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## Amer-I-Can alters lives, grads say

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Some called it groundbreaking. Others said it was life-changing. And everyone -- from principals and politicians to students and their parents -- touted its success.

Pro football Hall-of-Famer Jim Brown's anti-gang and anti-violence program was credited Wednesday with raising grades, curbing discipline problems and improving attendance among 128 public school students in Brevard who completed the semester-long course last week.

During Wednesday's commencement, middle and high school students from the county's first graduating class said the Amer-I-Can program boosted their self-confidence, re-energized their spirits and propelled them toward a bright future.

With help from the program, Palm Bay High senior Dale Haynes, 17, traded in his bad-boy behavior for the straight and narrow. He earned straight A's last semester for the first time since he was in elementary school.

"Success is for those who want it, hope for it and take action. I want success. How about you?" Dale asked his peers during the ceremony at Viera High.

Brown, who founded the program in 1988 to motivate struggling students, congratulated Brevard students.

"In America, you can go from the bottom to the top if you take advantage of what you're being offered right now," he said.

Brown, who spent nearly four months in jail in 2002 for vandalizing his wife's car, told students to make wise decisions. "If you use your education and your talent and your skills correctly, then you will shine every time," he said.

The Amer-I-Can program was introduced in South Florida eight years ago, but fizzled. In the past few years, state Rep. Mitch Needelman, R-Melbourne, chairman of the House Juvenile Justice Committee, pushed to re-launch the program. Last year, he helped secure \$1.3 million in state funding. As a result, 14 secondary schools in three counties, including Brevard, began pilot programs in August, enrolling more than 1,000 students.

Jack Cory, the legislative lobbyist for the program in Tallahassee, said there's a push to increase state funding.

At the four participating Brevard schools -- Stone Middle and Palm Bay, Eau Gallie and Bayside highs -- facilitators counseled students on strategies for success and how to avoid the barriers that prevent them from reaching their potential. They helped some students cope with problems at home, including drug and alcohol use, physical abuse and poverty.

Midway through the semester, Brevard students increased their grade point averages by 24 percent and attendance by 35 percent, officials said. "Grades went up, discipline issues went away and the overall demeanor of the kids changed. They're ready to go now," said Stone Middle Principal Andrew Johnson, who saw 34 students graduate.

Before enrolling in the course, Bayside High sophomore Barrett Chambliss said he had a bad attitude and a habit of blaming others for his problems. He said he often skipped school and often felt sorry for himself.

"I wake up every morning looking forward to school," the 16-year-old said. "I'm very optimistic about school and my future instead of thinking that there's no reason to live."

Eau Gallie High sophomore Melissa Gardinal, 16, said the program has helped help her stay off drugs and alcohol, which she was using daily. It raised her grades to A's and B's. "I'm going to college now," she said. "Before I just wanted to drop out."

Brenda Stewart, mother of Amer-I-Can graduate Dale Haynes, called the program "a lifesaver" for her son, who has been in trouble at school and with the law. "All I can say is thank you," she told program organizers. "He is going places now."

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