

KING'S FORK HIGH SCHOOL



King's Fork High School
Valedictorian:
Gabe Jackson

Didn't lose his focus through COVID-19

BY JIMMY LAROUÉ
STAFF WRITER

Note: This is the first in a series of stories on the valedictorians at high schools in Suffolk.

Gabe Jackson didn't try

to become valedictorian, but through his hard work in the classroom and the weighted grade-point-average that comes with taking International Baccalaureate classes, he graduates from King's Fork High School with top honors.

"I got straight A's, and then, because of the straight A's, it just followed suit," said Jackson, who finished with a 4.6 GPA. "It wasn't really the focus. It was just a side-effect."

He said things got easier for him during the coro-

navirus pandemic since he no longer had to get up so early to get to school on time. Instead of getting up at 7 a.m. to leave by 7:30 to get to school by 8, he could get a little extra rest before

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Valedictorian: Learning the language of code

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logging into classes virtually.

“I don’t feel like COVID has really affected me at all,” Jackson said. “I feel like IB got a little more difficult in my second year because I have all these papers due and all that. I feel like I’ve got pretty good time management. I’m not going to sleep in, but I’m going to sleep for as long as I can.”

He said it helped to have a great home environment that allowed him to focus on his academics without pressure — a “wicked smart” dad and a “super supportive” mom.

“My parents never were on my back,” Jackson said. “As long as I’m not failing, they were like, ‘you’re doing good.’”

But Jackson also had an outlet in sports such as swimming, soccer and weight training.

“It pushes me to hang out with people,” said Jackson, a self-professed nerd. “It gets me out of the house.”

Jackson, who plans to study computer science at the University of Virginia, said his dad has been a computer programmer since age 12, which is when it “picked up steam” for him — “he knows everything. He’s got it down.”

“It’s more like a hobby,” Jackson said. “I would say it’s kind of like puzzles. I feel like math comes easy, because I’ve been doing it for a while. I do a lot of 2D, 3D ... It feels like an accomplishment.”

Jackson finds the sub-

Valedictorian: Gabe Jackson

Age: 18

Family: James Jackson, father; Kathleen Jackson, mother; Maggie Jackson, 20, sister; Colin Jackson, 16, brother; Lily Jackson, 11, sister

College: University of Virginia

Major: Computer science

ject challenging yet useful.

“If it’s about theory, then you can apply that theory. I don’t want to do too basic things, but I feel like the stuff that’s more difficult, one, you’re going to get paid more for it. But two, it’s more rewarding. You can build on yourself.”

What he’s learned, he said, has been based

on self-interest and was informal in nature. For instance, he can write code, but he professes not to understand everything about it. He takes what he does know and uses that to grow.

“Once you understand the most basic form of a language,” Jackson said, “then you can extrapolate that to any other language.”

Lakeland valedictorian ‘just had to persevere’

BY JIMMY LAROUÉ
STAFF WRITER

Joshua Aldridge already had experience with distance learning when COVID-19 closed schools about 15 months ago.

Having taken dual enrollment classes at both Paul D. Camp Community College and Tidewater Community College, Aldridge, 18, was already familiar with Canvas, the online platform Suffolk Public Schools chose, since he had used it in those places.

It was a change for Lakeland High School class of 2021 valedictorian, but not one he couldn't handle. But by being a part of the school's Project Lead the Way

biomedical program, he had to partner on a yearlong capstone project, studying the effects on global warming on aquatic life — doing so while studying at home.

In the spring when students had the option to attend school in person, Aldridge chose to stay virtual, since the COVID-19 vaccine was not available to teens at that time.

“It was different, a bit challenging, but it was possible,” Aldridge said. “It was accomplishable. ... It was a bit more isolating because I had a partner with it and we had to discuss it over the phone rather than we would in class every single day for biomed.”

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Lakeland High School
Valedictorian:
Joshua Aldridge

Valedictorian: Plans to major in biology at UNC—Chapel Hill

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His interest in the biomedical program at Lakeland dates back to about fifth grade, when he was interested in becoming a dentist. After attending middle school at John Yeates, he opted to make the 20- to 25-minute one-way trip from his home to get to school, and his career choice has evolved to wanting to become an oral maxillofacial surgeon.

