SCF graduates’ futures filled with vision and promise
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By CARL MARIO NUDI —

Against a backdrop of palm trees and a view of Sarasota Bay, State College of Florida graduates queue up at the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall on Saturday for spring commencement exercises. PAUL VIDE LA/Bradenton Herald

SARASOTA -- The skies Saturday morning were bright and shiny, reflecting the visions of the future for many of the 759 graduates of State College of Florida.

More than 325 of those graduates donned blue caps and gowns and participated in the tradition of walking across the stage at the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall to receive their diplomas.

Keynote speaker David Houle, author and futurist-in-residence of Ringling College of Art and Design, charged the graduates to be visionary dreamers.
Houle warned them that they will come up against demands to temper that vision because of the legacy of 20th century thought.

"But legacy thinking will fade away this decade," the long-time media and entertainment executive predicted.

Nine graduates demonstrated their ability to actualize their vision through their leadership and academic performances and were finalists for the Outstanding Graduate Award.

SCF President Carol Probstfeld announced the two winners, one from the three baccalaureate graduates and one from the six associate degree graduates.

Nancy White, who at 51 obtained her Bachelor of Applied Science degree in energy technology management, was honored as Outstanding Baccalaureate Graduate and Lidia Litvinova O'Shields, 29, who moved to the United States from Russia four years ago, was named Outstanding Associate Graduate.

Before the graduation ceremonies, White humbly said, "there were more out there more deserving of this honor."

When it was announced she had won, she said she did not expect to win, but promptly unfurled a long sheet of paper ostensibly holding the notes of her speech.

This provided one of the several moments of levity during the mostly solemn ceremony.

White, of Sarasota, has had a career in accounting for around 30 years, she said, but with the lagging economy she thought it was time to look for a new profession.

"With sustainability and the green thing being big in Florida," she said, "I thought this would be a very exciting field."

The other finalists for the prestigious honor were Arnold Bailey Jr., of Sarasota, and Ketan Senjalia, of Lakewood Ranch.

The Outstanding Associate Graduate recipient O'Shields thanked her SCF professors and advisors, her mother, who was in the audience, and her husband for "his emotional and financial support."

O'Shields, of Boca Grande, completed her associates work in one year, taking a full load for four straight semesters, including summer.

"I like to study and learn new things," she said while waiting for the graduation ceremonies to start, "and a degree is very important to find a good job."

The Boca Grande resident will start at the University of Florida in the fall, studying Russian and French, with a minor in math.
Her long-term goal is to join the U.S. Foreign Service.

"I think my skills will serve me well," O'Shields said.

The other finalists for the Outstanding Associate Graduate award were Christine Gambino, of Bradenton; Nara Fernadez, Jeannean O'Connell, and Jared Padgett, all of Sarasota; and Emre Ozgener, of Parrish.

Along with recent high school graduates, the state college system provides educational opportunities for what are sometimes called nontraditional or older students who want or need to change careers.

At 40 years of age, Robert VanderBloemen graduated Saturday from SCF with an associate degree in radiography and is headed into a new career.

"This will be my second career," VanderBloemen said. "I was a PGA pro golfer."

"You just can't play golf professionally forever," he said.

VanderBloemen said he does not regret giving up professional golf and waiting until his mid-life to complete college.

"It's been a great 15 years," he said, "It proves you can always go back to school."

Jessica Luty, also knows what is like to return to school.

The 24-year-old started at SCF at 16, when it was then Manatee Community College, but had to drop out after a few semesters because of some tough times.

"I'm a recovering drug addict," Luty said. "I went to jail a couple of times."

She said she got caught up with the wrong crowd, but eventually got straight and returned to her studies.

Luty said her success was a collective effort of self-determination, the help of SCF guidance counselor Denise Turcotte, and her family and friends.

"Graduating is huge," said Luty, who earned an associate of arts degree Saturday, and is headed to University of South Florida in the fall to major in English.

"I'd like to do something like journalism or freelance writing," she said.

And she is very interested in creative writing.

"This may have taken me eight years, but I'm very happy," Luty said. "I'm not exactly where I would like to be at this point of my life, but it's a lot better than where I used to be."