

Slain students remembered at graduation (The News Journal)

Among the honors Sunday: six perfect GPAs and members of the Class of 1958

By ROBIN BROWN

The News Journal

DOVER -- When

President Allen L. Sessoms welcomed a record-size graduating class, along with the students' parents, families and friends to Delaware State University's 116th commencement Sunday, he acknowledged a pair of tragedies shared by the college community.

The

day of joy and achievement -- with heavy rain holding off until its end -- could not help but have a somber side. Since the last graduation filled Alumni Stadium, four students were killed and two others were injured in a pair of deadly shootings, one in New Jersey and one on campus.

"It's

important to acknowledge that it did happen and the students who aren't among us any more," said Sharnette Carter, 27, of Dover, graduating with a bachelor's degree in science education.

She

was still thrilled to graduate in a class of 591, as she called relatives in the crowd, who spotted each other with mutual waving.

And

there was plenty of cheering for the Class of 2008 -- including the most-senior senior, 67-year-old Frances E. Magee of Frederica, getting a bachelor's in psychology.

There

also were an unprecedented six presidential excellence awards presented to those graduating with a perfect 4.0 grade point average -- Jason Challandes of Smyrna, Lauren Hubbard of Magnolia, Mohammed Musah of Ghana, Caitlin O'Meara and Daniel Bryant of the Dover area and Jessica Chrabaszcz of Rhode Island.

Several

members of DSU's Class of 1958 returned as honored guests, and were saluted along with the new graduates by graduation speakers including Gov. Ruth Ann Minner, U.S. Rep. Mike Castle and Dover Mayor Carlton Carey.

Keynote

speaker Clark Kent Ervin, director of the Aspen Institute's Homeland Security Program, urged graduates "to choose to live for others and do what you can where you are," rather than worry about being rich or famous.

"Make your corner of the world a better place," he said.

Claibourne

D. Smith, chairman of the board of trustees, urged students to use the "array of tools" gained at DSU as they find their way in the world.

One

listener with two viewpoints was Jose Echeverri, a trustee and student earning a master's in business administration. As both, he said, he appreciated that Sunday's ceremony delivered a positive message while acknowledging the tragedies.

"They

were popular kids, too," he said, adding that no one who was on campus will forget the daily prayers and memorials. "We have truly come out of this a much better university."

The

university's recent open house for prospective students "was the largest ever ... it shows that DSU's strength has shone through."

The

slain students -- and the parents who will not see them graduate -- came to Annette Davis' mind as she drove from Wilmington to see her daughter graduate.

Her family sported T-shirts with pictures of her 23-year-old graduating daughter, Alfranetta "Netta" Davis.

For slain students' families, Davis said, Sessoms' kind words let them know their losses and their children are not forgotten.

Under stepped-up security that followed the shootings, this became the first graduation ceremony with the new campus police force, which Davis said "feels more secure."

Alice Vaughn of Trenton, attending to see her granddaughter Shunell Victor get her bachelor's in social work, said that initially she didn't feel that mentioning the tragedies was appropriate. But the more she thought about it, the more she felt it was part of what the university community had to get through to arrive at graduation day -- and a reflection of the "awful mess" in the modern world.

From behind a pair of glitter-covered glasses shaped in "2008," management information systems graduate Michael Parson Jr. of Wilmington said the joy of the day had to include the reality of the community's unprecedented grief.

"The tragedies are not far from everyone's minds," he said.

Last August, DSU students Terrance Aerial, 18; his sister Natasha, 19; Dashon Harvey, 20; and Iofemi Hightower, 20; were shot during a robbery at a school near their homes in New Jersey, just before they were to return to campus. The only survivor, Natasha Aerial, helped investigators find six suspects from New Jersey, then ages 15 to 28. They were arrested and charged with first-degree murder in the schoolyard massacre.

In September, the gunfire was on campus. As a group left a campus cafe, student Loyer D. Braden of East Orange, N.J., allegedly tried to shoot a student he had argued with but hit two others and fled. One student, shot in the ankle, recovered. The other died. Braden, who was expelled from the university, stands charged with murder.

For DSU to lose students in two fatal shootings after the April 2007

massacre at Virginia Tech "affected a lot of people in our community," said Michael Taylor, 22, of Washington, D.C.

As he spoke, wind buffeted the five large balloons and bouquet of flowers he had for his graduating girlfriend, Sheena Willis, also of Washington.

"People got stronger," said the criminal justice major and aspiring FBI agent. "They had to build up the courage just to go to class."