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## Teen beats obstacles, gets to top of class

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MOUNT VERNON - When Cinnamon Lewis delivers her graduation speech tomorrow, she will thank her teachers, reminisce about the prom and joke about her classmates' fashion choices as freshmen.

She'll keep to herself the more painful memories, like missing school to care for a sibling, making Father's Day cards in class while her father was in prison and working seven days a week to help pay her family's rent.

For Lewis, those events were setbacks, but they never killed her dream of being top of the class. After four years of struggle and hard work, Lewis graduates tomorrow from Mount Vernon High School as the class salutatorian. She will attend Columbia University in the fall.

"I always knew I was going to college," said the 18-year-old. "I felt like nothing or no one was going to stop me."

As a high school freshman, Lewis was expected, with her sisters, to stay home from school to look after their baby brother while their mother went to work. Lewis' mother could not afford a sitter and the baby's father wasn't around, she said.

Lewis and her sisters - one in middle school and another in high school - took turns watching him. If one had a big test, she got to go to school to take it.

When Lewis missed school, her older sister brought her classwork home so she could keep up with lessons. She missed some 30 days in two quarters and said she cried when she couldn't go class.

"I cared about school and I was already doing good, so I felt I didn't deserve to have my high school career messed up," she said.

In the middle of her freshman year, she told a teacher about her family situation and a social worker got involved.

The family never got a babysitter, but Lewis ended up going to school regularly while her then-16-year-old sister stayed home and eventually dropped out. Lewis said because she was a good student, people took notice when she wasn't there, but her sister wasn't so lucky.

In the years that followed, Lewis struggled to balance studies, after-school clubs and work. She was involved with the Model UN Club, was a National Honor Society president and a volunteer tutor, among other activities.

Lewis juggled two or three jobs in her junior and senior years, working up to 45 hours a week. She often gave half her check to help pay rent. She also had a rocky relationship with her mother, who was dealing with her own problems and, Lewis said, wasn't always there for her.

Lewis was exhausted and stressed, but she excelled at school and took advanced-placement classes. Out of 358 students in her class, she ranked second with a grade-point average of 3.96.

History teacher Linda Gordon said during her 15 years working at the high school, she had come across many students with troubled home lives, and that each handled it in their own way.

She said Lewis handled her situation with maturity and never let it slow her down.

"I'm amazed at what makes a kid like Cinnamon," said Gordon, who said she has grown close to Lewis over the last two years. "She could have so easily gone in another direction."

Gordon said Lewis' class work stood out from her peers' and called her extremely bright and driven. Lewis was a gifted writer, a class leader, and a popular student, she said.

"She is just a very special child," Gordon said.

Lewis will get full financial aid for tuition and housing at Columbia. She also has gotten a half-dozen scholarships totaling more than \$20,000.

At Columbia, she plans to major in creative writing or English. Her goal is to be a writer or a journalist.

In her graduation speech, she credits Mount Vernon High School and dedicated teachers for shaping her future and helping her succeed.

Lewis said her school had a negative reputation compared to wealthier districts, but that just made her work harder.

Her message to her peers: "Just because you come from a school that's considered bad doesn't mean you can't get into one of best schools in the United States."

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