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Walking across stage, leaving 'home'

By Andrew Dunn

As a teenager, Danny Barnhill acknowledges, he had some problems.

He dropped out of high school, did drugs and roamed the streets.

But today at 46, he will speak about his life before receiving a high school diploma at Durham Tech Community College's graduation ceremony.

"Durham Tech was the best place for me. ... I knew that even if I didn't have high scores they would work with me," he said. "Once I got to school, I saw so many doors. I might never stop going to school. ... You can never learn too much."

During the 3 p.m. ceremony at Duke University's Cameron Indoor Stadium, more than 600 degrees, diplomas and certificates will be awarded.

Fifty students will earn General Educational Development diplomas and an additional 67 adult high school students will receive diplomas.

The community college traditionally invites students to speak at graduation rather than seeking an outside speaker.

Ntuthuka Gcaba came to the United States from Johannesburg, South Africa, at age 18, and will represent university transfer students. He is heading to N.C. A&T State University in the fall to study field engineering. He hopes to earn a master's degree in architecture.

Gcaba will speak about transitions and choices, drawing from life experiences.

"When I first came here, I didn't know anybody and I was scared to start over again," he said. "Coming to America was a different experience. It was a big culture shock."

Gcaba said he primarily decided to come to the United States because the education system in South Africa was not designed to help him pursue his career in architecture since he began as an art student and had not taken math courses.

"My generation were the guinea pigs," he said -- the first group of black students after the end of apartheid and the freeing of Nelson Mandela.

Barnhill, who has studied at Durham Tech for three years, will represent the high school equivalency programs.

After leaving the program four times, he has completed his coursework and has enrolled in Durham Tech's clinical trials curriculum program, which prepares students for helping researchers conducting studies of new drugs and treatments.

Barnhill said he plans to find work after finishing the associate's degree program, and then enroll at N.C. State University.

"I weaved my way through things, but I was never able to succeed until I buckled down and got my diploma," he said. "Now the sky's the limit."

This year's ceremony also marks the last for President Phail Wynn, who is leaving after 30 years at Durham Tech.

He speaks at every graduation, congratulating the class on its success.

"I remind them that they are now more educated than they've ever been and are prepared to be a good employee, parent and citizen," he said.

But his address will be a little different this year.

"It won't be overly sentimental," he said. "More in the spirit of a hearty send-off."

Wynn will become Duke's vice president of Durham and regional affairs. The new position was created to develop more "tightly organized administrative leadership and a strategic plan for our regional partnership efforts," Duke President Richard Brodhead said.

In the role, Wynn will work with the Durham Public Schools, Research Triangle Park, Duke Health Care, N.C. Central University and Durham Tech.

"I thought it would be a good way to continue to work on community development," he said.

He said he felt it was the right time to leave Durham Tech because all his major initiatives are under way and it was his 30-year anniversary.

"It's wise to step down when things are going well," he said. "You never want to stay too long."

Students say they hope the next president will have Wynn's qualities.

"He was humble. He listens to each student," transfer student Ivory Thompson said. "I think they should be down to earth. They should be professional."

But, as Wynn insists, the graduation should focus on the students, their families and their futures.

"The journey on the road to knowledge is one that never ends," he said. "This is really a celebration of their accomplishments."

Melanie Jacobs is graduating from the occupational therapy assistant program after more than two years at Durham Tech.

"It's kind of sad," she said. "It feels like home there."

She came expecting to take preliminary courses and transfer to a four-year university. But she became hooked.

"I really liked what Durham Tech had to offer. It's a smaller school with a faculty that cares."