

Osman beats cancer to graduate with honors from Ridgeview

By Don Coble
School News

ORANGE PARK – Aya Osman had her blue graduation gown tucked under her arm in between classes Tuesday at Ridgeview High. Once considered too far away and too challenging, the sprightly senior now can now embrace a future.

A year ago, she couldn't think about graduation. She was too busy studying, too busy with her extracurricular meetings.

And fighting for her life.

A cancer diagnosis forced her to approach life in a series of "baby steps." Long-term goals, like graduation, was an unnecessary use of focus.

Treatment to kill the tumor in her arm was aggressive. Chemotherapy treatments required three-day hospital stays. But Osman never backed down,

"The first thing I thought was, 'What will I tell my friends? How am I supposed to manage, you know, arguably the hardest year of high school?' I wasn't really thinking too much about the logistics of what came with being diagnosed with cancer," she said. "As serious as cancer is, you don't really think that much long-term," she said. "You sort of look more so in the moment."

She immersed herself in her schoolwork and social activities. Cancer be damned.

"It helped to distract yourself, and no matter what it may be, whether it was piano or schoolwork," she said. "It definitely helps curb the side effects of such a great

diagnosis. It helps keep put your mind at ease and keeps you focused about something else."

Osman's mother brought her laptop to the hospital so she wouldn't fall behind. She kept up with her International Baccalaureate schedule as doctors monitored her progress. She will graduate next month with a 4.77-grade point average, according to school principal Becky Murphy.

"I did everything on my laptop," Osman said. "So you know, I was laying down on my hospital bed and the nurses would come in checking heart rate, checking my temperature and whatnot.

While I would be rushing to finish an essay for IB history or English or having the distraction of schoolwork, to be able to focus on something else really helped."

Osman said she someday wants to be a neurosurgeon. She hasn't decided which university she will attend, but she's successfully applied to more than a dozen schools.

And she will go to college cancer-free. "I found out I was in remission last April," she said.

Since she stays so busy living in the moment, Osman still doesn't think too far into the future. More importantly, she wants to make a difference.

"I'm keeping tunnel vision focus," she said. "I'm in a lot of extracurricular clubs at school because it helps keep me distracted. One of my favorite activities has to be the Multicultural Club and Earth Club –



STAFF PHOTOS BY DON COBLE

Aya Osman, who hopes to be a neurosurgeon, will graduate with a 4.77-grade point average. After battling cancer as a junior, she's now been cancer-free for a year.

multicultural club for raising awareness of unique and distinct cultures and to bring appreciation to other types of people so they can feel a sense of belonging at the school and the community."

As graduation approaches, Osman can finally embrace the prospect of a long and

successful future.

"I'm sure it will be such a gratifying moment," she said. "I'm going to take it in and make sure to look at everyone out there who made it possible, including Mrs. Murphy right here, and all my teachers and friends."

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2023  **Senior**
SPOTLIGHT

CLAY HIGH DWIGHT BROWN

Homeless to honors

Positive school spirit drives Brown's success at Clay High

By Don Coble
don@claytodayonline.com

GREEN COVE SPRINGS – It's easy to pick Dwight Brown out of a crowd. He's the one with the blissful smile.

It wasn't always that way for the Clay High graduate-to-be. Instead of immersing himself in his hopeless past, Brown was determined to find a positive path to success.

And nothing will erase that enthusi-

asm. Or his determination.

"For a year, I lived in a homeless shelter in Jacksonville," Brown said. "We kind of moved around a lot in my childhood because my mom couldn't stay in one house, you know. There were nights I slept in the car."

Unlike his classmates in Duval County, Brown wore shoes handed down from an older brother. He washed his clothes in



STAFF PHOTO BY DON COBLE

SEE DWIGHT, 11

Despite his challenging past, you won't find Dwight Brown without a smile at Clay High.



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'Pushing through' Middleburg's Martin survives young betrayal to be empowered to succeed

By Don Coble
School News

MIDDLEBURG – Aspyn Martin's story is difficult to hear, but the Middleburg High senior said telling is empowering.

She was assaulted by her stepfather when she was 11, and she had his baby when she was 12. Then she bounced between more than a dozen foster homes before finally finding a loving family three years ago.

She is also the Student Council's President and the Senior Board's Treasurer. She's about to graduate from high school and three classes away from earning her Associate of Arts degree.

Martin won't hide from her past. Se-

crets have been replaced by resolve.

