

DJJ NEWS



History-maker Inspires Class of 2024

Listening intently in shining blue caps and gowns, many members of the Yvonne B. Miller High School and Post-secondary Programs class of 2024 found they could relate to the commencement speaker at their June 7 graduation ceremony.

The speaker, dressed in a grey pinstripe suit, shared candidly that he was one of six children raised by a single mother in an area characterized by poverty, and, as a young person, he "made a bad choice" that resulted in him serving time in prison.

However, after his release, Del. Don Scott, D-Portsmouth, rebuilt his life from the ground up by working as a welder and rising to management. He ultimately became a successful trial lawyer and, in January, made history when he was elected the first Black Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates.

"You've earned something that no one can ever take away from you," Scott told the 37 young



Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates Del. Don Scott, D-Portsmouth, delivers the commencement address to the class of 2024.

men and women – all residents at Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center – who received their high school and GED diplomas that day.

“To do what you've done right now in this circumstance is amazing. That means you took the time to continue to work on yourself in spite of your circumstances,” Scott said. “That takes focus, that takes discipline, and that means you believe in the future. When you make a bet on yourself now, you know that where you are now is not where you will end up.”

Scott reminded the candidates for graduation to thank the family and friends, some of whom were in attendance, who stood behind them during difficult times. Among them was Christie T., who stood atop gymnasium bleachers and cheered exuberantly as her son received his diploma.

“I'm so proud of my son,” she said. “I can say the Department of Juvenile Justice has made a difference in his life. At one time, I didn't think he'd live to see 20, but here he is graduating. I see a new lease on life for him now.”

During his remarks, Scott recalled his own mother weeping in sorrow when he was given a 10-year prison sentence, but also her tears of joy 30 years later when he was sworn in as House Speaker. Scott took a moment to address faculty and facility staff in the audience.

“You don't know, you might have the Speaker of the House out here,” he said. “You might have the president of the United States right here. You don't know what you have.”

Bon Air JCC Director of Compliance Nikesha Roberts described Scott's speech as “a true beacon of hope” for the residents as well as the entire Department of Juvenile Justice.

“While we are intentional about pouring into our committed youth and lending to their rehabilitation and encouraging them to make



Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates Del. Don Scott, D-Portsmouth.



Class of 2024 student speaker.

good decisions once released, Del. Scott was a tangible and true representation of what doing so looks like," Roberts said. "All who fell under the voice of Senator Scott have been empowered to be the best they can and persevere not because of where they've been, but in spite of."

During the ceremony, School Principal Dr. Mark Hudson acknowledged the "support, guidance, commitment and love" of the faculty and staff.

"Collectively, every day, you show up. You are champions with the power to see need instead of desire, to create hope from failure, to build self-worth from self-doubt, through unimaginable series of shifts and changes this year, you have held onto your why and remain student-centered," Hudson said. "My personal appreciation for you is unmatched, and the value of your work is honored here today."

The class of 2024 student speaker, who earned a GED diploma and aspires to earn his master plumber licensure and start his own business, credited teachers and staff at Bon Air JCC for pushing him to return to school and focus on making positive changes in his life.



Principal Dr. Mark Hudson.

"If it wasn't for the teachers in my support group, setting and achieving these goals would have never been a thought to me," he said. "One thing I can say for the residents still in school: push through, don't give up and keep trying until you make it. It might seem hard, but in the end it's worth it. Congratulations to everyone who's graduating. We made it!"