Science has always been his favorite subject, and he's had a longstanding interest in learning about the body, the brain

and how it all connects together.

Aldridge was also able to expand his social circle, keeping his friends from his neighborhood while making new ones at Lakeland.

After earning a general education certificate at Camp and an associate degree from TCC, Aldridge plans to attend the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and major in biology and plans to go to dental school.

Besides academics, Aldridge also reached

Eagle Scout in the Boy Scouts, and was part of Lakeland's BioSTEM and Robotics clubs.

He credited Lakeland's staff, along with his friends, peers and family with helping him throughout. Aldridge said his mom, Nincy Accelin-Aldridge, drove him to do well, and his dad, Brian Aldridge, though he had to work a lot, helped provide him with slides he needed for his studies. He also noted aunts who worked as nurses who helped him, too.

Aldridge said he feels fortunate and appreciative to have had a more normal graduation and in his valedictory address, shared that it takes patience, perseverance and hard work to accomplish goals.

"I'm going to think about all the hard work that I actually had to do," Aldridge said. "At that time, I was struggling with how I was going to do this, study for all these tests, taking AP classes, dual credit. But in the end it was accomplishable, because here I am now.

Valedictorian: Joshua Aldridge

Age: 18

Family: Brian Aldridge, father; Nincy Accelin-Aldridge, mother; Jeremiah Aldridge, brother; Jacob Aldridge, brother

College: University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill

Major: Biology

I just had to persevere through it. I studied hard with the help of my peers, my friends and my teachers."



Nansemond River High School
Valedictorian:
Alyssa Cadua

Building a future in engineering

BY JIMMY LAROUÉ
STAFF WRITER

Note: This is the third in a series of stories on the valedictorians at high schools in Suffolk.

Alyssa Cadua gave her par-

ents' boasting a big boost by earning valedictorian status at Nansemond River High School.

Earning a 4.55-grade point average in the school's Project Lead the Way engineering program, Cadua did plenty over her four years of

high school to boast about.

"This sounds silly, but being able to give my parents something to brag about and post it on Facebook is just a good feeling to know that they have that," Cadua said.

But despite her giving them that, they never pressured her

to achieve that status.

"I think what makes it more special is that my parents didn't pressure me at all," Cadua said, "because they see me stressing and they're like, 'Alyssa, you know it's OK if

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Valedictorian: Inspired by sister overcoming health challenges

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things don't turn out the way you're hoping they do.' But that makes you almost want it more that they don't pressure me."

Her parents, Edwin and Susie, have been her biggest cheerleaders and did the little things that allowed Cadua to get a few extra minutes of rest.

For instance, because Cadua had to work throughout high school, her mom would have dinner ready for her when she would come home from a late shift so she could get to bed a little earlier, or focus on any homework. Her mom also helped with other things around the house so Cadua wouldn't have to worry about it.

"I noticed that she would try to help me in any way possible. So I really, really appreciated that."

Cadua described the last 15 months, and certainly all of her senior year, as weird. She wasn't sure if she could do all of her classes on the computer.

"I was freaking out," Cadua said. "I did not think I could keep this up for the whole year. I was definitely planning on going hybrid. But then after a month or so, I adjusted to it. I adjusted, my friends adjusted and we leaned on each other."

She had trouble keeping up with due dates, but her friends in the engineering program at Nansemond River helped her. Ultimately, she chose to stay in virtual learning to avoid having to adapt again.

"I didn't want to have to go through another adjustment period," Cadua said, "especially since it was so late in the year, I had already settled in."

Her friends also helped

'We're never just celebrating what we used to be running towards. I wrote about that because that's how I felt about getting valedictorian. ... It's always something, instead of just enjoying it.'

Alyssa Cadua
NANSEMOND RIVER HIGH SCHOOL
VALEDICTORIAN

Cadua keep up her confidence and were patient with her, especially during times when she hadn't done as well as she would have liked.

As for other events or things she would have been able to do in a more normal, non-coronavirus pandemic senior year, she has little regrets.