"Having a child when you're 12, of course, sends up a million red flags," she said. "Going into my ninth-grade year, I was in foster care – in foster care trying to raise a child. It was hard because I was a child trying to raise a child, so it wasn't easy to stay on my academics."

Aspyn has disdain for many in the foster care system. She said older children often are considered housekeepers and babysitters, not family members. Betrayed by someone in her original family, she struggled to find a family who accepted her as their own.

"It was terrible," she said. "When I was removed (by the state) from my home, my daughter was old enough to know I



STAFF PHOTO BY DON COBLE

Broncos senior Aspyn Martin plans to study business marketing after she graduates from Middleburg High.

was her mom. I knew I couldn't return, so I bounced from home to home."

And yet, she not only survived, she flourished.

"I honestly wouldn't change it for the world," Aspyn said. "Even though I went through these difficult times, I would just push through. I mean, honestly, your struggles don't define who you are. Your challenges don't define who you are."

Martin wants to earn a degree in business marketing. She already works as a student manager intern for Vystar at the school.

"I already have it in with Vystar, so I guess it's my biggest motive for continuing through and not just giving up," she said. "I want to be the person to share my story and say it's OK. You have to learn it's not your fault, first off. And second off, you can come out above it and push through and just do what's best for you."

On Oct. 2, 2019, a jury found him guilty,

but the case was closed a month later. The case is now listed as "inactive."

"I ended up going to trial against him," Aspyn said. "I just wanted to make sure I was all done with him. Back then, I thought it was my fault, not my family's fault, but my fault."

She found solace in her schoolwork and social activities at the school.

"You name just about any club, and I'm in it," she said. "Academics became my main focus because I learned to put my heart into anything I do."

Her daughter is now in pre-kindergarten. Both mom and child now embrace a happy future.

"Sadly, there is a lot of bad people in society," Aspyn said, "but there's a tone of good people out there if you search for it. Being happy is a decision, and I've decided to be happy."


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Oakleaf's Tallant finds comfort in Future Farmers of America

By Don Coble
School News

OAKLEAF – Kayla Tallant's sanctuary is a thickly-woven cotton and embroidered jacket.

So young to be subjected to so much confusion and grief, the energetic Oakleaf High senior has bounced from home to home, only to find solace in her blue Future Farmers of America jacket.

"The barn has been my safe place that blue corduroy jacket for FFA feels like home," she said.

Her parents were so strung out on drugs and alcohol, she was adopted by her grandparents when she was 2. They lived on a 25-acre farm in Suwannee County. In 2008, her grandmother – actually, Kyla called her "mother" – was diagnosed with scleroderma. Soon after that, her grandfather – "Papa" – was diagnosed with Parkinson's-Plus.

"I didn't really have parental support from the start," she said. "After I was born, I was blessed enough to have my grandparents. They took me in, and they made sure everything was great. They took care of me from Day 1."

Now it was her turn to take care of them. Although she was only in middle school, Kayla became their caregiver.

The farm was too big and too demanding for an aging couple and a child, so they moved in with their son in Palm Bay. Kayla was in seventh grade, and she flourished. She played sports, was a cheerleader and a member of the band. Life was good.

Then her grandfather died. At the same time, her grandmother's health deteriorated, especially after she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Her uncle moved the family to Middleburg.

"My uncle had never been married; he never had kids," Kayla said. "He totally turned his life around to take care of me. He pretty much was my guardian."

She reconnected with her "biological" father, but he suffered brain damage and was partially paralyzed in a car crash. She never rekindled her relationship with her mother.

"I've matured at a young age and learned how to take care of myself. But I have had with my parents. I have good examples of what not to be in life," she said. "I've always had big goals. I would definitely have to say if it wasn't for my grandparents, I would not be here today. I would not be the person that I am today," Kayla said. "They've shaped me. They've molded me. They've truly made me who I am. They told me I could do anything I put my mind to."

With so many changes in her life, Kayla learned to be self-supportive. Suddenly, she was in charge of caring for her grandmother and father.

Although she needed the support of others, she knew to take care of herself. That helped her adjust when she moved out and was on her own during her junior year at Oakleaf.

Emotionally and physically drained, Kayla was hospitalized because she didn't have a way to deal with her grief. She found peace in a unique place.

"When I was 12, I wanted to be a pediatrician for infectious disease, but when I got to Oakleaf, I was thrown into an ag class," she said. "I got super involved in FFA, I got a cow that I raised from three weeks old up until my senior year. FFA has been the place that feels like home to me."

Kayla wants to be selected for a state-wide position in FFA after she graduates next month. "I've switched over from wanting to be a doctor to now I want to teach agriculture," Kayla said. "Agriculture truly, the FFA organization as a whole, has truly changed my life for the better."

