

Graduating despite obstacles

By Toya Graham
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FORT MILL TOWNSHIP — A bullet with Ralph Wilson's name on it hit his leg. Some bad decisions followed.

Shannon Williamson, Ebonie Thompson and Sarah Fockler also made some off-the-cuff life decisions. All of them landed at Fort Mill Academy.

All of them overcame their obstacles and are set to graduate from their local high schools Friday. Wilson, Williamson, Thompson and Fockler will be there because each of them regrouped, re-focused and changed their life's game plan for the better by attending Fort Mill Academy.

"They all have worked very hard the last few years," Principal Marty Conner said during a recognition program last Thursday at the academy. "We know that you have a strong foundation to move forward. This school was founded and built just for you. This school is a school of second chances. We wish you all the best."

More than a week before graduation, Wilson was named the academy's student of the year and received the Harold "Mac" and Phoebe McCallum Scholarship. The \$2,500 scholarship made possible by Wayne and Gloria Price as a tribute to Phoebe McCallum, a former Fort Mill teacher, and the late Harold "Mac" McCallum — a former Fort Mill educator turned administrator — for the seeds they planted.

"You might face some bumps, but it's how you apply yourself," Wayne Price said to Wilson and fellow students before awarding the scholarship.

Across the room, a proud elder Wilson beamed because a younger Wilson has big plans. He plans to pursue multiple business degrees by attending Rock Hill's York Technical College and transferring to Winthrop University or

"So I can build a franchise and have something to pass on to my son," Wilson said.

Two years ago, Wilson wasn't planning for his future. Planning is a skill he learned from the academy.

"The teachers give you a little extra push and made sure I stayed on the right track," he said. "It's a lot of people who don't get a second chance. For my teachers to stay on me, it's a good feeling that someone actually cares."

From their second chances, Williamson, Thompson, Fockler and Wilson have grown. Their academics are top notch, school officials said, but their people skills, such as decision making and dissecting actions and relative consequences, are that much better. So too, is their outlook on their future.

Fockler, who spent her 10th grade year at the academy before returning to Nation Ford High, asked to return to the academy.

"I missed the small classroom," she said. "I needed to focus and get my GPA back up."

So, she returned to the academy and regrouped.

"I'm really excited," Fockler said. "I'm ready to go to college."

Williamson and Thompson also are excited about the future.

"It's pretty awesome," Williamson said of graduating. "Moving on to the next stage of my life."

He plans to join the military, he said.

"U.S. Coast Guard," he said. "There's a year waiting period."

Thompson once thought about quitting high school, but reality kicked in, keeping her on course.

"I'm graduating for myself and my family," said Thompson, who considered becoming a journalist or massage therapist.

From Fort Mill Academy, each graduate learned time management, self discipline, respect and endurance. For that, Fockler is

Graduates:

from page 1A

grateful.

"They've definitely helped me," she said. "I'm grateful they allowed me to come back this semester."

Fort Mill Academy also left its mark on Wilson. More than a year ago, he played what could have been his last basketball game.

"I was shot," he said. "In the thigh."

Wilson, then a student at York Comprehensive High School, had just finished playing a basketball game and discovered that the car he rode to the game in was out of

gas. That would turn out to be the least of his worries.

"I was opening the trunk," he said. "I turned around and all I heard was 'pop.' I thought it was a BB gun. It was a small hole. Then I saw all the blood."

Time passed.

At school, Wilson was known for talking too much and got suspended for disrupting class. More trouble followed, he said.

"I got in trouble again for being a class clown," said Wilson, who was sent to York One Academy, where he stayed for half a semester before he got into an argument with the principal.

"They kicked me out," he said.

That brought an epiphany.

"I've got to straighten up so I can graduate," said Wilson, who

noted his grandmother and father wanted to see him walk across the stage.

At Fort Mill Academy, Wilson completed nine classes, but learned so much more.

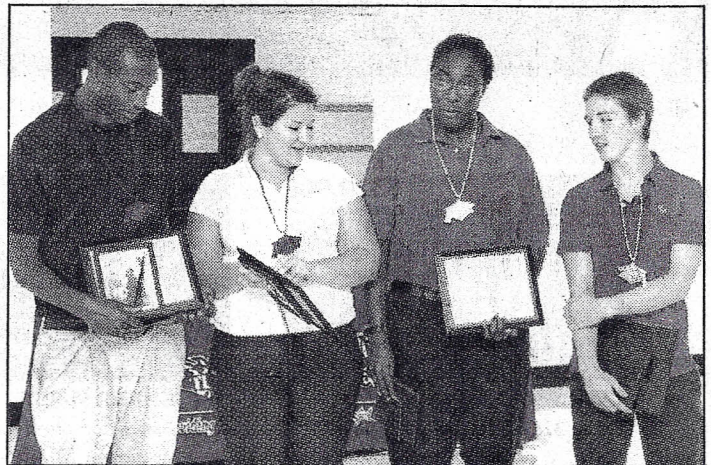
"Mostly how to be respectful and carry myself like an actual man and not running around like a kid," he said.

That means the class clown had to disappear.

"I still like to make people laugh," he said. "I don't just wild out like I used to."

Now, Wilson is humble and proud because he gets to do the graduation walk.

"Grandma and my dad are happy as a jaybird," Wilson said. "All they really wanted me to do is finish high school."



TOYA GRAHAM/FORT MILL TIMES

Fort Mill Academy officials held a recognition program honoring Fort Mill seniors who are slated to graduate this week. Honorees are Ralph Wilson, (left), named student of the year and recipient of the McCallum Scholarship. He is flanked by Sarah Fockler, Ebonie Thompson and Shannon Williamson.