"I'm not sad," Cadua said. "I don't feel like I've missed out on anything. When I'm going through pictures and I see a picture of me at a football game, in the River Rowdies crowd, it's kind of like an 'Aww, I'll never have that again,' kind of a feeling.

"But overall, I'm OK with how this year was, and I'm just so grateful with how this year was, and I'm just so, so grateful I get a graduation. That was the biggest thing for me. I think if we didn't get a graduation, my answer would definitely be different. ... Everything else, there'll be other things in life, like college football games, and I'll have formal dances to go to in the future. I'm OK with it."

Cadua at one time wanted to be an aerospace engineer, but after

drifting away to that, became more interested in biomedical engineering. She's focusing more on the technology side of the medical field and hopes to work in a hospital alongside doctors trying to develop artificial organs.

She's been inspired by her older sister, Danielle, who was born with a hole in her heart.

"She's totally fine, but I've always thought it was interesting, so that pushed me toward it."

With her sister going into the medical field, and her mom, Susie, already there, they've always talked about it.

"I remember, even though I was really young, I had memories of waiting for her in the hospital," Cadua said. "And I think it'd be really cool to help people who were like my sister."

She is, however, open to other kinds of engineering.

"I definitely think, for sure, I'm going to stay in engineering," Cadua said. "I just want to build things."

Besides school, Cadua played a lot of field hockey, especially for her club team, but when that ended,

she got into baking. When her church, Community Church, reopened, she began attending there a lot more. She said it was a good outlet to take a break from school and work, and "just breathe out a little bit and see a bigger picture."

"I relied on that," Cadua said. "It was a nice community in a time where there wasn't any other kind of gathering, other than church."

Her valedictorian speech focused on living in the moment. Its genesis came from her church group in which discussion centered on how people always have some goals they run toward, and then when they reach that goal, they move onto the next goal without celebrating the achievement.

"We're never just celebrating what we used to be running towards," Cadua said. "I wrote about that because that's how I felt about getting valedictorian. I found out I was valedictorian a few months ago and then I was like, 'Cool, that's awesome.' And then I started freaking out over scholarships, and trying to get scholarships, and then once I found out I got a scholarship, I started freaking out about getting furniture. It's always something, instead of just enjoying it."

Looking back at high school, Cadua said she would tell herself that no matter what, things will be OK.

"The freshman me was stressed so much over every little detail," Cadua said. "And in the end, that one test that you didn't do so well on, that one game that you played so bad in, it's OK. In the grand scheme of things, it's OK."

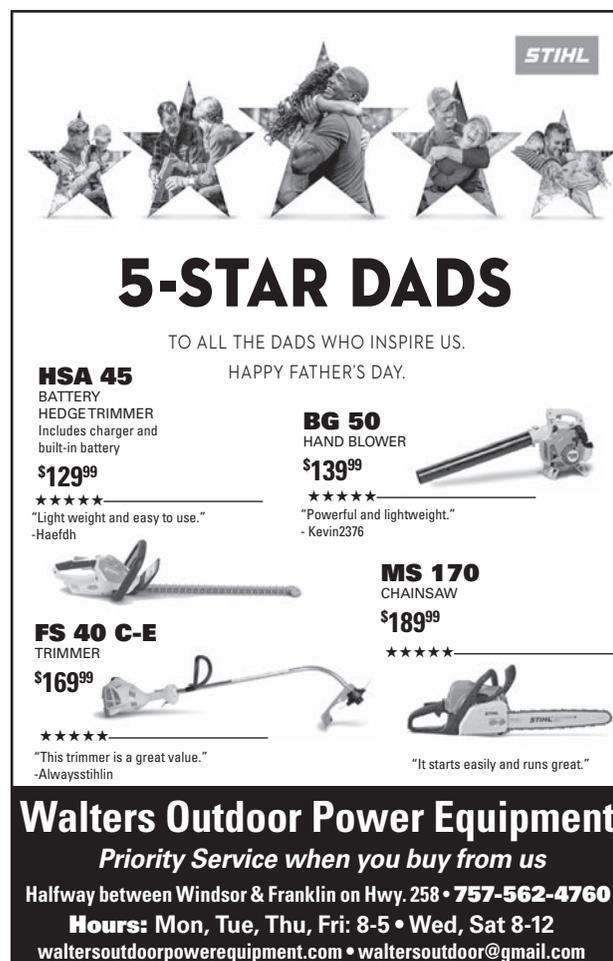
Valedictorian: Alyssa Cadua

Age: 18

Family: Edwin Cadua, father; Susie Cadua, mother; A.J. Cadua, brother, 29; Danielle Cadua, sister, 20