She is the reigning Miss Agriculture USA for Clay County and the Clay County Cattleman's Sweetheart. She's an officer in



Kayla Tallant finds sanctuary in her Future Farmers of America jacket.

the National Technical Honor Society and a National Science Honor Society member.

And she will graduate with a 3.5-grade point average.

"I haven't been dealt the best hand of cards, but it really matters how you play them," she said.

Ulsch climbs from hole of doubt, despair, emotional pain to graduate with honors

By Don Coble
School News

KEYSTONE HEIGHTS – Sam Ulsch thinks about his parents every day. We wonder if they'd be proud of his accomplishments in sports and the classroom. He questions whether they found a way to beat their demons.

So many questions. So few answers.

"I wish they could see how things turned out," he said. "They missed a lot."

Sam's father lost his job as a youth pastor. He didn't last long as an insurance salesman, either. That's when both of his parents started down a dark road of substance abuse.

"It got tough early on for my parents," Sam said. "I'm the oldest with five brothers. Because of everything they had to deal with, (my parents) didn't make the best decisions. They turned to substance abuse. They made it very difficult for my brothers to be successful."

Then came the call on Sept. 18, 2018. His parents died instantly in a remote area of Bryceville in Nassau County.

Now a senior at Keystone Heights High, Ulsch will celebrate a rebirth when he gets his diploma. His emotional collapse started before his parents, Phillip and Holly Ulsch, were killed after a logging truck turned in front of them, and they ran into the back of it.

"When I got the news, I bottled up," Sam said. "I knew my brothers needed me, but the year that happened, I quit all sports. I didn't try in school. I didn't put forth much effort."

Things changed the moment the Indians hired Steve Reynolds as its defensive coordinator. He was promoted to head coach three months ago.

"I was mourning my parents' loss, but I had to find a way to get around that." I started to move along. I got back into sports. In my sophomore year, I started taking school serious. I took (advanced placement) classes. I got my stuff straight. I give all the glory to God, but I wouldn't be where I am today without the people around me."

– Sam Ulsch

"Well, myself and coach (Lantz) Lowery, his weightlifting coach, we spent a lot of time with Sam," Reynolds said. "And look, Sam makes it easy to want to spend time with because he's a great kid. He does all the right things. He takes time. And, you know, he puts effort into everything he does. He's an impressive kid. A person like that has something so drastic happened to them, we just wanted to do everything we can."

Sam returned to football and weightlifting as a sophomore. He was a three-year starter in football and a member of two state-winning weightlifting teams.

He also is the Senior Class Secretary and close to earning his Associate's degree from Santa Fe College in the dual-enrollment program.

"I was mourning my parents' loss, but I had to find a way to get around that," Sam said. "I started to move along. I got back into sports. In my sophomore year, I started taking school serious. I took (advanced placement) classes. I got my stuff straight."

"I give all the glory to God, but I wouldn't be where I am today without the people around me."

"I'm going to miss him terribly when he graduates," Reynolds said.

Reynolds said he plans to stay at the school as long as there's a Ulsch boy in



STAFF PHOTO BY DON COBLE

Football coach Steve Reynolds helped Sam Ulsch rebound from the despair following his parent's death by helping him find solace in in the school's athletics programs.

the pipeline. Ben Ulsch will be a senior next year. Other brothers are currently in seventh grade and ninth grade.

"I'll be coaching an Ulsch until I retire," Reynolds said. "There's three more here and there's two more across the street (at Keystone Heights Elementary).

"I fully anticipate coaching up those kids until I retire."

"My brothers are doing well," Sam said. "They are my best friends."

And like their big brother, they have questions, too.

Refusing to give up



Jakayleia Bauer loves being with her twin daughters and her boyfriend. The senior will graduate from Clay Visual Academy after her girls spent a month in NICU in October.

Bauer defies challenges to earn her degree early

By Don Coble
School News

KEYSTONE HEIGHTS – Jakayleia Bauer thought about giving up many times in the last seven months. Nobody would blame her, either, since she was rearing twin daughters and trying to finish her senior year of high school.

But she didn't quit. In fact, she completed her classwork ahead of schedule and will graduate later this month from Clay Virtual Academy with a 3.37-grade point average.

Although she had plenty of support, Jakayleia had to do most of the hard work herself. The sense of achievement that will come with her diploma has allowed her to think about a successful future.

