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MINORITIES REWARDED FOR GOOD GRADES

Aimee Juarez, Herald Staff Writer

PALMETTO --- Dwight Roberts Jr. considers himself a comedian who loves to brag.

The 11-year-old Wakeland Elementary School fourth-grader, who wants to be a football player and actor someday, loves to boast about the B's he has earned at school this year. And Sunday was a day for him to prove his academic success is more than just lip service. Dwight was among a large group of Manatee County minority honor roll students invited to attend an education celebration hosted by the Neighborhood Leadership Initiative at the Manatee Convention and Civic Center.

It was the first time the event was hosted in Manatee County to honor minority public school students who had attained a 3.0 grade point average or higher on a 4.0 scale.

About 2,000 elementary, middle and high school students and their parents attended the celebration. They took part in festivities such as prize drawings and learned about scholarships and other educational opportunities.

Dwight's mother, Erica Burney, said she was happy to receive an invitation to attend the event with her son.

"I'm proud of him. His dad's proud of him," Burney said. "He's always bragging he's the smartest one. This doesn't mean he'll stop."

Team Success Academic Celebrations, which was formed in Sarasota last year and has hosted the event in Sarasota County twice, was among the 12 organizations that sponsored the Manatee County celebration.

Fred Spence, founder of the organization, created the event to help foster a sense of pride in minority students.

"I was angry and disheartened about the achievement gap occurring in the state of Florida," he said at Sunday's event. "There is no expectation for minority kids to excel in academics. It's almost like they don't exist. It's about time we do something to take care of our kids. They need to know there's a future for them, which isn't something they hear too often."

Spence teamed up with **Cynthia Newell**, president of the Neighborhood Leadership Initiative, and brought the celebration to Manatee County this year.

"What we're doing is simple --- we're paying attention to kids who pay attention" in class, **Newell** said.

Keynote speaker Mary Williams, director of communications and administration for the Gates Millennium

Scholars program, which is backed by a \$1 billion grant to fund scholarships aimed at minority students, encouraged parents of young children to learn more about educational opportunities.

Representatives from the University of South Florida and Manatee Glens were on hand to inform older students of educational and internship opportunities.

Dwight's friend and classmate Kevin Williams, 10, was also honored at Sunday's event. His mother, Shakina Campbell, said just being invited to attend the celebration attests to the A's and B's her son has earned this year.

"I'm very proud," she said. "I know he's doing good in school, and that's enough for me because I know he's pushing himself to succeed."

PHOTO/BRIAN BLANCO/Special to The Herald