

Guided by faith, Rockett achieves SCA milestone

BY JAMES W. ROBINSON
STAFF WRITER

Taylor Rockett marked a milestone for Suffolk Christian Academy and herself in May as the school's first African-American female valedictorian.

Graduating at the top of the class is a monumental achievement that Rockett looked back on saying for her it was "quite the journey."

"I struggled at the very beginning of elementary school, which led me to have tutoring every day from kindergarten until fifth grade. I have spent countless nights where I stayed up until 3 a.m. to make sure I did all of my assignments thoroughly," she said. "For me, excelling in school was the way for me to get into my dream college."

Rockett said school provided a way for her to stay out of trouble and not become the stereotypical teenager.

"By becoming valedictorian, I wanted to show my fellow underrepresented communities that everything is possible by being consistent and



SUBMITTED PHOTO

As valedictorian at Suffolk Christian Academy, Taylor Rockett wants to show those in underrepresented communities that everything is possible by being consistent and working hard.

Valedictorian: Rockett eyeing neurosurgeon career

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hardworking no matter what the odds are against you,” Rockett said.

She reflected on making the valedictorian address at her May 27 graduation, noting that it was an emotionally filled day.

“It was nerve-wracking, to know the day that I had been looking forward to the past 13 years was finally here,” Rockett said. “For my whole senior year, all I could think about was writing the important speech that was a summed-up snapshot of what my life has been like for the past 18 years.”

She noted that she decided to write her speech three days before graduation, then practicing in the remaining time leading up to the big day.

Even before it was time for her to step on stage, Rockett recalls she was “anxious and had butterflies.” Plus, she said speaking in front of her family who attended from near and far to support her didn’t make things easier.

“It made me feel even more nervous, especially from practicing with

nobody in the audience to a packed audience filled with everyone’s families, friends and faculty. Presenting the valedictorian address was not only a final goodbye to the school that I attended for the past 13 years,” Rockett said. “This address was a thank you to my family, teachers and administrative staff who helped and shaped me into the amazing person I am today.”

When she was finishing her graduation address, she said she had to remind everyone graduation is the closing of a chapter and an opening to a new one in life.

“While being sad, I had to remind myself that it was not a sad time, but a joyous occasion,” she said. “I wish I had not rushed graduation to come so soon as I once did in kindergarten.”

Reflecting on becoming SCA’s first African-American female valedictorian, Rockett discussed how she wanted to “break the standard” of what a valedictorian should look or be like. She also stressed the importance of believing in herself as well as her

faith in Christ.

“I have had to believe in myself and know that I had all the knowledge at my fingertips,” she said. “There have been many times I have wanted to give up because it was hard for me. In those times, Jesus never left my side and I prayed every day for Him to help me to gain knowledge and understanding of all subjects. I have had to persevere through all aspects of my life.”

With her faith, Rockett said it was easier knowing that she had Christ rooting for her every step of the way.

“All glory goes to God because I know that I was not able to do all of this by myself,” she said. “I have always walked by faith and not by sight.”

With high school behind her, Rockett now prepares for the next step — attending college at New York University, which she selected for its biology program.

“I am majoring in biology with a pre-medicine track,” Rockett said. “The biology program is the 22nd-best ranked biology major out of all

the colleges in the world. It is also one of the best colleges in the world. I want to be a neurosurgeon in the future and they have a great medical school.”

Rockett said NYU offers opportunities for her career and what she’s interested in. She also praised the opportunities it provides for networking and diversity as well as finding ways to serve her community.

“NYU has great internships and so many networking opportunities available to me by being in the city. The amount of diversity at NYU is an incredible way for me to learn about other cultures and learn about others’ perspectives and beliefs,” she said. “I will also be a part of the Honors Scholars Program. Which is going to help me serve the new community that I am joining and find solutions to better improve the world and to help others around me.”

Rockett shared her aspirations and goals for the future, which includes taking the Medical College Admission Test for med-

ical school and earning her undergraduate biology degree.

Following this, she plans to attend the NYU Grossman School of Medicine to study in its neurosurgery program.

Despite the long journey ahead, Rockett believes that she is ready for the path she’s taking with the strength of God by her side.

“I am more than capable and ready to put in all of the work and dedication it takes to become a surgeon,” she said.

