

# Hardee Countian Top Cadet In SFSC Corrections Class

South Florida State College graduated seven new correctional officers early this month in a ceremony at the Highlands Campus in Avon Park.

Leading the class in academic excellence was a Hardee County cadet.

Michael Austin, coordinator of college's Criminal Justice Academy, called the seven graduating cadets to the stage during the Thursday, June 6, event, handing each new officer a certificate.

Those receiving certificates were class leader Nekesha M. Dials of Wauchula, Mascola G. Miller, Mary McClee Banks, Amelia R. Hamilton, Mark Kodie Roberts, Austin Wade Waldron and Kameraia K. Wesley.

Some of the cadets were singled out for their achievements during the 11 weeks of instruction.

Earning top honors for academic excellence was Dials. For top work on the shooting range was Roberts.

Dials also was given special recognition as class leader as was Miller as executive officer.

Guest speaker for the ceremony was LaKisha Collins, correctional probation senior officer with the Florida Department of Corrections and a member of the SFSC Criminal Justice Academy faculty since 2015.

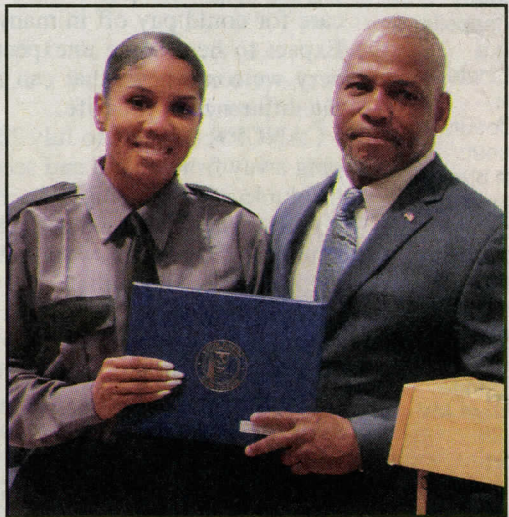
Addressing the cadets, Collins said, "You made it to this day. Hold your heads up high and enjoy the milestones that you've fulfilled. Don't worry about doing great things; do little things with great love. And remember that someone else's success does not define your own. "Rather than compete with others, share and support each other," she continued. "A community is about building one another up

and sharing the wealth. Your turn will come regardless of the wall you might bump up against.

"There will be moments in your life that will show you clarity. You're destined for greatness. Believe in yourselves as we all believe in you," Collins concluded.

Upon successful completion of the 420-contact-hour Basic Correctional Officer Program, students earn an Occupational Certificate and are eligible to take the state certification examination to become a certified officer.

For more information about this program or any other programs offered through the SFSC Criminal Justice Academy, call 784-7282 or email [Michael.Austin@southflorida.edu](mailto:Michael.Austin@southflorida.edu).



**Nakesha Dials with Michael Austin, coordinator of the Criminal Justice Academy. Dials, of Wauchula, was honored for top academics.**



COURTESY PHOTOS

**New correctional-officer program graduates are (front, from left) Nekesha Dials of Wauchula, Mary McClee Banks, Amelia Hamilton and Kameraia Wesley; (back) Mark Roberts, Macola Milier and Austin Waldron.**



# Academy Grads Ready To Protect & Serve

Sixteen graduates of South Florida State College's Basic Law Enforcement Academy and one graduate of the Crossover Academy were recognized at a graduation ceremony last week on the Highlands Campus.

BLE Class No. 258 graduates who received occupational certificates at the Wednesday event included Darius L. Johnson and Jose A. Juarez, both of Hardee County, along with Estevan Carranza, Angel Chacon, Alexander C. Cotto, Nicolas R. Davis, Julia Franchetti, Tyler J. Gilliard, Jorge L. Godinez, Drew M. Haley, Dominic T. Hutchins, Mark A. Lanning, James D. Lethbridge, Zakir Malik, Jashaun D. Walden and Justin R. White.

