



one of us
charlie patton

He went from foster care to college degree

When Derrick Dunlavy was 6 years old, he and his older brother Mike were sent to live at the Boys Home, a now-defunct home for boys on University Boulevard, next to Jacksonville University.

There was an agreement between the home and JU that provided free tuition to JU for any Boys Home resident who qualified for admission.

But only two Boys Home residents ever took advantage. Mike Dunlavy graduated from JU in 2004. Then Saturday, Derrick Dunlavy received his bachelor's degree from JU.

"It took me a while," said the 28-year-old Dunlavy, who admits he made a few poor choices after he turned 18 and left the Boys Home and the foster care system.

"Kids who have grown up in foster care tend to be in a hurry to get on with their lives," he said.

He did get a two-year degree from what was then Florida Community College at Jacksonville and enrolled a couple of times at the University of North Florida, only to drop out each time.

He finally resumed his higher education at JU about 2½ years ago. Finishing the course work has been a struggle since he holds a full-time job as an area manager for LAZ Parking and is a divorced father with custody of his 3-year-old son, Caden. Now he plans to take a couple of semesters off before going back to JU for a master's in business administration.

He's also decided to become actively involved with Florida's Children First, an advocacy group, and Voices for Children, which promotes and supports the Guardian ad Litem program.

"When I was young, I didn't have any vision," he said. "If there's one thing I want to get out of this, I want to give the message to kids in the foster care system that if you keep trying and keep believing, you'll succeed."

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Provided

Derrick Dunlavy, who went into the foster care system at age 6, is determined that his 3-year-old son, Caden, has a better childhood than he had.

PATTON

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He remains close to his brother, who recently graduated from law school. At a party celebrating that graduation, he tried to speak. "I don't think I got six words out before I boo-hoo-hooed,"

he said.

He has re-established a relationship with his mother and recently took Caden to visit her. He also makes sure Caden spends time with his own mother.

"Growing up without my mom, I didn't want him to go through that," he said.

As for how it feels to be finished with school, at least for a little while: "It's going to feel like a ton of bricks have been lifted from my shoulders," he said.

"I'll be able to do some laundry."

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