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Christopher Rivet, Center Academy graduate

Academy celebrates unique class

By **REBECCA BLUE**
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MANATEE — The uniqueness of the Center Academy's 17 graduating seniors came to light Friday evening as each approached the stage of the Congregational United Church of Christ to give testimonials.

They were shy, emotional, comical and to the point — all characteristics that more than 100 audience members captured in the school's class of 2007.

Rep. Doug Holder reminded graduates of the importance of the day and their road ahead.

"Remember it and cherish it," he said. "You will face obstacles in all you do," he said. "As you do, the way you react will define who you are."

Christopher Rivet, who received an award of exemplary achievement, said he thought he knew it all when he began attending the academy. He later learned otherwise.

"I thought I had everything figured out," he said. "As the years progressed, I realized I didn't. Every day at Center Academy, I learned a little more."

Another award recipient, Cynthia Cruse, was acknowledged by teacher Jerome Pascuzzi for having the second-highest grade-point average.

"We always have 10-page papers due at the end of the year," he said. "Usually they come in at 9½ pages, with large fonts, but Cynthia, she wrote 20 pages on Fidel Castro. It was so well-written I read it twice."

Valedictorian Daniel House completed his senior year with a 4.0 grade-point average. Pascuzzi described him as intelligent, with a strong sense of humor.

"He came here pulling pranks, using dirty words and he's leaving a perfect gentleman with a strange sense of humor," Pascuzzi said.

With such a small class for the private charter school, it's a tradition at Center Academy graduations to have each



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Graduates of Center Academy file down the aisle at the Congregational United Church where their ceremony was held.

student give a short testimony, followed by certificates of appreciation distributed to the parents by the student.

Some cried, while others spoke quietly.

Heather Brady explained the toughness of achievement. "Everyone who knows me knows it was a long haul, from beginning to end," she said.

Derek Laguana spoke of his future plans, as a chocolatier.

"I hope everyone from Center Academy will come in my shop one day and remember me from school," he said, before his eyes welled up with tears upon presenting the certificate to his parents.

Sha'Lisa Scott, along with a handful of others, recognized

God's assistance in their accomplishments.

"I want to thank God," he said. "Without him, I wouldn't be here today."

Elijah Watkins looked at his classmates as he said, "Be happy that you actually made it this far."

Others spoke words in fun that their family might rather they didn't share, like Zachary Wolfgram.

"I want to thank my mother for always pushing me, sometimes literally," he said. "My father, for the financial aid."

School board member Barbara Harvey presented Veronica Freeman, her goddaughter, with a commendation from President Bush for

completing more than 10,000 hours of voluntary service since the age of 9.

She also received a \$1,000 scholarship.

"You must dream big," Harvey said. "Anybody can have small dreams."

Rochelle Stokes, director of the Richard Milburn Academy attended to witness two of her former students complete one of life's biggest achievements.

"I've always maintained contact and told them when the big day comes they better bring a personal invite," Stokes said. "It's wonderful to see them graduate."

Graduates: Heather Brady, Teresa Brown, Cynthia Cruse, LaKreasha Cunningham, Lacey Doss, Veronica Freeman, Daniel House, Derek Laguana, Christopher Rivet, Sha'Lisa Scott, Jessica Singleton-Smith, Daniel Spiering, Peter Tamburin, Darin Virginiak, Elijah Watkins, Taj Williams, Zachary Wolfgram

Speakers: State Rep. Doug Holder, R-Sarasota

Shining Moment: Veronica Freeman was presented with a commendation by President Bush and a \$1,000 scholarship for completing more than 10,000 hours of volunteer work.

Best Quote: "It's what you are able to do, not what you know." — Dr. Jacquelin E. Jones

Interesting Sight: An overflow of attendees stood patiently along the back wall during the entire graduation.