

# 'Nothing should ever hold you back'

## Man's grit inspires Bergen graduates

PARAMUS — Mike Oliveri wanted to make two things clear Friday to the graduates receiving their high school equivalency degrees from his alma mater.

One: He loves his life, even with muscular dystrophy withering his limbs and turning everyday tasks like getting out of bed into a major project.

Two: The reason life is so good is that he had the courage to trade comfort for independence.

"Nothing ever holds me back, and nothing should ever hold you guys back,"

Oliveri told graduates from the GED program at Bergen Community College.

Oliveri, 24, has relied on a wheelchair since age 17 and has been steadily losing the use of his muscles. He dropped out of River Dell High School at 16, and later earned his GED and an associates' degree in psychology from Bergen Community College.

Until recently, Oliveri lived in a wing of his childhood home in Oradell that his parents built for him. Last November, he left on a monthlong cross-coun-

try journey with two friends in a van modified for people with disabilities, determined to live alone and support himself in Los Angeles.

The California living hasn't been easy. Social Security, which Oliveri depends on because his illness prevents him from working, pays only \$926 a month. That doesn't usually cover his expenses, but he insists on being financially independent from his family.

His apartment isn't very handicapped-friendly, and he's still trying to find a steady

group of friends. The little things can quickly turn into serious problems. One blog entry talks about the day he passed out on the floor out of reach of his phone and had to yell until the building super came to his aid.

But Oliveri has no regrets.

He likes meeting new people and relying only on his own ingenuity and the kindness of strangers to solve the inevitable problems. He is determined to squeeze everything possible into a life he knows could be shortened by his ill-



MICHAEL KARAS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Mike Oliveri watching GED graduates at Bergen Community College accept their diplomas.

## Speaker: 'Happy in the world'

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ness.

"My life in the past three months has been *my* life," he said. "I'm happier on the move, even with no money, even with no friends ... around me. I'm happy in the world. I'm just happy, period."

His family has had more mixed reactions. Oliveri's sister, Lisa, 27, said she encouraged him to go, and is happy to see him living independently. His mother, Christiane, worries about him constantly, but also sees a new spark in a son who

used to be so depressed about his illness.

"It's just so scary," she said. "But I notice vitality and a thirst for life that I have not seen here in many, many years. Michael used to spend hours just in his room or just watching television without that sparkle in his eyes, without doing things."

Bergen Community College invited him to speak hoping that his message of overcoming adversity would resonate. Most graduates are between 18 and 25, and 40 percent were unemployed when they started the program.

"He wants to encourage anyone who's looking to accomplish or achieve a certain dream to go beyond your limitations and that anything's possible," said Lori McCurley, a spokeswoman for BCC.

One story, in particular, connected to Oliveri's. The valedictorian, Myles Williams, of Paterson, is 51 and blind. He went back for his degree only after calling the wrong number and reaching the GED program. Now, he plans to finish a degree in broadcasting at the college.

"I ain't blind, I just can't see things," Williams said, to a laugh.

"You see us now, and you're going to see us in the future, because we're not stopping here."

As for Oliveri, he isn't stopping yet. He wants to see more of the world, and hopes to roll through Central and South America soon.

"There's no final destination," Oliveri said. "Think about that: final destination. There are ends to most of the things in my life. Why would I want to create another one? I'd rather be the never-ending story."