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Thursday June 21, 2007

## NEWS

## Five students achieve success after rocky road to graduation Young scholars persevere through pain, disabilities

By [George Basler](#) and [Connie McKinney](#)  
*Press & Sun-Bulletin*

This weekend, students across the Southern Tier will graduate from high school. But some had to overcome special challenges.

One battled back from a serious accident, three overcame autism, and one became an advocate for her infant son with cerebral palsy.

Here are their stories:

### REACHING A GOAL

APALACHIN -- Eighteen scars are still visible on Erica Mallery's knees, arms and stomach.

They're reminders of the intense pain, difficult struggle and hard work of the past five months after a Jan. 25 automobile accident put the Apalachin teenager in the intensive care unit at Wilson Regional Medical Center.

"I don't care. They make me look tough," joked the 18-year-old senior at Owego Free Academy. On Saturday, Mallery will reach a goal she set for herself after the accident: To walk across the stage with other students in her graduating class.

She's gone from lying in a bed unable to move, to sitting for seconds at a time, standing for seconds at a time, walking with a walker, walking with a cane and, ultimately, walking on her own.

"She's very inspirational to me," said Judith Hawkins, Mallery's English teacher this year. "I've watched her struggle so much. She's worked so hard."

Mallery was a passenger in a 1998 Nissan that hit a tree and a guardrail. She lists her injuries in a matter-of-fact way: damage to her right eye, a broken right arm, nerve damage in her hand, three broken ribs, a punctured left lung, a lacerated liver, a separated pelvis, two broken femurs, a broken heel bone, a ripped shin, three broken toes and ripped tendons. She also had to have an operation to correct an obstructed bowel that was causing intense vomiting.

While Mallery is matter of fact about listing her injuries, she's not matter of fact about the pain she went through. That's still fresh in her mind. "No one understands how I had to fight," she said.

The lowest point was when she couldn't move her legs. Another low point was the operation to repair her bowel. She remembers screaming in pain. She thought the screams were in her head. Later, she found out



WAYNE HANSEN / Press & Sun-Bulletin

Owego Free Academy student Erica Mallery, who was seriously injured in a car crash, is shown with her mother, Mary. At left is a poster honoring Erica's community service.

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they had been out loud.

After six weeks at Wilson, Mallery spent three weeks in intensive rehabilitation at Binghamton General Hospital. Doctors thought she could be there until May, but she went home in March because of her progress. She kept doing occupational and physical therapy three days a week and started home instruction to finish the English and economics classes she needed to graduate. A full schedule in her sophomore and junior years meant her second semester of senior year was relatively light.

"There were days the pain was so bad I didn't want to get off the couch," Mallery said. But through it all, she had a goal. "I wanted to walk with my class. And I didn't want to be pushed in a wheelchair or walk with a cane. I wanted to be like all the other kids," she said.

Mallery has already reached part of her goal. She walked and danced at her senior prom in early June, where she was crowned queen, and came back to school at the end of the school year. She'll spend the summer working as a lifeguard and building up her endurance before entering SUNY-Oswego with the goal of being an English teacher.

Her ordeal taught her some lessons in compassion and caring, Mallery said. Her family -- mother, father and little sister -- were there when she needed them, and so were her friends, she said.

She also took away another lesson. "I found I can really do anything if I put my mind to it," she said.

## **FIND THEIR NICHE**

WINDSOR -- Amanda Tharratt used to have a hard time making friends.

But at Windsor High School, she's made several friends even though she has Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism where people have normal IQs but struggle with social skills, transitions or changes. Windsor's cheerleaders even celebrated her birthday with a cake and candles at the cafeteria.

"It makes me feel accepted here," she said. "Now I feel better about myself, and I am happy."

Tharratt, 19, is one of three students with autism who will be the first to graduate from the Oak Tree Program, a Broome-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services program for students with autism housed at Windsor High School. She and Aaron Dinger, 19, and Joe del Cano, 20, will receive Regents diplomas from their home districts Saturday when they graduate at Windsor. All are in regular classes but return to the Oak Tree classroom for help with social skills and scheduling.

Both students and staff at Windsor helped del Cano succeed, he said. "They do it with such passion that you know they love their job," he said of his teachers.

Dinger also credited the Windsor teachers with his success. He even took advanced placement calculus this year. He's headed to Broome Community College this fall to study engineering science on his way to becoming an electrical engineer.

"I am really good at taking stuff apart and putting it back together to make it work," Dinger said.

Del Cano plans to become certified in computer repair through a BOCES program and then hopes to find work as a computer repairman. Del Cano and Tharratt may also attend college.

Tharratt has given several talks on autism to community groups. She and her mother, Diane Tharratt, hope to start a public speaking business.

## **STAYING ON TRACK**

HALLSTEAD, Pa. -- Activities most high school students take for granted weren't part of Marian "Maddie" Rinker's life at Blue Ridge High School in Pennsylvania.

Instead of sports, clubs or parties, the 18-year-old Hallstead resident spent time caring for her infant son and taking the baby to neurological, orthopedic and other specialists in the Southern Tier and Pennsylvania.

Her life changed between freshman and sophomore year when her son, Gavin, was born with cerebral palsy, a condition that refers to any one of a number of neurological disorders that permanently affect body movement and muscle coordination.

The news, which hit hard, made her a much more serious young person.

"I'm not complaining," she said. "Everyone thinks being 15 years old and having a baby, you must regret stuff. But I haven't regretted anything. I love him too much to regret anything."

Rinker got pregnant by her then-boyfriend (they are no longer together). She feels fortunate in one very important way. Her parents, while initially shocked and upset, supported her and pushed her to stay in school. She feels sorry for young people who find themselves in the same situation, and lack this support.

She grew up quickly, Rinker said. Instead of worrying about what to do Friday night and the "drama" of high school life, her days revolved around school work and caring for her infant son. Her aunt, who runs a day care center, took care of the boy during the day. At night, Rinker did her homework and "regular mom stuff." She graduated June 9 with a 90.6 average.

"It made me stay on track," she said. "It pushed me to do my best."

Rinker credits officials at Blue Ridge High for letting her miss days when she had to take Gavin to doctors' and specialists' appointments. While the cerebral palsy has affected his motor skills, it does not appear to have impacted his cognitive ability. He wears braces now, but doctors said therapy could mean he will be walking within a few years.

"There were scary moments, but she stuck in there and did the doctors' appointments and asked the questions. She's the one in charge," said Susan Cawley, Rinker's guidance counselor at Blue Ridge High.


In the fall, Rinker will enter College Misericordia in Dallas, Pa., to study medical imaging. She'll enter under a special program run by the college that allows mothers to live on campus with their children in special housing. They also receive subsidized day care.

Her rule is not to wallow in self-pity. "If you do that, they're going to think they're a mistake. And no child should feel like that," she said.

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