College: Virginia Commonwealth University

Major: Biomedical engineering



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Nansemond-Suffolk Academy
Valedictorian:
Arya Barot

Achievements due to 'hard work and God's grace'

BY JIMMY LAROUÉ
STAFF WRITER

Editor's Note: This is the fourth in the Suffolk News-Herald's annual series of stories on the valedictorians at Suffolk's five high schools.

Arya Barot had always had the goal, and the dream, of becoming valedictorian, but it wasn't something he expected, or something expected of him.

Taking a challenging academic course load at Nansemond-Suffolk

Academy, Barot made that a reality and sustained his efforts even while attending classes virtually. And he attributes his achievement as valedictorian to two things.

"Hard work and God's grace," Barot said. "I can't take credit for it. I've worked

hard and my family has instilled values in me, but also, my belief that whatever success or achievements I get are all God's grace."

As for many, COVID-19 changed school and interac-

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Valedictorian: Multi-sport athlete

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tions with people. Barot said a positive effect is that it has allowed him to grow closer to his family, including grandparents who live in the same neighborhood.

“We’ve taken it very seriously, because I live in a multigenerational family,” Barot said. “I’m very close to my grandparents. In fact, we do family prayers together each evening.”

That’s why Barot said he and his family have taken every precaution, and it’s why he remained a virtual student even as many of his peers returned to school.

As for the online coursework, Barot, who had attended NSA since the third grade, said he didn’t have difficulty adapting to it, and with family around, he didn’t feel isolated.

“I’ve always worked hard and I’ve always done my best,” Barot said, “so during the pandemic, I had to adjust what I was doing, but I never had the feeling that it would come in the way of my goals.”

But throughout his time at NSA, Barot challenged himself, completing 11 Advanced Placement exams along with every honors or higher-level courses that he could take in each subject, especially in math and science. He said doing this taught him how to better manage his

time.

“It was a challenge, but I enjoy learning, and I enjoy learning how to learn,” Barot said.

Though he plans to major in computer science at the University of Virginia, he also has a budding interest in entrepreneurship and business.

“I’ve yet to find what I truly love, and when I find what I truly love, I’ll have the background and skills to pursue it,” Barot said.

Prior to the pandemic, Barot was a multi-sport athlete at NSA, having competed in cross country, swimming, indoor track and tennis. During the pandemic, since he wasn’t competing at school, he kept in shape by running with his brother.

For his valedictorian speech, he said he did not feel qualified to offer advice to anyone, but that he would highlight things important to him — empathy and gratitude. Those are attributes he said his parents raised him with.

“Everything that I do, and all of my hard work, I always try to maintain humility,” Barot said, “and I always try to remind myself to stay grateful to everyone who had a part in that, especially my family, parents and in school, my teachers, counselors, people

Valedictorian: Arya Barot

Age: 17

Family: Preshita Barot, mother; Dimi Barot, father; Adi Barot, 15, brother

College: University of Virginia

Major: Computer science and business

who gave me guidance.”

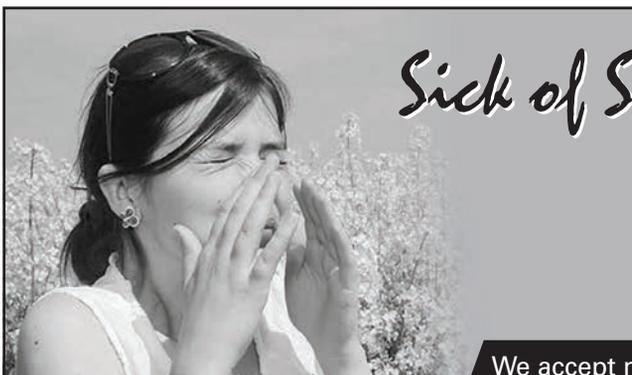
He said his faith has always been an integral part of who he is and a big part of his life.

