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Mouton beats the odds, becomes a success

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Ulysse Mouton, a Northside High School senior, was one of 104 students in the nation to receive the Horatio Alger National Scholarship.

Success should not have been an option for 18-year-old Ulysse Mouton. Statistically, young black men with his upbringing — surrounded by drugs, abuse, poverty and an unstable, mobile family — end up with a couple children, in jail or dead.

Ulysse beat the odds, and on Saturday he wore a gown decorated with a National Honor Society stole and performed his role as Northside High School's master of ceremonies. He looked like any other driven teenager with tens of thousands of dollars in scholarships that will allow him to attend Alcorn State University in

Mississippi.

"I had to grow up before I was ready. I had to become a man real early," Ulysse said. "A lot of people look at me and say, 'Wow, I'm surprised. How could you do all this?' I had this all planned."

Ulysse moved countless times during his life, sometimes to apartments and trailers and other times to homeless shelters and family's homes. He attended at least 10 schools.

He managed to stay at Northside High for all four years because his family lived in a trailer park for nearly three years, the longest he remembers ever living somewhere.

In the middle of his senior year, his family moved to the southside near Judice.

Ulysse, his mom, stepdad, three half-brothers, 19-year-old sister and her two kids live in a two bedroom apartment. Neither his mom nor his stepdad work.

"We've been living off of my step dad's workman comp and the check that my little brother gets and food stamps," Ulysse said. "But my mom will take that and blow it at the casinos and not have nothing to show for it."

He was involved in football, band, football, chorus, wrestling, track, baseball, bowling, Key Club, Beta Club, National Honors Society, explorer post, church choir, tutoring and speech.

That still wasn't the end of his responsibilities, and it was difficult to find time for homework.

"I would have to put it on the back burner until I clean up and make sure my brothers have taken baths and stuff like that," he said. "Sometimes I have to cook. I have to force them to take a bath and make sure they get their homework done."

Ulysse's three younger brothers drive him to be successful. He knows he is the only positive role model in their lives.

"When you think about breaking generational curses, I knew that it would have to be me to do that," he said.

Ulysse and his sister share a father and grew up in the same household, but their circumstances affected her differently. She dropped out of high school and became pregnant with her first child when she was 14.

Ulysse's biological father abandoned his family when Ulysse was younger than a year old.

"He was on drugs real bad and crack real bad and he was abusive to my mom, so they ended up splitting up," Ulysse said. "She tried to survive living from family to family to family and sometimes abandoned homes."

Then his mom found a new man, and for a while it looked like things were going to turn around. But then the new man began dealing crack and abusing Ulysse and his sister, Ulysse said.

"It's not like they fought behind our backs. It was in front of us. You know, a young boy, I didn't know how to react to that," Ulysse said. "I'd tell them to stop it. That didn't work. I didn't want to get too involved because he would beat me again. He would beat us with broom sticks."

Ulysse's stepfather was arrested many times, including once for dealing crack, Ulysse said and court documents confirmed.

When the stepdad came back from jail he was even more abusive, Ulysse said.

After a while Ulysse's mom stopped being supportive of Ulysse and his sister.

"She would tell us that we weren't gonna be nothing. She would tell me I would be like my dad," he said. "My sister took it as, 'Oh my God, I don't know what to do.' But I took it as, 'You know what? I'm going to show you. I'm going show you that I'm going to be much more than you and him.'"

Through everything, Ulysse found an escape that changed his life.

"I took music as a friend, cause I knew that everywhere I went, whatever I did, whatever choices I made, my friend would stay there and would always be there. No matter how far we moved," he said.

He taught himself to play piano at 10 and played percussion in Northside's band. He sings and writes music and will major in music performance and media at Alcorn.

Attending Alcorn, a small historically black college, did not seem possible to Ulysse last year.

During his junior year things started to get worse at home, so he met with his counselor, Cindy Devall, and asked her for help.

Devall called Chip Jackson, an active member of 100 Black Men of Greater Lafayette and the director of Enrollment Services at UL. He Jennifer Jackson, his wife and the UL assistant to the president for campus diversity, became Ulysse's mentors.

Jennifer Jackson was impressed by how well adjusted Ulysse was despite his circumstances.

"He has helped us. I know everyone says you end up being the one mentored," she said. "Sometimes I'm complaining about this and that and remember — sometimes he hasn't eaten."

Ulysse earned eight scholarships, including a \$22,000 scholarship from Alcorn, a music scholarship from Alcorn, the \$20,000 Horatio Alger National Scholarship and the \$10,000 Glenn Armentor scholarship.

"I didn't know how I was going to make it to college," he said. "I didn't think I would do it for free."

He graduated 11th in his class of 161 with a 3.6 grade-point average. His ACT composite score was 19, but he earned a 21 on the English section and a 23 in math.

He will take some summer classes and do train with the university's football team, where he will be a fullback.

After obtaining his bachelor's degree, Ulysse wants to earn a degree in entertainment law. He wants to be a music producer and work in artist and repertoire.

"I want to help kids that are unfortunate and have a talent for music and want to express their problems, but doesn't have a way to get it out," he said.