Her goals include becoming one of New York City’s most successful neurosurgeons, providing her patients with the relief they need and forming a nonprofit organization that offers the option of free surgeries no matter what they may need to be done. Additionally, she said she will continue to support her family in all aspects of life.

“My main goal is to continue serving God in all stages of my life by fulfilling His purpose and the will that He has for my life,” Rockett said.

Hartgerink looks toward a career in environment law

BY JAMES W. ROBINSON
STAFF WRITER

Skylar Hartgerink is celebrating her hard work after graduating as valedictorian in Nansemond-Suffolk Academy's class of 2023.

As she begins her life journey, Hartgerink took time to reflect on this recognition and how the achievement came about through hard work and time management.

"As a student athlete, I had to learn to use spare moments throughout the day to study to ensure I knew the material," she said. "I always put 100% effort into every assignment, no matter how small, and I think this dedication is what made me so successful."

Hartgerink recalled how she was "overwhelmed by anxiety" and how huge the task of delivering the valedictorian address on graduation night appeared for her. However, once she spoke, she said all her nervousness went away.

"I was honored to have been chosen to impart a final



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Skylar Hartgerink was named Nansemond-Suffolk Academy's class of 2023 valedictorian. She plans to attend the College of William and Mary to double major in history and environmental science.

Valedictorian: To attend William and Mary

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message to my classmates as we went our separate ways and to end it on a positive note," she said.

As she looks to her future, Hartgerink said she will attend the College of William and Mary, which she chose for its "outstanding" academic reputation and the sense of community she felt during her visit on accepted students day.

"The passion the students have for their interests was evident and I immediately felt at home," she said.

Hartgerink says she plans to double major in history and environmental science to prepare for a career in environmental law.

She said she hopes to learn from other cultures during her time in college.

"I also hope to study abroad as much as possible to learn another language and to witness different cultures and perspectives," Hartgerink said. "I believe this will not only help me in my career, but also in life."

While Hartgerink is not sure how she wants to make an impact in her life yet, she does express the desire to lead by example. "In my experience,

when you strive to always try your best and do the right thing, those around you see that and tend to do the same," she said. "I want to lead my life with

integrity and compassion so that I can be the kind of person people feel comfortable coming to when they have a problem."



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Cacanindin looks to nursing to better others' health

BY JAMES W. ROBINSON
STAFF WRITER

It's a time for celebration for Graduate Zoe Cacanindin is enjoying the celebration that goes with being named 2023 valedictorian at Nansemond River High School.

Cacanindin said despite obtaining this honor in high school, the process towards her achievements started long before then with many years of hard work.

"I have gotten used to preparing in advance for my courses and learning how best to understand the information being taught to me," Cacanindin said. "Classes I've taken from early on helped to strengthen my foundation in core subjects and reinforce my work ethic. It was necessary for me to keep up my high performance throughout my academic years and stay motivated to do the best I could."

She noted that despite the workload and her outside responsibilities becoming overwhelming, she found it "critical" to keep putting in her best effort.

"This included participating in honors, dual enrollment, and AP courses, which helped me to increase my GPA and advance my knowledge in various subjects. Diligently studying for other exams, such as the SAT



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Cacanindin

Valedictorian: Plans to attend UVA

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and ACT, was necessary as well, despite them not counting toward my GPA,” Cacanindin said. “Outside of my schoolwork, I still made sure to be engaged in school in an extracurricular aspect, doing my best to obtain positions that would enable me to effectively lead other students.”

Cacanindin said that time management was imperative for her.

“Understanding how to delegate time to study, complete assignments on time, prepare for presentations, attend club meetings and get ample rest was what made achieving valedictorian at Nansemond River possible,” she said.

On delivering her valedictorian address to her NRHS peers, Cacanindin recalls it was a “nerve-wracking” experience because she didn’t get the chance to practice in front of a large group.

“Funnily enough, though, I was more nervous about leading a line of students and possibly walking in the wrong direction on the way into the stadium,” she said. “Thoughts were running through my mind of if my small jokes would be received well, if I would be able to engage the audience, and if my tassel would fall back to the wrong side of my cap again.”

However, thanks to seeing her friend give his address, who was the school’s salutatorian, she gained confidence. Likewise, Cacanindin noted how she remembered everything she learned in public speaking class to help her give the address.

