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The Villages

VHS grads say school's values helped them to succeed in life

Alumni also credit strong academics for college achievement

By **DAISY MOON**
DAILY SUN

THE VILLAGES — In many ways their lives are much the same. They still enjoy the same interests and the same hobbies. And perhaps most important, they still carry that same sense of "work ethic" they acquired as students at The Villages Charter School.

In every other way, however, life as an adult is a "dif-

ferent world," said Whitney Windham, a 2006 graduate of The Villages High School.

A 2010 graduate of the University of Central Florida, Windham has come a long way since her days as a member of the Golden Girls Spirit Squad.

"When I was in high school, I had no idea who I was," Windham said. "And I had no idea who I wanted to be. You really don't find yourself until you have to."

Fellow VHS alumni Matt Hoopfer and Jordann Pierluisi are pretty much on the same page.

See **VHS**, C5



Submitted photo

Villages High School alumna Whitney Windham, seen here with her parents Debi and Lynn Windham, is a 2010 graduate of the University of Central Florida. 'I feel like I know so much more about the world around me,' Windham said of her personal growth following high school. 'I feel like a grown-up now.'

VHS, from C1

High school "seems like it was a really long time ago," said Pierluissi, a 2008 VHS graduate. "It just seems like it was a whole other world."

Though he's only been away from high school since graduating in 2009, Hoopfer already has seen great changes in his own life.

"I've grown a lot since I've been out of high school," the Florida State University sophomore said.

'Where are they now?'

Their days at VHS may seem lost in another lifetime, but Windham, Pierluissi and Hoopfer haven't forgotten what they learned. Each credits his or her success to the values instilled in them while attending the charter school.

"I would say that really not that much has changed, because I still have that same work ethic," Pierluissi said. "And I still have to work really hard in school."

And "I'm still dancing," she said.

A former member of the Golden Girls Spirit Squad in both middle and high school, Pierluissi now performs with UCF's Knight Moves Dance Team.

The UCF junior attended a community college for two years prior to attending UCF, where she is working toward a degree in sports and fitness education with a minor in education.

Pierluissi said she hopes to work as either a teacher, dance teacher or fitness instructor following graduation.

She's considering earning her master's degree.

Pierluissi says VHS's academic workload prepared her for life as a college student.

"When we had to do business projects and professional portfolios (in high school); I still go back and refer to them,"



Submitted photo

Jordann Pierluissi, a 2008 Villages High School graduate, now performs with the Knight Moves Dance Team at the University of Central Florida. She is working on a degree in sports and fitness education with a minor in education.

she said.

For example, she's currently constructing a cover letter and resume for a college class – something she already was well prepared for thanks to her studies at VHS.

"I've talked to a lot of people in my classes, and they've never had to do anything like that," Pierluissi said. "Whereas I've done it a long time."

Now in his second year at FSU, Hoopfer says that The Villages Charter School prepared him "110 percent" for his college studies.

"The environment ... they created there has helped me a lot," he said. "I know (from attending the charter school) if I work hard, I am going to get the results I want."

The Villages Charter School "taught you to work hard every single minute of every day,"

Hoopfer said.

At VHS, Hoopfer was known for his leadership qualities, serving as senior class president.

"In high school I was really interested in politics," he said. "And I still am."

That's one reason he chose to attend a university in the state's capital, Hoopfer said, to be in close proximity to the political world.

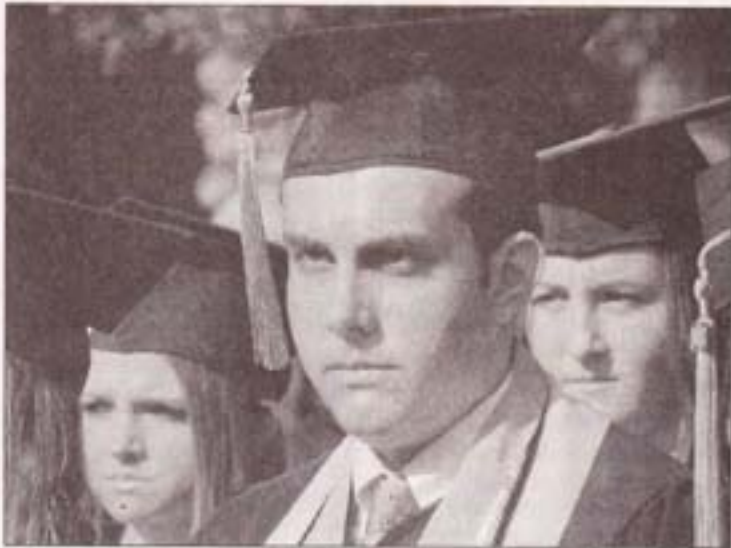
While studying business management and real estate, Hoopfer is actively involved in the Florida State College Republicans, which he serves as treasurer.

"We have a lot of fun," he said. "We've been really involved with all the campaigns. It's a good way to meet people."

While Hoopfer and Pierluissi are still pursuing the world of

academia, Windham is a full-fledged working girl. The UCF graduate is employed at the Orlando Heart Center, she said, where she works as a human resources manager.

You might say her success is due in part to the support she received as a student at The Villages Charter School.



Submitted photo

Villages High School graduate Matt Hoopfer is now a student at Florida State University. "I've grown a lot since I've been out of high school," he says.

"Their teachers really care," Windham said. "They are the type of teachers that would stay after (class). They really believed in you."

The former Golden Girl went on to dance in college, performing as a member of UCF's Starlet Knights Dance Team.

Even after serving as captain of a major college dance group, she still credits what she learned as a high school Golden Girl for helping her to succeed.

The charter school "gave so much to a dance team," Windham said. "I don't think they realized how big of an impact that had on my life."

Like most graduates, the former homecoming queen has

developed a better sense of self since her high school days. She says she sometimes looks back on those years and says to herself, "Oh, Whitney, I wish you wouldn't have worried about that."

"I feel like I know so much more about the world around me," Windham said of her personal growth following high school. "I feel like a grown-up now."

"I have to pay my own bills," she said. "But it's a good feeling. It's a feeling that I made it."

Daisy Moon is a reporter with the Daily Sun. She can be reached at 753-1119, ext. 9067, or daisy.moon@thevillagesmedia.com.