

First class graduates from Beacon Charter School

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WOONSOCKET -- Since its founding three years ago, there has always been lingering doubts over the future of the Beacon Charter High School for the Arts.

First came the trials of getting the school open after years of planning by retired Woonsocket educators Jack Lawhead and Paul Colette. Then in its second year last spring, Beacon had a run-in with the state Department of Education over financing and the school's continued viability.

But doubt finally dissipated Friday night at the Stadium Theatre, as Beacon's first class of graduates gathered with their families for the school's first graduation ceremony.

It was a Class of 2006 with just 17 members, but the enthusiasm and excitement marking the night rivaled that of a class boasting hundreds.

Gov. Donald L. Carcieri and his wife, Suzanne, joined the class for the graduation ceremony, and so did Board of Regents Chairman James DiPrete and Steven Feinberg, executive director of the Rhode Island Film Commission and keynote speaker.

The spotlight, however, was on Beacon's graduates, a group of young people who took a chance on an innovative and independently operated school that offered studies and attention they hadn't found elsewhere.

And when the chips were down and that gamble appeared to have been the wrong one, they stuck with their experiment, fought for it with their families, and showed everyone something new can work.

The school's perseverance through those troubled times had drawn Carcieri to its opening day in September and back again last night to offer the graduates some congratulatory remarks.

"If I were in their shoes, I would be really excited," Carcieri said, as he entered the historic theater with the class members.

"The kids came out for their school, their parents came out, they really wanted their school to survive, and everyone came through to keep the school alive," the governor said.

Conceived as a school that would blend business with the performing arts, the public charter school today offers that mix of studies to students from Woonsocket, Cumberland, North Smithfield, Lincoln, Burrillville, Pawtucket, Central Falls and several other communities.

As he waited for the ceremony to begin, Beacon graduate Ian Gagnon, of Burrillville, said he felt "ecstatic" over being there.

"Right now, it feels crazy to be graduating because there are only 17 of us and it is such a small group, but everybody is happy," he said.

It was the school's size of just 114 students between grades 9 through 12 that drew Ian and many other students, and it was Beacon's personal style of education that gave many their first taste of education success.

"College, that's how I feel," Gagnon said as he stood in line. "I'm going to college," he said of his plans to begin studying business at the Community College of Rhode Island in the fall.

"I'm glad about that because I didn't think I was going to make it this far, and it feels really great to be here," he said.

Another class member, Tracey Thurston, of Pawtucket, said she found Beacon to be "the best school in the world."

The school supported Thurston's interest in being an artist and helped her to make a commitment to education.

"I've been in five different high schools but I stuck with it and now I'm going to college," Thurston said. She also plans to attend the Community College of Rhode Island in the fall.

As part of their graduation requirements, each of Beacon's students had to produce a short film about themselves, their interests or achievements.

That connection to the arts was apparent in the graduation ceremony, when class member Meghan Lemoine, of Woonsocket, sang the national anthem perfectly a cappella, and underclassmen Monty Gauvin and Holly Taylor paired up to sing their own composition of a class song played by Taylor on an electric guitar.

Class salutatorian Tiffany Gray, of Woonsocket, said the class "hopes that this is the beginning of history for the school" in her address to the crowd. "Our school has proven to be strong and successful, and we have defeated any of the obstacles that have come along," she said.

Gray added that she wanted to "especially thank my fellow graduates for, without them, this day would not be possible."

The school's principal, Robert Pilkington, told the class that graduation was the start of "something big" for class members, but also for the school itself.

Beacon, he said, will now turn its attention to relocating from its temporary home in the former St. Louis Parish School to a permanent Main Street site in the fall and expects to grow to its maximum student population of 180 over the next two years.

All of that will be possible because of the Class of 2006, he said. "It is because of your accomplishments over the past three years," he said, "and that is truly being true to you school."

In his remarks from the stage, Carcieri said it was the efforts of the students themselves that helped keep the school open. Their dedication to Beacon helped inspire a cooperative effort among the state Department of Education, private partners such as Johnson & Wales University and local community leaders to back Beacon's future.

"It all came together and here we are today," Carcieri said. "You stayed open, you had a good year and you are the first graduating class. Give yourself a big round of applause.

"Our whole state is proud of what you've done and I wish you great success in the years ahead," the governor said.

The class valedictorian Kayla Menard, of Woonsocket, wrote her speech as a movie script that told of the school's chaotic beginnings and eventual success.

"This year was something different," she said. "Once again we met new faces and had to deal with the absence of others. We were no longer the school we started out as, but we showed the potential of becoming something even greater," she said.

The school continues to work on fixing the mistakes of the past as it paves "the road to the future," she said. "This community is striving to become something greater, something extraordinary. Our family is growing," she said.

Feinberg said he was honored to address the first graduating class and offered tips on his own experiences working as a film producer in Hollywood for over 20 years.

His best advice to the graduates, Feinberg said, would be for the students to be themselves.

"No one else can be you. No one else can see the world as you see the world," he said. "Be yourself."

Lawhead, who came up with the idea for an independent local high school almost 30 years ago and was on the school's original board of directors with Colette, did not attend Friday due to his continuing fight with cancer.

But Colette, who gave the students their diplomas with Board of Trustees President Patricia Hawkrige, said his longtime friend would be proud of the class.

"I think this school is a great place for the kids," he said. "It's growing and I hope this is the beginning of Beacon meeting all of our expectations."

As Thurston walked on stage to collect her diploma from Colette, the new graduate stopped for a moment in the middle of the stage. "Hey, mom," she called out to her mother, Jean, and then gave her diploma a proud little wiggle.