The Crossover Class No. 355 graduate receiving his occupational certificate was John P. Gadson.

Maj. Brandon Ball, of the Florida State Fire Marshal's Office and a faculty member at SFSC since 2002, was guest speaker at the graduation.

Ball offered the new law enforcement officers advice about their careers going forward. "Make sure that you

thank those who have helped you to this point in your training," he said. "Your core system at home is going to continue to be a valuable part of your well-being.

"Aim high, stay focused, stay humble, stay dedicated, maintain high ethical standards, and focus on doing the right thing," he continued. "Remember that your actions are a reflection on all of us. And, give something back. No definition of a successful life can do anything but include serving others. I applaud you for taking up the challenge to help serve the communities in which we live."

During the ceremony, special awards were presented to the cadets: Tyler Gilliard for top academics and Hardee Countian Jose Juarez for top firearms scores. Jorge Godinez was given special recognition as class leader.

SFSC's Basic Law Enforcement occupational certificate program trains students to become law enforcement officers in Florida. By successfully completing the program, they are eligible to take the State Officer Certification Examination to become

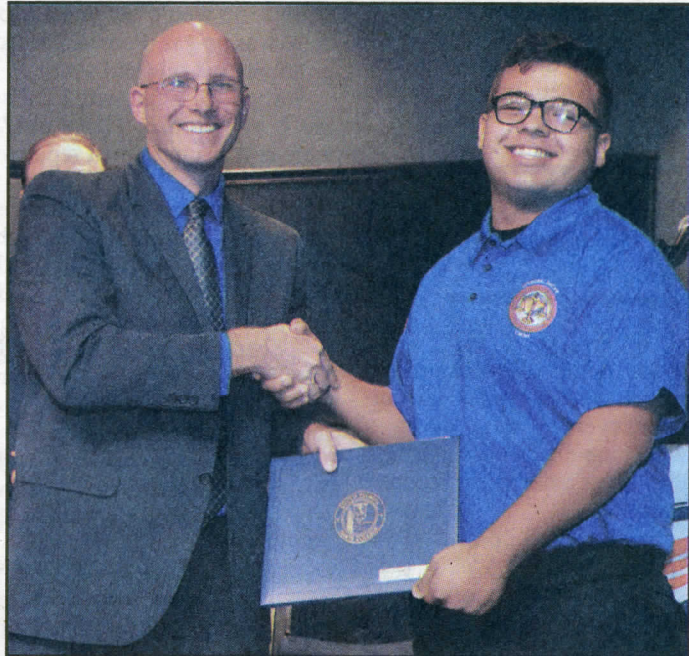
certified law enforcement officers.

The program runs 770 contact hours, or approximately five months full-time or 10 months part-time.

The Corrections to Law Enforcement Crossover occupational certificate program trains currently employed cor-

rections officers to become law enforcement officers in Florida. Upon successful completion of the program, graduates are eligible to take the exam to become certified law enforcement officers.

This program runs 515 contact hours, or approximately 10 months part-time.



**Michael Huften, Criminal Justice Academy coordinator, gives Hardee Countian Jose Juarez special recognition for top firearms scores in his class.**