“I tried to look up at the audience frequently, speak at a decent pace,

and be loud enough for everyone to understand my words. I looked at everyone that I addressed both explicitly and implicitly in my speech, as I truly wanted what I said to reach them,” she reflected. “I let go of doubts about the quality of my written speech and just tried to convey my message to the best of my ability. It was relieving to hear some laughs at my school-related references and applause at the end. Even now, I really do hope that I gave a speech that spoke to everyone, whether it be students, staff, families, or others.”

With high school now behind her, Cacanindin is focusing on her future that will see her attend the University of Virginia. She noted the school’s academic reputation being one of the reasons she chose to attend.

“It is ranked as the top university in Virginia due to its wide range of educational programs and commitment to academic excellence. Specifically, the university has a rewarding BSN program, in which I will get the chance to expose myself to a variety of courses and opportunities, such as interdisciplinary research,” Cacanindin said. “As a student at the school of nursing, I will also be able to gain clinical experience starting my second year. Furthermore, UVA has a strong sense of community, including hundreds of clubs and organizations that allow students to pursue their interests.”

Despite not even starting her first year yet, Cacanindin said she has already made multiple friends who have made her feel welcomed in her new journey. After com-

pleting her four years of high school, she hopes to earn her bachelor of science degree in nursing to become a registered nurse.

“This would allow me to be on the frontlines of patient care and advocate for patients’ needs, thus ensuring quality care. As a nurse, I would also be able to contribute to the advancements and efficiency of healthcare,” she said. “Having a BSN has the potential to open up even more opportunities as well, so I am thinking about advancing my education in medical school. This way, I can further explore different specializations that interest me, such as oncology, cardiology, and neurology. By being a doctor following graduate school and residency, I could provide preventive care to improve the health of my patients.”

Cacanindin said she hopes to continue serving her community beyond high school, even through volunteer work, clinicals or her career.

“I intend to promote and better the health and well-being of others in my life by providing essential services and providing empathetic support,” she said. “Furthermore, I strive to make healthcare more accessible, thus reducing health disparities affecting certain groups. I plan to do this through research, which I will begin soon, and first-hand work in various communities. Overall, my goal is to make a positive impact by bettering the health conditions of those around me, and that starts with expanding my knowledge in the college setting.”

Barnes hopes to make a difference in others' lives

BY JAMES W. ROBINSON
STAFF WRITER

King's Fork High School graduate Sydney Barnes said being named valedictorian was "certainly a surprise," her hard work and commitment to her studies makes it clear she earned the honor.

"While this title wasn't necessarily my ultimate goal, it was definitely a pat on the back, so to speak," Barnes said. "For me, this accolade was never about reaching for numbers or receiving bragging rights. This status is a testament to my all-nighters, failures and fear, just as much as it is to my straight A's and strong work ethic."

Choosing to enter Suffolk Public Schools' International Baccalaureate program, Barnes said high school was no joke for her as she also added athletics, clubs, community service and a part-time job to the mix.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Kings Fork High School valedictorian Sydney Barnes chose the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for her studies, with plans to major in political science and minor in Hispanic studies.

Valedictorian: Wants to aid others

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With her goal of always doing her best, she said that meant taking steps back from things she could once handle.

"I reminded myself that the endless work and sleepless nights would have a payout that I couldn't afford to pass up, especially coming from my background as a Black female student from a single-parent household. Along with studying and working myself to the bone, I came to realize that my strength alone wasn't enough. I depended on my family, friends, and God to push me to keep going when I wanted to give up," Barnes said. "I worked hard to have a chance at a competitive education and to bring my dreams to fruition, and this achievement shows me that I am capable of anything that I dream of."

On the night of graduation and delivering her valedictorian address, Barnes said any nerves on the special day were eased after her Dad yelled "'Go, Sydney B!'" from the stands as she made her way to the podium.

"This speech was such a milestone in my life, for I knew that this was my chance to show others the young woman I had grown into," she said. "Coming to Suffolk, I was known as a timid person, most people simply regarded me as 'the smart girl.' However, I didn't feel any shyness on stage, and I surely felt like more than a smart girl. I felt a liberation that I hadn't experienced before as if this was the final step to say 'I did it.'"

Barnes recalls being "overwhelmed" with tears that day, giving thanks to the special person who guided her through her academic journey and her life — her sister.

