



Graduation shows good things to come for Newtown

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Nursing program helps boost morale and employment prospects.

By Kelly Hatton Correspondent

SARASOTA - Debra Mitchell walked across the stage with tears in her eyes and a smile on her face. Her white and red scrubs were clean, bright and new.

Mitchell, 34, is one of the 12 women who make up the first graduating class for the certified nursing assistant program (CNA) at the United Way Resource Center at Booker Middle School.

This CNA program was the first of its kind for the resource center. The certification was at no cost to the students. The center paid for the students' scrubs, and CareerEdge, a local nonprofit, paid for their tuition.

CNA courses normally cost upwards of \$1,000. Unlike college and university courses, scholarships like Florida Bright Futures and the Pell Grant don't apply to CNA programs.

"I would have never been able to afford to take this class," Mitchell said prior to Thursday evening's graduation ceremony.

During the day, Mitchell works as a supervisor at a call center. Since the class was held at night, she was able to attend despite her busy schedule. The course lasted six weeks, and was taught by instructors from the American Red Cross.

Students learned in a lab, and did clinical work, where they put their skills to the test in the real world.

However, for these 12 women, the program was more than just a class. For many of the students, it was the chance for a better life.

"It's hard, being from this community, some people don't think we can do what we are destined to do," said Shavonne Johnson, another graduate of the program, during her graduation speech.

This program, through the United Way Resource Center, targets those living in North Sarasota. The center is housed inside of Booker Middle School, which makes it easier for people living in the community to utilize their programs.

"This is just a great opportunity for this area. A lot of stuff doesn't come into Newtown," Mitchell said.

The center also offers other resources to the community. Come January, it will offer legal services, financial literacy programs and tuition-free GED programs, said Xavier Russell, the Director of Neighborhood Initiatives for United Way.

The center plans on offering more CNA certification courses, because of the success of their first graduating class. All 12 students originally enrolled in the course made it to graduation.

"We talked about the importance of this group being successful," Russell said.

Both Mitchell and Johnson graduated on the honor roll, earning an "A" grade in the program. Mitchell also received a certificate for perfect attendance.

"To me, making this program work, not only benefits me, but it benefits our whole community," Mitchell said. "If we don't do it right, and make it right, then the people that are going to come behind us might not have this opportunity."

At the end of the ceremony, every graduate stood with a candle in their hand. They recited "The Creed of the Red Cross Nurse" lighting the way for graduates to come.

"I hope we paved the way for a lot of young women," Johnson said.