"A year ago, I really didn't have a plan, but I think I want to go back to school," she said. "I think I might want to do cosmetology. And I'd like to be married."

Her daughters are six months old. Getting them both to sleep at the same time wasn't easy. And when they did nod off, she dug into her schoolwork.

"It was hard at first, but I got some help

with the babies," she said. "I thought about giving up multiple times, but I just didn't want to waste all that time."

As if being a teenage mother wasn't complicated enough, her daughters had to be delivered by Cesarean.

"There was a risk that one of them wasn't going to make it if they didn't take them out when they did," Jakayleia said.

"They had to stay in the NICU (neonatal intensive care unit) for almost a month. This was a high-risk pregnancy because of

the type of twins that I had."

The father is in the Navy. Jakayleia said he's been a positive influence.

"He's been very huge help to me, one of the main people that was pushing me to finish school," she said.

Her daughters and family also kept Jakayleia motivated.

"I've been through a lot," she said, "but I got a lot of help. My babies are doing well, too. It hasn't been easy, but I couldn't give up."

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Definition of sanity

Orange Park's Green gets support to pass English ACT on sixth try

By Don Coble
School News

ORANGE PARK – The English portion of the American College Test (ACT) was particularly difficult for Orange Park High's Copeland Green.

The other parts of the standardized test – math, reading and science – were a snap, but Green's Attention Deficit Disorder created a unique challenge for the senior.

"I had a problem because of the way the test was formatted," he said. "I couldn't seem to pass it. I just didn't get it. The more I tried, the harder it got."

The disorder makes it difficult to focus and prioritize a task. Copeland was easily distracted and his attention often wandered away from the test.

"I have ADD, so I need more time for assignments to be able to do something," he said.

Green said he started to believe he'd fail every time he took the test. No matter how many approaches he tried, nothing worked.

"I feel like I had a lot of anxiety," he said. "I was having trouble with it at the time. All of these tests just got me worked up. And it just kind of built up on me. It was hard to believe in myself anymore. I figured it was too hard for me. But I kept working at it. I tried to fight through it."

He kept taking the test. And again. And

"I feel like I had a lot of anxiety. I was having trouble with it at the time. All of these tests just got me worked up. And it just kind of built up on me. It was hard to believe in myself anymore. I figured it was too hard for me. But I kept working at it. I tried to fight through it."

– Copeland Green

again. And again. And again.

"My teachers helped me through it all and I was finally able to get it," Copeland said. "I failed it five times in total. I was close to quitting, but my teachers kept working with me."

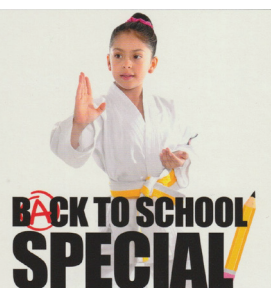
"I was really close to quitting. Every time I took the test, I expected it to go bad." A passing grade on the English portion is a 20. Green scored a 22.

"I've had to pay for a lot, and I've failed a lot," he said. "I finally was able to pass it. The extra time that I got is what go me to pass the test."

Copeland will graduate on May 19 with the rest of his Raiders classmates. Oddly enough, he's not sure he wants to attend college after completing high school. But if he does, he will have ACT scores to make it possible.



Copeland Green found the English portion of the ACT particularly difficult. With the help of teachers and perseverance he was able to pass the English portion.



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Mother knows best

Bannerman's Ligon turns bad grades into bright future



"I'm at the point now where I know I can do it. I just have to put the work in, focus and be motivated because I've seen the results."

– Payton Ligon

get your GED if you don't get a high school diploma. "But she told me that feeling you get when you get your high school diploma, and you know that you did this yourself because it shows on a piece of paper that I put in the work. I get a reward and my diploma, and she said that can lead to much greater things in life."

Ligon got the support she needed at Bannerman Learning Center. She could do a lot of her classwork online, which meant she could concentrate on each subject until she finished an assignment.

"It was easier to do it online because I could take my time," she said. "I didn't have to switch between classes and remember different things for different subjects."

She said she didn't struggle with math and science projects, but English classes were challenging. Being able to work online helped her write essays and complete reading assignments.

Payton said the classwork still was challenging, but she didn't back off. She pushed even harder, and now she is one exam away from joining the rest of the senior class during graduation ceremonies.

"I had the motivation to focus on it."

After graduation, she hopes to go to college to earn a degree in the medical field.

"I want to become a therapeutic nurse, maybe work in physical therapy," Payton said.

And she is optimistic she will succeed.

"I'm at the point now where I know I can do it," she said. "I just have to put the work in, focus and be motivated because I've seen the results."