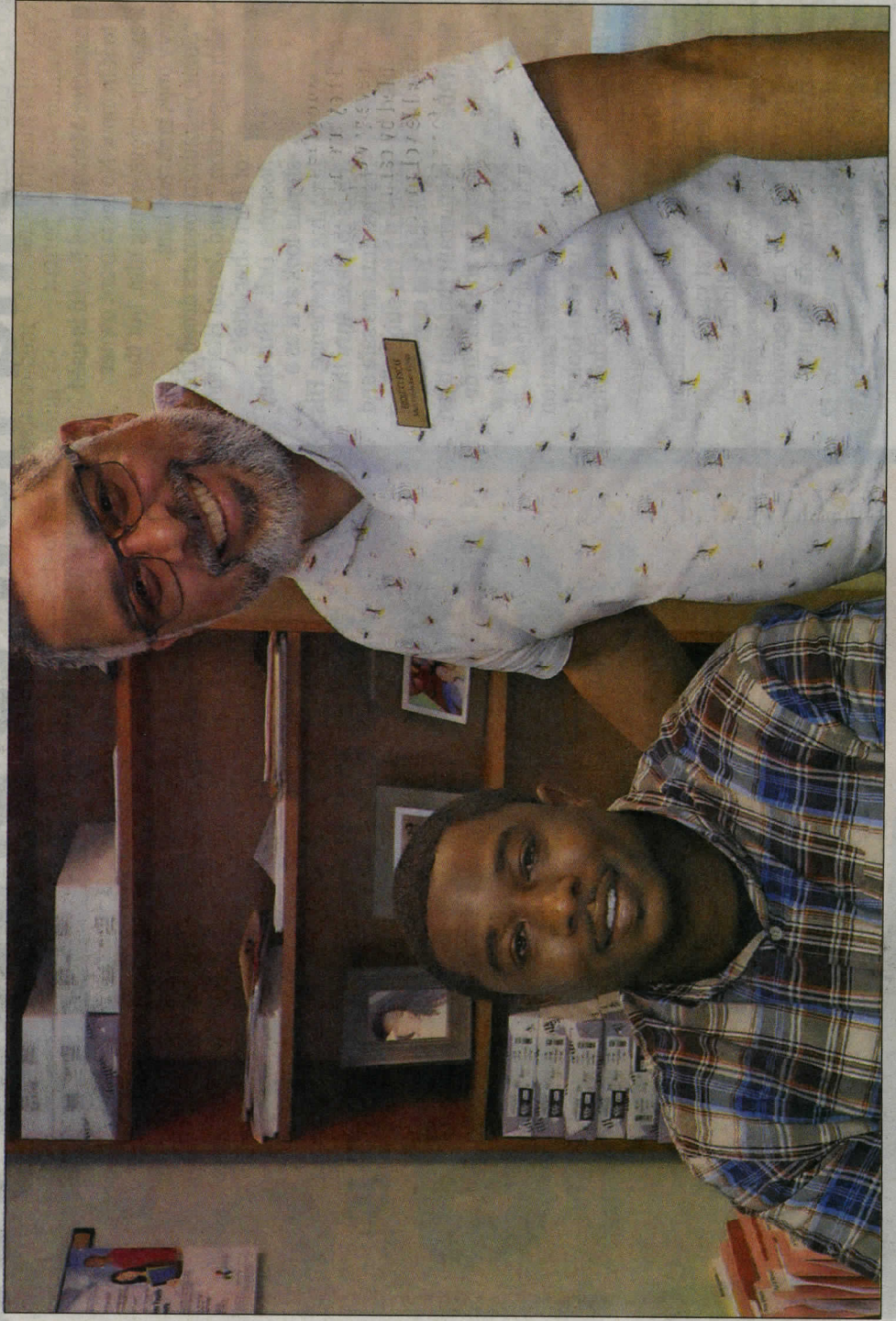


**Basic Law Enforcement Academy graduates at (from front left) Estevan Carranza, Drew Haley, James Lethbridge, Julia Franchetti, Angel Chacon-Rodriguez, Domonic Hutchins, Jose Juarez of Hardee County, Alexander Cotto and Zakir Malik; (back) Mark Lanning, Jorge Godinez, Justin White, John Gadson, Tyler Gilliard, Darius Johnson of Hardee County, Jashaun Walden and Nicolas Davis**

COURTESY PHOTOS



# Former DeSoto athlete a 'difference-maker,' such a caring heart'



Antonio James (left) and SFSC program specialist Eddie Cuencas

PHOTO PROVIDED



Antonio James believes in having a purpose. After participating in the Panther Youth Partners (PYP) Program and now a program specialist with PYP at South Florida State College (SFSC) since August 2018, he can pass along his wisdom to other youth in the community.