“In the past year, I’ve learned to be more grateful and I’ve learned to appreciate what I have more, and who I have more,” Barot said. “There are people who are worrying about making ends meet, and feeding their families and paying rent,

and luckily, we’ve been very blessed.”

Looking back at his time at NSA, Barot said he’s enjoyed his experience, making close friendships and finding mentors to guide him.

“When I look back,” Barot said, “I will remember how much I grew from the time I entered NSA to now, my graduation.”



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Suffolk Christian Academy
Valedictorian:
MaryDouglas
Johnson

SCA valedictorian found 'the right balance'

BY JIMMY LAROUÉ
STAFF WRITER

MaryDouglas Johnson wouldn't trade her experience at Suffolk Christian Academy for anything, and credits the school's staff, and her family, for helping her on her path

not just with academics, but with life.

Johnson, who earned valedictorian status for SCA's class of 2021, was able to balance her classes while playing basketball and growing in her faith.

"I've loved being here the

whole time," Johnson said. "It's made it a lot easier. You don't have to transfer your records, you don't have to transfer schools, you don't have to lose friends, especially — I've made a lot of really good friends here. I'd call them family, especially with

the teachers and staff here."

During this past school year, she did not go back to school in person until late last fall for health reasons — "that was odd," she said. She started by coming in for her gov-

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Valedictorian: Headed to Tech

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ernment class to participate in discussions. After that, she phased herself into classes, and once she completed a quarantine period following Christmas break, she went back to school in person.

In particular, Johnson credits SCA Headmaster Tamra VanDorn, who she has known since a little girl, with mentoring her.

“She’s really been like a guide to me, getting me through, not only academically, but spiritually as well, helping me keep on track with both of those and keep them steady and even them out so I’m not focused on academics more, not focused on spiritual more. You have to have the right balance.”

Her family, too, helped her stay motivated to do her best.

“Honestly, I didn’t think I would get valedictorian,” Johnson said. “Obviously I tried, and obviously, I worked and did put my best toward my schooling, but at one point this year, I was like, ‘Do I really want valedictorian? Do I really want to give the speech? Do I really want even salutatorian to give a speech?’

“And then I weighed the pros and cons. Yeah, you have to give a speech, but you get that on your resume, you get that on your academic records. It’s an accomplishment, and I was like, I want to push for it. And my family really did help me with that, especially my mom.”

Her mom, April Johnson, pushed her to play sports and to do her best in school.

“She (kept) me motivated to get everything done on time, as well, because I’m one to procrastinate until the very last minute,” MaryDouglas Johnson said, “and either not finish it or not doing it to the best of my ability.”

With all she’s accomplished, she said if she could do it over again, she would do more in her free time earlier in high school

because you may not have that later on.

Academically, Johnson took dual enrollment classes at Paul D. Camp Community College to help her get ahead when she goes to Virginia Tech to study engineering. While she will be thankful for some family help with financial aid, she is looking to work this summer and pair that with scholarships she has received.

The SCA valedictorian also noted the help she received from her basketball coach, Kristy Cornette.

“She’s really helped me a lot athletically, because at one point, I was really on the fence about playing basketball,” Johnson said, “even before COVID. I was like, there’s school, ... it’s my junior year and there’s a lot going on. And she was like, ‘If it’s too

much, quit, but I’d like for you to try.’ And my mom said the same thing.”

She tried, loved it and kept with it.

“It motivated me to have more time management,” Johnson said.

And that came in handy when putting together college applications, securing financial aid, looking for a job and also balancing her faith and family, and finding a little alone time on top of her academic load.

As a result, it fills her with gratitude for the support she’s received, doing it all in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

And without that support?

“I don’t think I’d be sitting here, I don’t think I’d have been valedictorian,” Johnson said. “I don’t think I’d have been able to accomplish what I got.”

Valedictorian: MaryDouglas Johnson

Age: 18

Family: April Johnson, mother; Scott Johnson, father; Victoria Johnson, 15, sister

College: Virginia Tech

Major: Engineering

