

Times • Press • Recorder

A Lee Central Coast Newspaper

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 6, 2007

An edition of the Santa Maria Time

CNPA General Excellence Award Recipient



TPR/Hector Trujillo

Ashley Johnson, in the Arroyo Grande High School office, is set to receive her diploma Thursday.

AGHS senior overcomes hardships to graduate

In need of help herself, she offered help to others

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Despite dealing with significant obstacles in her life, Arroyo Grande High School senior Ashley Johnson will receive her diploma this year and will continue her education.

Ashley, who plans to attend California State University, Monterey Bay, in the fall, will graduate June 7 with her classmates.

"My experiences here were really good because most of my

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Johnson: Attended five schools in last six years

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teachers were understanding of my situation," said Ashley. "There were a lot of troubling times in life. I'm still having to deal with a lot of stuff."

After having suffered large amounts of neglect and abuse as a child, Ashley attempted suicide as a young teenager. At one point, she was forced to work full time at a drug store in Fontana to survive.

A 17-year-old Pismo Beach resident, Ashley attended five schools in the last six years.

"My dad kicked me out of my house recently, so I have been having to stay at a friend's house," Ashley added. "It has just been really hard moving, finding a place to stay and graduating on time."

Ashley has a younger half-brother, Corey Johnson, whom she is very close to and resides in Florida.

Among the people that she thanks for helping her make it through school are AGHS journalism teacher Carolyn Swanson and Advanced Placement English teacher Thom Wade.

"Ashley is very modest and somewhat private," said Swanson. "From just looking at her, you wonder what such a beautiful and intelligent girl could have gone through. She has overcome obstacles and has such a bright future ahead of her."

Ashley was enrolled in Swanson's newspaper production class and wrote several articles as one of the school newspaper's feature editors during her senior year.

She was recently named among the 2007 winners of the Horatio Alger Association for Distinguished Americans Award. The \$2,500 award was given to Ashley after she turned in several essays on the challenges she has had to overcome while maintaining a 3.6 overall grade-point average during high school.

"She is very task-oriented and is willing to write about almost any topic," Swanson added. "She continues to push herself even with all the hardships she has undergone."

Ashley's extracurricular activities include tutoring Span-

ish and participating in church youth groups.

"What makes Ashley special is her ability to put the everyday distractions of life on hold," said Conan Bowers, AGHS vice principal. "She has been dealt a very tough hand, yet she continues to play the game of life without flinching."

Bowers said he has known Ashley since childhood when she was a fourth-grade student at Margaret Harloe Elementary School in Arroyo Grande where Bowers was employed.

"Ashley can and will achieve whatever she puts her mind to," Bowers added. "She is smart, articulate and, most of all, determined to be successful."

Despite her circumstances, Ashley still finds ways to help others and improve people's lives. In 2005, she was part of a program that helped build houses for homeless families in Mexico.

"You can't be afraid to ask for help and or support when it is needed," Ashley said. "People want to help but are not able to unless you tell them you need it."