James has a lot to share—his early life in Arcadia was an obstacle-course of challenges. He played football at DeSoto High and like other young athletes wanted to become a professional football player.

But getting sidetracked threatened that dream.

"I haven't always been the person I am now," he said. "I grew up in an atmosphere where all the guys had girls and a lifestyle around drugs. My idea in high school was to sell drugs for the rest of my life or make it in football."

But James's mother and grandparents kept him in their prayers, and it seemed to make a difference. When he graduated from high school, James received a phone call from someone in PYP telling him that if he went to college, he could make money.

"Then I met Eddie Cuencas, program specialist in youth services at South Florida State College," James said.

"He explained the program to me and confirmed that I could get paid to go to school."

The PYP Program, through SFSC and CareerSource Heartland, helps kids and young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 gain skills that lead to employment, academic support; advisement in financial aid and financial literacy; assistance with career development; job shadowing; workshops that improve employability; and personal, academic, and career counseling. Participants must reside in Hardee, DeSoto, Highlands, or Okeechobee counties, be a junior or senior in high school, or be out of high school with a desire to earn a GED or vocational certificate. PYP participants receive a stipend based on family income, class attendance, teacher feedback, grades, and work readiness activities.

"I joined PYP for the money, really," James said. "I was still selling drugs, but Eddie kept mentoring me. And with the prayers of my mother and grandparents, over time, things started changing for me."

"When Antonio came to my office, he wasn't sure where he was going because of the lack of community support regarding preparation for what happens after high school," Cuencas said.

"That's what makes all of our outreach programs at SFSC significant. They are beneficial to all the young people we work with."

James attended SFSC but stopped to take a job at the Avon Park Correctional Institution, where he worked for nine

years. However, while with the institution, he earned a Correction Officer Occupational Certificate from SFSC's Criminal Justice Academy in 2010.

"In the midst of working there, I began to develop into the person I am now," he said. "Corrections is rehabilitation to help the inmates change behaviors for when they get out of prison. If you ask them why they committed a crime, eight out of 10 will say it's from not having a father. So a lot of young men connect with gangs, and it takes the place of the father and a family that cares."

Eventually, James took a position as a corrections officer with PRIDE Enterprises, a private, not-for-profit corporation that funds and operates inmate work and training programs and offers post-incarceration job placement and support services.

"At that time, I got into reading a lot of life-development books to train myself in how to help the inmates," James said. "At PRIDE, my main job was care, custody, and control—caring for needs of inmates and staff, keeping the inmates in custody, and having control of the inmates as a corrections officer. It was also to help the inmates become better people.

"I worked for PRIDE for three years and loved what I was doing," he said. "It was positive and productive for the inmates. It's like going from hell

to heaven. The inmates want to be at work."

At PRIDE, inmates can learn about tire refurbishment, chemical manufacturing, auto mechanics, printing and digital imaging, welding and cabinetry.

James returned to SFSC as a student and earned his Associate in Arts degree in 2016 and, in August 2018, he joined SFSC as a program specialist with PYP.

"I got to a time when I felt like I was stuck and I was being called to move on to something else," he said. "I talked with my wife and prayed about it. I want to be that person who makes a difference in other people's lives. When I was looking for a job, the position at SFSC popped up. Where I came from, this job has made a difference in my life."

James now counsels and mentors young people and can speak from his own life experiences.

"We can see how this and other programs such as Take Stock in Children and Big Brothers, Big Sisters benefit our community," Cuencas said. "The mentoring component of our programs is important to young people's lives. It starts as a friendship and develops into a trusting relationship. You can then challenge a young person to pursue their goals. You can try to inspire and encourage someone all day long, but it all goes back to the friendship and relationship. Young people need someone to talk to. Antonio and I built that kind of

relationship over time."

