A North Port woman received the Outstanding Graduate Award during State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota spring 2011 commencement exercises this weekend in Bradenton.

Jodi Johnson, 38, first enrolled at Miami University of Ohio out of high school, but never graduated. It wasn’t until three years ago that she decided to go back to school and now calls graduating with her associate in arts degree “a dream come true,” she told the Bradenton Herald.

“I am so thankful to have attended here,” Johnson said Saturday as she accepted the college’s award for superior leadership, academic achievement and community service.

Johnson developed her leadership skills as president of Phi Theta Kappa, playing host to PTK events, organizing scholarship workshops and participating in service projects. She also was a member of the SCF Green Team and cofounder of the Awareness Initiative Program at SCF Venice designed to raise awareness about drug and alcohol dependence. Johnson was one of just 50 college students nationwide to be named a Coca-Cola Academic Team Gold Scholar and her name appeared in the April 11 special edition of USA Today. She also was named to the PTK All-Florida Academic Team.

Her next step: get a bachelor’s from New College of Florida, where she’ll major in anthropology. She hopes to one day work in a museum.

But she didn’t get her degree just for herself. She did it partly to be a role model for her son, Ethan, 14.

“I’m interested in really and truly making a difference,” Johnson said.

Other finalists for the award were Stephanie Burr of Port Charlotte, Paul Cajka of Sarasota, and Shirley Foor and Derek Wallace, both of Bradenton.

Joining associate degree graduates were graduates of SCF’s first baccalaureate program, the bachelor of science in nursing, celebrating a milestone in the college’s 54-year history.

Two ceremonies were held to accommodate the 325 graduates that participated out of 729 students eligible for graduation, which included 38 BSN graduates. Thirty-five BSN students participated in graduation.

The guest speaker was Elizabeth Anne Rigney, an SCF BSN graduate from Englewood. Rigney, a practicing nurse with experience as a charge nurse in the intensive care unit at Englewood Community Hospital, earned her associate in science in nursing degree in 2006 from SCF and returned to enroll in SCF’s BSN program. She started a new job in May as a clinical documentation specialist at the Englewood hospital, and plans to apply to Florida State University’s doctor of nursing practice degree program offered at SCF Lakewood Ranch.

The Bradenton Herald contributed to this report.