Two years ago, Payton Ligon wasn't sure about her future. She knew her grades would make graduation difficult, but she figured a GED would be all right. Her mother's wisdom helped her see a diploma was important.

By Don Coble
School News

GREEN COVE SPRINGS – Two years ago, Payton Ligon wasn't sure about her future. She knew her grades would make gradua-

tion difficult, but she figured a GED would be all right.

Then her mother, Latonya Ligon, changed her life.

"I would say, like two years ago, I had hopes that I would graduate, but my situa-

tion with my grades wasn't looking good. I had worries, for sure," Payton said.

So what changed?

"I made up my mind when I called my mom because she was talking about (my grades)," Payton said. "She said, 'You can

2023 Senior

ST JOHNS CLASSICAL ACADEMY SANA HAMAD

Déjà vu all over again

Despite starting over several times, SJCA's Hamad will graduate on time

By Don Coble
School News

FLEMING ISLAND – Sana Hamad has had to start over several times in her life.

Born in Iraq, she had to learn English when her family moved to Texas when she was 5. Then after moving to Florida two years ago, she had to retake state exams she already passed two years ago.

Equally unsettling was the adjustment from a public school with more than 1,000 students to the quaint confines of St. Johns Classical Academy.

"My high school experience has been very weird," she said. "I went from a school with thousands of people to a school with only 22 seniors."

Standard testing from Texas didn't comply with Florida, Sana said. So state exams taken in 10th grade had to be retaken during her junior and senior years at SJCA.

And she had to do it while working a part-time job.

"COVID didn't help," Sana said. "I had to re-do everything, and working from home because of COVID wasn't easy."

"It took a long time. I had to go to tutoring. I had to take practice tests. I didn't want to quit. I wanted to persevere and go through it. I wanted to finish the year off strong."

– Sana Hamad

Sana works three hours for the YMCA after-school program at the Classical Academy. She got home at 6:30 p.m. and still had hours of studying to catch up.

"I had a hard time with time management," she said. "I had to reorganize myself and do schoolwork. Time management was a struggle for me because I ran off little hours of sleep. I mean, it was just the cycle."

Every single day was just the same thing. So I got tired at moments, but I also had good moments at the same time.

"It took a long time. I had to go to tutoring. I had to take practice tests. I didn't want to quit. I wanted to persevere and go through it. I wanted to finish the year off strong."

Sana will join 21 other senior classmates for the school's graduation program on May 19 at Hibernia Baptist Church on Fleming Island. And she will do it as a newly-naturalized citizen.

"When I came to America, it was 2010, and I knew little to no English at all," she said. "I was a very quiet kid. I didn't even speak Arabic. I was just super shy at home and in school."

"It was a struggle learning a new language and getting along with customs and the culture here. And I also had a hard



After starting over several times during her academic career, Sana Hamad will graduate with her senior class of 22.

time in elementary school, too."

Her parents became U.S. citizens in 2016. Sana was naturalized last August.

Sana said she plans to attend St. Johns River State College next year before transferring to the University of North Florida.

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Dwight

from page 3

the sink or bathtub, and he often wore the same outfit for days at a time.

"I stunk," he said. "I noticed as a young child the differences between me and my other classmates. I knew there was a difference between how they were living and how I was living. I just like kind of thought to myself, I don't want to be stuck in this position. I want to move on past this position that I'm in. I just don't want to be homeless anymore."

Brown eventually moved in with his father and stepmother in Clay County. Suddenly he found stability, and with it came the decision to only surround himself with positive, happy people.

"I just flourished here. I liked the education system," he said. "It was different than Duval County. I had better influences, and I just flourished."

Brown will graduate with honors and a four-year scholarship offer for the University of Florida. He wants to become a lawyer, judge or politician.

"This isn't supposed to be where I am. It's so rare, but I made it," Brown said. "I just tried to stay inspired by my past. I know where I once was. I'm not going back."

Brown said academics and "school spirit" helped drive his success. The more he excelled, the harder he worked.

"I had a great support system and a certain level of spirit to want to push as hard as I did to make myself become who I am," he said.

What Brown became was the school's 2022 Prom King and this year's Homecoming King.

"I've got good friends around me," he said. "I always make sure I have good influences around me – people who also want a future for themselves, because if you don't want a future for yourself, what are you going to do to inspire me?"

Brown's zeal for life defies his past. Instead of finding a place to sleep or where to get his next meal, Brown now worries about future college exams and how far his enthusiasm for success will take him.



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