James's connection to PYP is strong also because his wife, Rasheena, participated in the program while in high school. Rasheena is now a nurse practitioner at Highlands Regional Medical Center.

"Antonio's an amazing father, husband, and son," Cuencas said. "He now has a daughter who's looking up to him. So, he takes being a good father and community member seriously. Having become a father himself has allowed him to be a father to others as well. He has such a caring heart. He genuinely cares about every young person who comes in the door."

#### PYP AT A GLANCE

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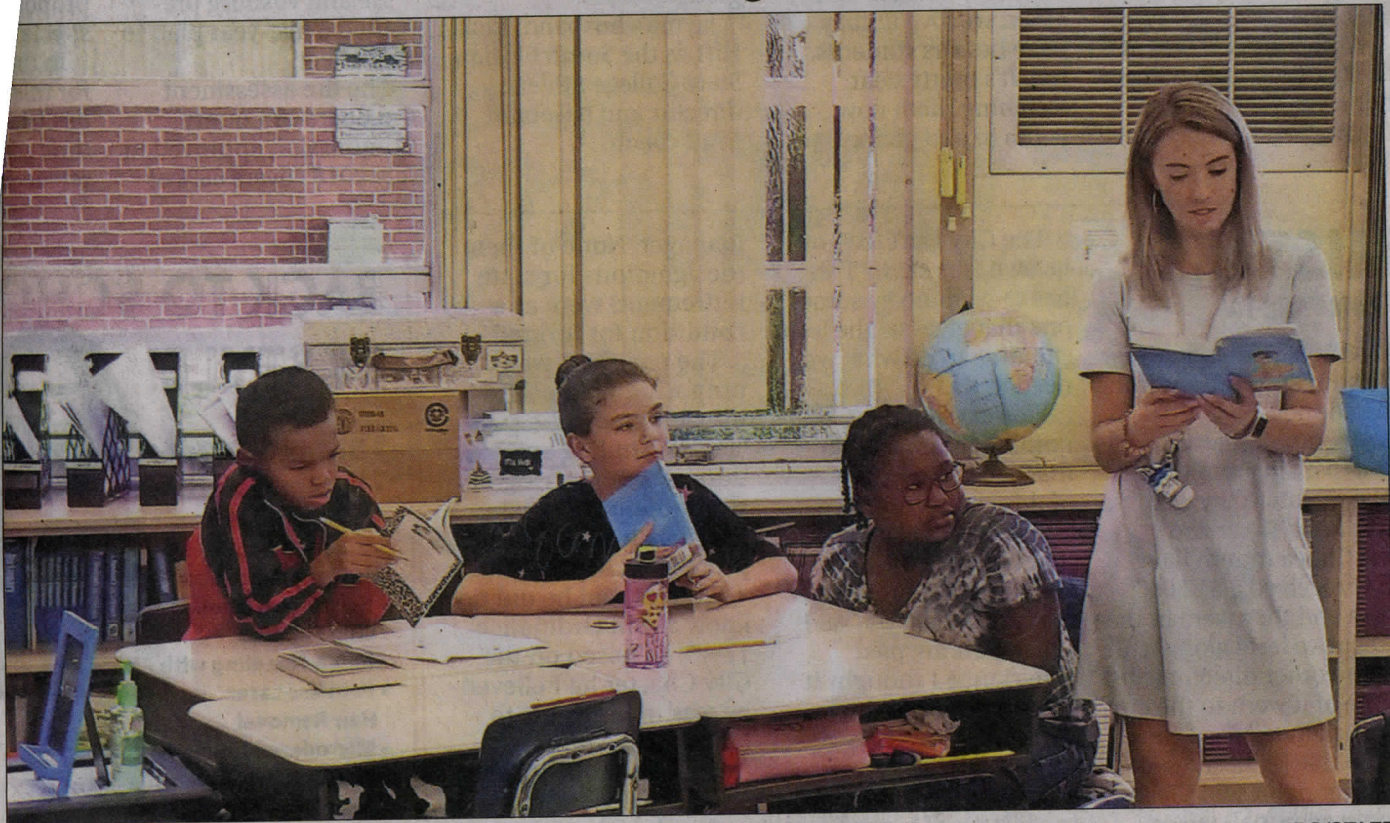
Mike Davis, program specialist in Okeechobee County, 863-824-6032, daniel.davis@southflorida.edu



