

Alfred University awards 118 master's degree during downstate commencement

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They are masters of their futures, Brigadier General Robert L. "Steve" Stephens (retired) told 118 graduates who received their master's degrees in education from Alfred University during commencement ceremonies today at Kingsborough Community College. Sixty of this year's graduates received Master of Science degrees in counseling, and 58 received master's in literacy education. Alfred University began offering master's degrees at downstate locations, working through the Center for Integrated Teacher Education in 2006, and graduated its first students in September 2008. "The most difficult obstacle to overcome is doubt in yourself," Stephens, who earned his master's degree in counseling from Alfred University in 1971 and now serves on the Alfred University Board of Trustees, told the graduates and their families. "I didn't start believing in myself until I was 30," Stephens admitted. His dream, which he didn't tell anyone, was to become a general in the U.S. Army. "I was afraid to tell anyone, afraid I couldn't do it, afraid I wasn't good enough." But Stephens, who spent 30 years in the U.S. Army did achieve his goal, and the newest AU graduates can do the same, he assured them. "It takes a lot of courage to follow your heart," he said. "Don't be afraid to have a dream. It can become a reality." The path is not always easy, he admitted. "I made wrong turns, U-turns and did doughnuts in the parking. I went up, and I went down, and made roads where there weren't any," but he did achieve the goals he laid out for himself at the beginning of his career. If they don't have a dream yet, Stephens advised the graduates, "Give yourself the gift of believing in yourself. Try anything and everything, search high and low, until you find something you love (then) get on with your life." The new degree (you have just received) will open doors you didn't even know about before," Stephens said. "Go out with your new master's degrees and make it work for you." A graduate of West Virginia State University, Stephens chose a military career. As an assistant professor in the Reserve Officers Training Corps, he was assigned to the ROTC unit at Alfred University, and earned his master's degree in counseling while working full-time and raising a family. Stephens is now vice president for External Relations for Clayton (GA) State University. Speaking on behalf of the students who received their master's in literacy, Myra Fisher declared, "We did it. We came in (to the program) alone, and we walk out today as friends, as associates, as brothers and sisters, and we all love each other." They could not have done it without the support of their families, Fisher said. "They stand by us. They stood behind us. They hold us up, and they pull us through." Christian Horn, one of three who spoke on behalf of the counseling students, thanked Dr. Jay Cerio, professor of school psychology and program director, and Dr. Robert K. Bitting, associate professor of counseling and coordinator for the downstate practicum, for their leadership. "I respect them a lot for their hard work, their help and their friendship." Melissa Bastian, also speaking on behalf of the counseling students, said she knew she had made the right decision from the moment she arrived in Alfred. Students take classes weekends at downstate location, but begin the two-year program with two weeks of classes on the Alfred campus. Participating in Alfred's downstate program "was a wonderful experience, something we will treasure forever" said Diana Fuller. "We became a family. We made friendships that will last a lifetime."