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## Stellar grads of L.A. Unified tell their stories

Some students overcame addiction, financial issues and family problems on their way to becoming standouts.

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Nick Perle did not seem destined to be among a group of honored graduates selected to address the school board. Most of his life, he'd been headed down a different path -- at age 8, he started using drugs to escape the pain of physical abuse and his parents' divorce. He passed out during classes in high school, if he bothered to show up at all.

But there he was last week sitting with the stellar students, marveling at their accomplishments.

Irresistibly, the student narratives began to overshadow official business at the downtown headquarters of the Los Angeles Unified School District. That business was accomplished with the election of Monica Garcia to a second one-year term as board president.

Then the students told their tales.

Deara Okonkwo, 17, disclosed that she was graduating not from high school, but from the University of Southern California with a major in English and a minor in psychology. (She had graduated from Middle College High in South L.A. at 14.) She also teaches dance and manages a dance group. She's headed to graduate school at USC. She intends someday to be the U.S. secretary of education.

Honors student Kelvin Batiste, 18, hadn't been sure he'd be included in graduation ceremonies at Hollywood High.

Family problems had caused him to move to Lancaster for three months of his senior year, separating him from his friends in the Performing Arts Magnet at Hollywood High.

His mother, Veronica Batiste, recounted in an e-mail how she and her son had experienced periods of homelessness as he grew up.

The day before graduation, Kelvin finally got word that his paperwork was in order. An aspiring actor, he plans to start at Cal State Northridge and hopes to transfer to New York University to major in theater.

"I can actually make it out of the ghetto and become something," he told the school board.

San Pedro High grad Gabriela Lopez, 18, proudly noted that she'd never missed or even arrived late for school. Her mother has worked serving food in the school cafeteria for the last decade or so.

Outside school, the honors student started a dance troupe. She also volunteers at a senior center and as a church youth leader. Her goal is to become a heart surgeon or a forensic anthropologist, which, as she explained, is someone who identifies corpses.

Maybe later she'll run for the U.S. Senate. The first in her family to attend college, Lopez will start at El Camino College in Torrance and transfer, she hopes, to USC.

And on it went. About a dozen students spoke. Board President Garcia acknowledged the parents' roles in these success stories. She also called attention to the many students who failed to graduate. More than half drop out in L.A. Unified.

Nick Perle had been headed that way.

He started smoking marijuana daily at age 8, pinching the drugs from his older brother, who, he said, also was self-medicating to cope with an abusive father and other family problems. His father died when Perle was 10. After that, he started popping pills initially prescribed to treat panic attacks. He discovered Xanax, Vicodin, OxyContin and more.

He had no friends, no interests. But he would hang out with rappers, rockers -- it didn't matter: "I was kind of like a chameleon, blending into any environment, whatever I had to be to get loaded," he said. "I didn't know who I was."

In class, he usually did just enough to get by. By his second year of high school, his grade point average was 0.68; his credits left him mired in ninth grade. He got kicked out of one public high school.

Perle said he was physically abused again at a private boarding school in Arizona, but his mother promised him quick passage home if he earned good grades.

He did. And July 2, 2004, was the last day he used drugs.

Perle enrolled at Thoreau High in Woodland Hills, a nontraditional "continuation" school for students who have not thrived elsewhere.

By the time he graduated at 19, his GPA had soared to 3.86. And he was selected to speak before 4,000 people at a June ceremony at Palisades High.

"I'm grateful that I was able to deliver the speech in front of my peers," he said, "because gratitude without expression is like wrapping a gift and not giving it."

He told them that "a boy does what he wants to do, and a man does what he needs to do."

At the school board meeting, he spoke about Thoreau High and its 12-step program for overcoming addiction, about its caring teachers and about students who look out for one another. It was a place where he never saw a fistfight.

He found out that he liked basketball, writing, movies and spending time with family and friends.

And he deepened bonds with his brother, who also achieved sobriety, and his mother.

During the first Thoreau back-to-school night, "I didn't have this feeling of impending doom with my mom walking into the school, because I was doing great," he said. Later on, "people clapped when I got an award, which was completely new to me."

He plans to attend Pierce College and become a counselor who helps addicts.

Amid this collection of superstar students, it was Nick Perle who brought all the adults, transfixed, to their feet, some with tears in their eyes.

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