

Unexpected Bright Star

August 12, 2000 By JODIE NEEDLE Staff Writer

BOCA RATON — Some called him retarded. Others teased him for his disabilities. Most didn't expect much from Ryan Kasha. No way would he become an athlete, or a musician, or some other type of superstar. Certainly not a brain! But on Friday, Kasha graduated from Florida Atlantic University magna cum laude with a bachelor's of science degree in math that he earned in three years instead of four.

It's just the latest in a series of ways Kasha, of Miramar, has proven wrong those who have underestimated him. But even Kasha, 21, and his parents, Ken and Gail Kasha, can see why some have. He graduated from a preschool for developmentally disabled kids. At age 5, his IQ was pegged at 43, and it wasn't until that year he learned to talk. Even then, Kasha rarely spoke without slurring. And he could barely see out of a drooping right eye. He couldn't walk quite right either, since he relied on his left eye to guide him.

"Everybody wrote him off," said Ken Kasha. "Everybody!" Everybody except for his parents.

The Kashas removed their son from special education classes in the Broward School District. But with that came a lot of ridicule and a lot more hours of studying. Kasha would read chapters over and over to comprehend what other students grasped on first read.

He cried that kids teased him about his eye, his speech, everything. And he watched with envy as his older brother, Harley, got praise for straight A's. He wanted that, too. More than that, though, he just wanted to fit in. Kasha can't explain exactly how he did it. Maybe the early diagnosis was incorrect. Or maybe he drew strength from his parents' faith in him, or his own religious faith.

Either way, Kasha vowed to prove everyone wrong. He continued speech therapy and somehow, he started making A's -- the first one on a math test-- and earning academic achievement awards.

Later, at Hallandale High School, he tutored peers on the basketball and football teams and was named valedictorian, graduating in just three years.

"I say I did it all by myself, but some credit goes to my parents," Kasha said on Friday, calling them his personal heroes. "My parents taught me anything is possible. The way some people had seen it, I'd have been lucky to be flipping burgers at McDonald's, or maybe Wendy's."

Then, and now, his parents are proud, said Ken Kasha, who suffered two heart attacks last week that almost kept him from attending his son's graduation.

But he plans to see his son become a math teacher. "Don't be surprised a few years from now when you see him named teacher of the year," said Gail Kasha. Before that, though, Kasha plans to earn two master's degrees in education and in science teaching. He starts FAU's master's program in a few weeks, and after that, he wants a Ph.D.

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GRADUATION DAY: Ryan Kasha waits to receive the diploma for his bachelor of science degree, with high honors, from Florida Atlantic University on Friday. Behind him is fellow student Antonio Osborne. Staff photo by Richard E. Van Nostrand

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