"It was then that I realized how far I had truly come in my development," she said. "Following my gratitude, I handed out nuggets of wisdom to my peers, which was the rather easy part. Being the senior class secretary, I worked with the bulk of my classmates, meeting many people that I otherwise would not have gotten the chance to know, and hearing stories that touched my heart."

Barnes said that her message wasn't just her own glory, but the struggles, successes and growth of her peers.

"I felt as if I was back in my school's auditorium, speaking to my classmates about the fun that was to come from our senior year, except now we had finally reached the finish line," she said. "Speaking to them one last time was a blessing that I wish everyone had the chance to experience."

With high school now behind her, Barnes looks to her future this fall at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where she plans to study political science with a minor in Hispanic studies.

She said that UNC was one of the top schools she always wanted to attend due to its humble prestige.

"It is the nation's oldest public school and has been named one of the top schools in the country, while still being inclusive to students of all backgrounds, not just to those who are financially able," she said. "When I visited the school, I didn't feel like an imposter or an outcast, but rather part of a larger community, which is something that sealed the deal for me. Furthermore, I received a full academic scholarship to pursue my undergraduate degree, making

Chapel Hill more accessible to my family. In all, UNC felt like my home away from home, so that's exactly what I made it."

Barnes' career aspirations are to become a U.S. diplomat working in international relations on both domestic and foreign policies. She also hopes to work towards improving civil and human rights issues at home and abroad, hoping to make marginalized groups feel "more welcome in this world."

"Somewhere along the way, I may pursue law, American politics, or wherever my heart pulls me," Barnes said. "Also, I think it would be exciting to capitalize off of one of my favorite hobbies, skating, and open up a skating rink down the line."

She said she hopes to have an effect on others during her lifetime.

"I hope to show others what it is to live to the fullest," Barnes said. "This means having big dreams, being zealous, and taking risks, because how do we know our life is complete if we don't test its boundaries?"

She also hopes to show people that you can do whatever you put your mind to no matter where you come from.

"For me, that may look like leaving small towns to pursue foreign territories or helping others through legislation," Barnes said. "Equally, I could end up changing my field of study to help others from a different standpoint. In the end, I hope that others see that all it takes is passion and patience to bring an idea to life. After all, I was once a little girl full of dreams without much opportunity available and I managed to achieve valedictorian status."

Valedictorian eyes nursing career

BY JAMES W. ROBINSON
STAFF WRITER

Becoming valedictorian was not a goal Lakeland High School graduate Alexis Perkins had in mind.

In an interview this week, Perkins said she believes her focus on working hard and being dedicated to her studies helped her earn this honor.

She said she believes the advanced placement classes she took at LHS helped her grade point average.

“It was a lot of work and a lot of studying,” Perkins said. “I would stay up multiple nights in a row to make sure all my assignments were done.”

She explained that it was draining on her through the school year. But she always tried to keep a positive mindset regardless.

“Looking back, I am extremely proud of all the work I put in to be able to have the recognition of being valedictorian,” Perkins said.

Looking back on graduation day, she recalls being extremely nervous knowing she would be delivering the valedictorian



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Lakeland High School graduate Alexis Perkins believes hard work and dedication helped her become valedictorian. She will begin her new journey at Radford University to work in the nursing field.

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Valedictorian: To attend Radford

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address. But when she got on that stage, Perkins said all her nerves disappeared.

“I was looking into the eyes of my classmates, some of whom I’ve known since elementary school,” she said. “I was easily able to speak clearly and deliver my speech with no nerves involved. I felt very relieved once it was all over though.”

With high school behind her, Perkins said she is now looking ahead to beginning her college studies at Radford University.

“I chose this college because I fell in love with the campus and the environment seemed very positive and uplifting. I felt like a perfect fit at that school,” she said. “I also fell in love with Radford’s nursing program and decided that that’s what I wanted to commit to.”

Perkins’ goal for college is to earn her bachelor’s degree in nursing.

“Once that is acquired I want to either specialize in pediatrics or become an emergency pediatric travel

nurse,” she said. “I do also want to go back to school afterwards to become a nurse practitioner.”

Perkins said she hopes becoming a nurse will allow her to make a difference by saving lives.

“I want to be able to have connections with my patients to give them the best care and to make them feel safe and welcomed,” Perkins expressed. “I hope to also inspire my younger patients to want to make a change in the world as well.”