Woman Maria  
nd said city  
Should have  
City Council for approval

# It's a Woodlawn Elementary family

*3 Hitt teachers & grandma, too*



MARC VALERO/STAFF

Woodlawn Elementary fifth-grade teacher Sydney Hitt with her class during a reading session.



SEBRING — Woodlawn Elementary School can now boast it has three “Hitts” in the classroom with a mother and her two daughters all serving as teachers at the school with the saying, painted on a front office wall — “We are a Family, It’s just the Woodlawn Way.”

The family within the Woodlawn family includes Jayma Hitt who has been a teacher at Woodlawn for 33 years and is now teaching second grade.

Her daughters, Sydney Hitt and Cassidy Hitt, who are both teachers at Woodlawn.

Sydney is in her second year at Woodlawn teaching fifth grade and Cassidy is a new teacher in her first year at Woodlawn.

Sydney and Cassidy’s grandmother and Jayma’s mother, Peg Stephenson volunteers at the school.

Stephenson is retired from Sebring High School where she was the bookkeeper for 31 years. She has been volunteering in Jayma’s classroom one day a week for the past 17 years.

Cassidy said she served her teaching internship, with a host teacher, at Woodlawn last year. This year she has a peer evaluator, but most people are her mentors and are gracious and willing to help her.



MARC VALERO/STAFF

**Woodlawn Elementary third grade teacher Cassidy Hitt in the computer lab with her class.**

She had her class in a computer lab Thursday taking an on online assessment to evaluate their skill levels.

Some students raised their hands when they were having difficulties.

“That’s just trying to determine how much you know; it’s OK; just do your best,” she said. “They are going to give



MARC VALERO/STAFF

**Woodlawn Elementary second-grade teacher Jayma Hitt with her class at the playground during recess.**

you things you don’t know; that’s OK.”  
In her second week of teaching,



# FAMILY

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what has Cassady learned about being a teacher?

"Time management is a big thing," she said. "Trying to figure out how much you can get done in a certain amount of time and it never works out the way you planned for it to work out and you adjust and modify it and change what you need to change for your students.

"That is who you have to think about the whole time. You are here for them so you have to make sure that you are doing whatever you can for them to be successful."

Cassady received a bit of encouragement from one of her students whose mother graduated with Cassady.

"So he knew I was in the college program," Cassady explained.

"He came to me on the first day of school and said, 'It's O.K. if you are struggling; it's your first year.'"

While Cassady was at the computer lab with her class her mother, Jayma, had her class at



MARC VALERO/STAFF

the playground for recess.

Jayma said, "I think she will do a good job with the students: she loves children and she went SFSC [South Florida State College] to get her degree here; I think that she will do well."

Three of Jayma's second-graders from last year are now in Cassady's third-grade class.

"They went from Mrs. Hitt to Miss Hitt," Jayma noted.

Woodlawn Elementary Principal Jon Spencer said, "It's a whole family affair; we love it; they were here as students, too. It's pretty neat watching them now come in and giving back

as teachers; it's pretty awesome.

"When you see that tradition and walking in the same steps that they were as students and their mom walked as a teacher ... and their grandma is down there volunteering right now. It really is a family affair."

- Sydney and Cassady attended Woodlawn for their kindergarten through fifth grade schooling and Jayma attended Woodlawn from first grade through fifth grade.

Jayma's husband, Rick Hitt, is the South Florida State College athletic director and baseball head coach.